

Moving Towards Your True Potential

The Brain Needs More Downtime

It can recharge in moments - if you develop the skill

It is time to rethink the traditional work-days of professionals given the emergence of a multitude of distractions we are confronted with daily. The smartphone only compounds the distractions and, in some ways, makes us dumber. A mobile device in view or hearing or vibration range blocks our best thinking and undermines our conversations. When I speak with people, they are all “busy, busy, busy”, but what are they accomplishing by being so busy?

Multitasking is killing our brain cells and lowering our work quality and efficiency. MRI scans on brains of individuals multitasking show decreasing brain density in the anterior cingulate cortex – the area involved with empathy and emotional control [J. Rubinstein, D Meyer, J. Evans, “Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching,” Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance, 2001, Vol. 27, No. 4, 763-797]. It is time to take back control of your waking hours.

Research in neurology / neuroscience has given us a better understanding of how our brains work. You will not be extremely productive by sitting down for 2-3 hours focusing on execution without a break. The brain is designed for 5-12 minutes of focused execution or innovation (without external distractions), then dis-engaging from the task by taking a short break of at least one minute of deep brain downtime and recovery, before re-engaging. Think of your brain as a sprinter and not a marathon runner. By doing this you can get hyper-efficient at what you do, freeing up time to think strategically, collaborate with others and innovate.

We should also find our “prime time” – the one waking hour that you are most focused. Every minute in “prime time” is 2-100x more valuable than any other of your waking minutes. This is an hour in the early morning for many people but also can be late afternoon for others. It is best to avoid scheduling meetings or travel time during your “prime time.” I recommend reserving this for completing your most critical tasks of the day.

Want to achieve bigger goals faster? Goals are nothing more than targeted behavioral pathways for our brains. The physical act of writing down a goal makes it real and tangible. Every goal should stretch you and be personally compelling. It is best to avoid fantasy goals as they typically lead to failure since our brains cannot plan them in reverse.

Like any other organ, the brain is affected by our lifestyle, diet, and the amount that we exercise. The following foods promote brain health: fruits and vegetables with dark skins, oily fish and walnuts/pecans. Cardiovascular activities, such as walking briskly for 30 minutes a day, can be enough to reduce the risk of brain function declining. The more we use our brain, the better our mental functions become. For this reason, brain training exercises are a good way to maintain overall brain health.

By incorporating some of the techniques above, you can improve your efficiency and reduce the stress caused by multiple distractions.

Here are some facts you may not know about the brain:

ENERGY USE

The brain represents around 2 percent of a person's weight but uses 20 percent of their oxygen and calories.

HYDRATION

Scientists estimate that the brain is around 73 percent water. Keeping the brain hydrated is important. Being dehydrated by as little as 2 percent may impair a person's ability to perform tasks that involve attention, memory, and motor skills.

CHOLESTEROL

Cholesterol is a type of fat that people often consider bad for their health. It's true that eating too much cholesterol is bad for the heart. However, many people are unaware that cholesterol plays a significant role in a person's brain. Without cholesterol, the cells in the brain would not survive. Around 25 percent of the body's cholesterol is contained within the brain cells.