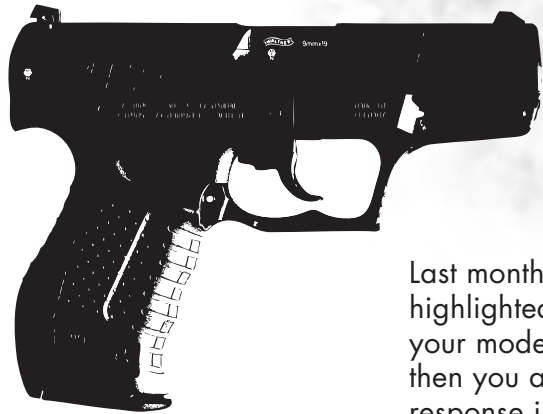


USING YOUR MIND AS A WEAPON FOR SUCCESS IN 2013



Last month we looked at your mindless brain vs your modern mind. It highlighted that if you are not practicing and developing the muscle of your modern (conscious) mind to inhibit your mindless (unconscious) brain then you are likely to keep reacting to stressors, things that trigger a stress response in the same way.

It's 2013 and you will be confronting another year, and thinking about what you want to accomplish. This month I would like to equip you with ways to have your mind be a weapon for success in this new year. We will look at the four things you can apply to enhance the use of your mind:

- Complete 2012 and create a clean slate in your mind for 2013
- Maximise the limited energy your brain has to perform at its best
- Use the SCARF Model to minimise threats and maximise rewards to your brain
- Feed your mind the "Healthy Mind Platter"

COMPLETING 2012

One of the things I observe about people is that once the clock rolls over to January 1st we suddenly start to reflect on the year before and make all sorts of declarations for the year to come. Mostly these New Year's resolutions are all based in not doing what we did last year that did not go how we intended or trying to do better than we did last year, and we often don't stick to them as we intended.

Sometimes it is hard to avoid repeating the past given our brain is so hard-wired for certainty and conserving energy by not wanting to change old habits, behaviours and patterns of thinking. However what I find can make a difference in being able to give you a great start to having the kind of year you want is to powerfully complete the year you just had, and actually be able to create something fresh and new that isn't either NOT 2012 or 2012 strikes back, or return of the 2012.

Here are some steps to take to complete 2012. When I say complete, I mean that you have said all you need to say about last year, acknowledged what happened and what did not happen that you intended and that you have really let go of whatever failures you may have had or any things you did not accomplish that you wanted to throughout the year. It means you are able to actually say to yourself "I am putting 2012 behind me and I have a clean space in which to create 2013."

You will need a piece of paper for this exercise (it works best to write it down).

- Write down everything you accomplished in 2012 that is worth acknowledging and giving yourself some kudos for. (Don't be

stingy, just write down all the things large and small that you accomplished – as many as you can think of)

- Write down everything that you did not accomplish that you would have liked to or intended to accomplish or another way to look at it is any failures that there may be to acknowledge. Remember if you failed at accomplishing something you said or intended to do, YOU are not a failure (this is a subjective linguistic narrative or interpretation of the facts), you simply failed to fulfil something that you said or intended to fulfil – THAT'S IT. Again, just write it all down and don't get significant or dramatic.
- Write down any regrets you have about last year.
- Now cast your mind back to last year and scan your brain and write down anything else that is on your mind about last year that may be incomplete or relevant to be able to have everything about last year written down – this could be things like stuff that happened that you feel could have been better, people you have not said things to or disconnected with or have issues with, any feelings or emotions you have about last year, etc – just anything else there is to say about last year.
- Read everything you wrote (or you can read it to someone out loud is even better) and say to yourself "this is everything that happened last year, and it is in the past now, it is what it is and there is nothing I can do about it or change about it because it already happened", and see if you can just let go of all the stories, narratives, interpretations, feelings and emotions that you have attached to what happened last year positive or negative and put it behind you.

SCREW UP THE PIECE OF PAPER, BURN IT OR THROW IT IN THE RUBBISH BIN AND DECLARE 2012 COMPLETE.

You are now ready to create 2013 from a clean slate and a fresh mind. While creating what you want to accomplish in 2013, I recommend identifying the habits, behaviours and patterns of thinking that you want to change this year that got in the way of any areas of your performance, productivity and overall wellness in 2012. Have those as some of your accomplishments/goals for the new year to support you actually reaching your aims for 2013. Also, identify the stressors that caused you undue stress this year and work out what you will do this year to gain more mastery over their effect on you, or if possible remove them from your life.

MAXIMISING THE LIMITED ENERGY YOUR BRAIN HAS TO PERFORM AT IT'S BEST

The part of the brain responsible for our conscious brain activity (Pre-frontal cortex – PFC) has a limited supply of glucose and certain activities will use up this precious resource faster than others. To increase the capacity you have to use your mind to it's best you need to ensure you are not tiring your brain unnecessarily, leaving you less able to perform other important tasks that need your PFC. There is so much research about the PFC and how to maximise the use of your brain but for the sake of making it simple for you here are three key things to work on.

Prioritise prioritising – One of the most energy hungry activities for the conscious brain is prioritising what you have to do. To help plan your day better and become more effective you need to understand that your brain has a limited amount of energy. Our ability to make sense of our thoughts gets depleted over time as we engage in mentally challenging tasks so we need to treat our mental energies as a limited resource. If you have any prioritising to do for planning, tasks or projects, make sure you do this at a time in the day when your mind is fresh or recharged. I would recommend doing any prioritising or planning early in the day when your mind has the most energy.

Don't try and hold multiple things in your mind at the same time while working things out. Again, this activity is very energy expensive on the brain and will use up your mental resources very quickly. Our brains work best when we can see things visually so I would also recommend if you are trying to work things out, solve problems, figure out how to organise projects, etc, write it down so you can see it and you will preserve your brain and have more capacity for other important things you need to use your mind for.

Try and limit multi-tasking and constantly diverting your attention between different tasks as it is shown scientifically to reduce your levels of performance and productivity and simply drain your brain unnecessarily, diluting your focus. While we all think we are doing great by multi-tasking, it actually does not improve our productivity and performance, so I strongly recommend taking on practicing doing less of it.

USE THE SCARF MODEL TO MINIMISE THREATS AND MAXIMISE REWARDS TO YOUR BRAIN

I introduced this last month as I think it is the most up to date and relevant information available today to have you be able to use your mind as a weapon for success in 2013. The following is out of the most recent article by Dr. David Rock and Christine Cox, Ph.D titled "SCARF in 2012: updating the social neuroscience of collaborating with others." Please go to davidrock.net and click on 'resources' to download the full article. I am only giving a brief summary here for you to start applying it so I highly recommend reading the full article to get the maximum power out of your mind this year.

Your brain is designed to be constantly on the lookout for and detecting any threat that it perceives may be a danger. In our modern world we have threats to our brain constantly – these can be small with minimal increases in stress or large sending us into a complete state of fight or flight reducing our performance and productivity. This can shape how you deal with life moment to moment and impact your capacity to get the best out of your mind, which is why the SCARF model is a VERY powerful tool for you to practice and develop a muscle with applying it to your life.

The SCARF model stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. It distinguishes five areas of experience that trigger strong threats and rewards in the brain, which influence many of our behaviours. It gives people the ability to understand why they react and behave the way they do in social situations, and a powerful access to modifying and changing how they react.

I find it such a great tool as it gives me a clear and easy to remember language to reappraise my emotions and deal with the myriad of social threats and rewards that I encounter daily. Social threats, like the fear of looking bad in front of others can impact your perception, brain function, and ability to think, create and collaborate. With practice, using the language of the SCARF model

means you can notice these five experiences before, during or after an event that causes a social threat or reward to your brain. It enables us to mitigate or take away the threats that an interaction might bring about. The language of SCARF can help us notice a threat occurring while it is happening in real time and look to regulate our emotions. After an emotional event, such as a team meeting that went wrong because a comment generated a sense of unfairness, SCARF can also help people explain and therefore understand a situation. Using it you are left with different choices as you minimise the potential impact of your actions on others (and others' actions on you).

Here is a brief review of the five domains of SCARF that were created in 2008 by Dr David Rock.

Status refers to one's sense of importance relative to others (e.g., peers, co-workers, friends, supervisors). **Certainty** refers to one's need for clarity and the ability to make accurate predictions about the future.

Autonomy is tied to a sense of control over the events in one's life and the perception that one's behaviour has an effect on the outcome of a situation (e.g., getting a promotion, finding a partner).

Relatedness concerns one's sense of connection to and security with another person (e.g., whether someone is perceived as similar or dissimilar to oneself, a friend or a foe). Finally, **Fairness** refers to just and non-biased exchange between people (e.g., praise for or acknowledgment of one's efforts, equivalent pay for equivalent work, sharing a candy bar with everyone, etc).

All of these areas of experience that can produce a threat or a reward can impact your view of a social situation whether it is threatening or rewarding, so the more you become aware of when a threat or reward is being triggered, the more you can master your capacity to have your mind able to perform at it's optimum, reduce your stressors and stress, and create a new level of overall wellness.

The practice for you to take on this year to improve the performance of your mind is to start recognising and noticing the different threats to your brain that negatively affect you, before, during or after they get triggered and work on minimising their effect on you and the amount you encounter day to day. Also create an environment where you are maximising the number of SCARF rewards to your brain (and to others) making change easier when working on improving your performance, productivity and overall wellness.

FEED YOUR MIND THE HEALTHY MIND PLATTER

In looking at what is going to contribute the most to you being able to use your mind as a weapon for success in 2013 and to put the cherry on top of everything else we have covered in this article, I could look no further than this cutting edge article entitled "The Healthy Mind Platter" published in October 2012 by David Rock, Daniel J. Siegel, Steven A.Y. Poelmans and Jessica Payne. I have attempted to review/summarise some of the main points of the article, with my own comments, to give you a sense and a taste of (no pun intended) the "Healthy Mind Platter." If you are serious about having 2013 be unlike no other year you have ever had then I invite you to read the whole article and apply what it says. Please go to davidrock.net and click on 'resources' to download the full article.

Our modern world has taken us from a muscle power and physical labour based economy to a predominantly brain-powered economy. We all understand the need for a combination of nutrition, exercise and rest for a healthy and strong body but these are not sufficient for an alert, creative and resilient mind.

I love these next few paragraphs from the article as they sum up the current state of how we are with managing our mental well-being and begin to create a new view of how to improve the health of our mind: "Consider the current state of how most people manage –cultivate and maintain – their mental well-being. We have all experienced the challenge of maintaining focus over prolonged periods of time, and know how it can cause fatigue. We all know that our attention is even more limited if we had little sleep the night before. With stress, the brain will disconnect more often from the task at hand, and we may find ourselves staring at the computer screen, experiencing a momentary state of reverie or trance.

As soon as we become aware of our disconnection, we may want to return to the task, but we might feel an urge to stand up, go for a walk and get a snack. Basically, our brain is demanding a minimum level of physical motion and important nutrients in order to be able to operate well. On our way to the vending machine we may encounter a colleague, and although we are cognisant of the pile of work waiting for us on our desk, we connect with a bystander to exchange a chat and a joke.”

“Once again, our brain is automatically driving us to socialise even without our awareness or conscious intention, distracting us, and delaying the time before we return to work. Once we are back at our desk we may be able to focus again, but we seem to lack the necessary creativity to resolve the problem. None of the techniques known to us seem to help in producing a satisfactory solution. Frustrated by this impasse we may lean back in our chair, and suddenly remember the joke made by our colleague half an hour ago. We internally laugh at the joke, and do not realise that thanks to this playful mental intermezzo, our brain is capable of having a sudden insight that will help us to solve the problem. In the case described above the person is basically stumbling from activity to activity, driven by the needs of the brain, without any level of awareness of why this chain of events is occurring. We may even return back home that night believing we had a productive working day, ignorant of the fact that the reason we are irritable is not because our spouse is being unreasonable, but because we are mentally exhausted.”

“Now consider how different things could be. What would happen if we were to start the day after a good night’s sleep with half an hour of reflective practice, taking advantage of the rested and centered mind to prioritise the activities of the day? We might consciously plan to take a break over lunch, allowing for down time or even a brief nap, and arrange for a tennis game with a friend right after work, thus combining connecting time and physical activity. When we arrive at work, we mindfully schedule the meetings of the day to alternate individual focus time with meetings with colleagues so as to have a day with variation in brain activity. The result might be that when we come back home we actually have sufficient reserves to connect and play with our children, completing the list of healthy activities for the day before dinner time. Following a healthy mind diet can provide us with the physical and mental wellbeing necessary to establish and maintain relationships with family, friends and colleagues, and efficiently realise the tasks and responsibilities at school, work, and in our communities.”

The following is a brief summary of the seven neuro-cognitive activities that nurture the mind:

SLEEP TIME – REFRESHING MIND AND BODY, AND CONSOLIDATING MEMORY

Sleep is vital for all humans for both body and mind. We all understand how important it is for our body, but less understood is how important it is for our mind and brain such as memory function, creative processing, and emotion regulation. Sleep is a highly dynamic and active collection of brain states that are critical for physical, cognitive and emotional health.

The amount of sleep that an individual should get varies, but the average from sleep studies conducted is around eight hours. Some need much less and some need more, so you will have to see what works for you, but understanding one’s sleep needs and ensuring these are managed properly is central to a healthy body, brain and mind.

If you are short on sleep, napping is shown to be an incredibly effective way to help improve the performance of your mind. Even brief nap-studies show these can really boost your cognitive performance and help you feel more alert. If one wants the positive effects of a nap right away it has been shown that 10 minutes is the best option so you actually get a light sleep but not too deep so that you feel drowsy when waking up. Adding a nap to one’s day, or an extra 20 minutes to one’s sleep cycle (or both) can yield major benefits to cognition, emotional regulation and general performance.

PLAY TIME – THE JOY OF EXPERIMENTING WITH LIFE

Play, which may seem like a frivolous, unimportant behaviour with no apparent purpose, is seen by scientists now as possibly equally important to other basic needs of sleep, rest and food. Neuroscience research reveals that play-joy is a basic emotional system and essential in child development and adult creativity and learning. Play is very important for adults to create a healthy mind due to its proven cognitive benefits.

Play-joy stimulates a reward to the brain, producing dopamine which facilitates new connections in the brain for creativity and memory. There are many ways you can add play to your day to day life from playing with your children, to having a laugh with colleagues at work, to activities that are just unstructured fun and joyful interaction with others. I invite you to look and see where you can create more opportunities for the play-joy experience and improve the health of your mind.

DOWNTIME – DISCONNECTING FOR INTEGRATION AND INSIGHT

Downtime is about “inactivity” or doing absolutely nothing that has a predefined goal. Hanging out, being with one’s surroundings, being spontaneous, having no particular goal or focus, as one might do on a lazy Sunday morning with no plans. Down time is more about “being” in the moment with spontaneous emergence of whatever activity may or may not arise rather than “doing” a preplanned activity with a goal or pre-set agenda. Downtime is so important for your mind in so many ways, particularly to facilitate having insights to solve problems or make complex decisions. It is shown in many studies that when you consciously engage your mind in doing nothing specific or ‘preplanned’ it allows your brain to make the necessary connections that it can’t make when you are conscious and using your pre-frontal cortex (your executive brain function).

Downtime may occur between activities: while waiting for an appointment or an airplane, while listening to music or sifting through a magazine, that is, if we do not really pay sustained, focused attention to what is heard or written. A meta-analysis confirmed that across many studies, unconscious thought produces better decisions than when people decide immediately using conscious, logical reasoning. In this age of the knowledge and service economy, regular breaks - short and long - are needed to sort and integrate important elements of our minds and permit creativity to emerge.

The right kind of downtime is when our brain disconnects and “un-focuses” from the task at hand and its millions of distractions to connect with something entirely different as a condition to have insights on a whole different level. It is important that you are creating the proper conditions in your life for insight. I invite you to look at your daily and weekly schedule, and how you approach it, and start to give yourself sufficient time and space to disconnect and disengage from whatever you are focussing on, and allow your mind to facilitate more creativity, spontaneity and more powerful use of your brain

TIME-IN: REFLECTION, ATTUNEMENT, MINDFULNESS

When we are dealing with the pressure of stress the brain is hard at work trying to restore balance to our body-mind system. Time-in is much more than relaxation in the Healthy Mind Platter, which is only one form of meditation in a broad range of meditation to facilitate time-in.

One particular type of meditation that has been scrutinised by neuroscientists in increasing ways recently is mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness has been described as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally”. Rather than changing the environment or the appraisal of the situation, mindfulness aims at becoming aware and accepting thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

To conclude, “time-in” is characterised by a very particular type of conscious, focused attention on the inner life of the self in the here and now. Time-in focuses attention on one’s intentions and highlights awareness of awareness itself – the two fundamental elements of being mindful. Time-in develops the capacity to be present with experience.

It can be generally seen to be related to a range of benefits if practiced on a regular basis: in addition to being a wakeful lowered metabolic physiological state, it has physiological, cognitive emotional and social benefits. Regular time-in can therefore be counted among the seven vital activities on the Mental Health Platter.

CONNECTING TIME – THE HEALING POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

According to Matthew Lieberman, one of the founders of social cognitive neuroscience, our “evolutionary wiring predisposes us to be social,” actually causing a sense of physical pain if we are socially rejected. As such one could argue that social connection is a basic human need, very much like water, food and shelter. Social support has been associated with positive effects on various diseases, such as cardiovascular reactivity and blood pressure. Social integration and perceived emotional support are directly and positively related to physical and mental health, including lower mortality.

Stress can cause sleep problems and impair the brain function, which is why the buffering effect of social support on stress levels is important in the Healthy Mind Platter. Not functioning well socially can contribute to stress and impact mental well-being, and social support can make a huge difference in dealing with and reducing stress.

Lonely individuals may experience higher levels of perceived stress, react more negatively to stress, benefit less from social interactions and experience less efficient and less effective sleep that may interfere with the restorative processes of sleep. The presence of positive social support reduces the likelihood of negative health outcomes in the wake of stressful events.

Important in connecting time is the neuropeptide Oxytocin. Known as the “trust molecule” researchers have shown when oxytocin levels increase there is an increase in the level of trust and connection between subjects. Studies show that a combination of oxytocin and social support exhibited the lowest cortisol (stress hormone) concentrations as well as increased calmness and decreased anxiety during stress. Also, from our earliest days of life our connections to others provide a source of feeling seen, safe, and secure.

PHYSICAL TIME – IMPROVING THE BRAIN'S PLASTICITY THROUGH EXERCISE

All the literature world over has shown for years that exercise affects overall health and brain function. Some of the important effects of exercise are improved cognitive function; enhanced learning and memory; improved “executive functions,” the set of abilities (like response speed and working memory) that allows us to select appropriate behaviour, inhibit inappropriate behaviour, and focus despite distractions; stress reduction; decreased anxiety; alleviation of depression; and overall, physical activity has a significant positive and global impact on mental functioning.

Movement and physical activity give your mind the chance to create new connections and re-wiring in the brain (neuroplasticity) and is one of the most effective ways of having your mind be a weapon for success this year. I recommend doing at least 30-45 minutes of structured exercise daily where you have scheduled it, and it is something intentional and purposeful. It needs to challenge you enough so you get the benefits to your mind and body. I would also recommend, due to our long history of hunting and gathering and our innate design to be moving frequently (not sitting constantly), that you get 30-45 minute of any other kind of movement throughout your day, keeping your mind and body nourished with the power of movement – an essential daily nutrient.

FOCUS TIME – ATTENTION MANAGEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE

Modern life has turned our day to day activities to a 24/7 constant information stimulation and state of availability for whatever demands we have to fulfil on. This is leaving us more scattered and our attention constantly fragmented. This requires the capacity to manage one's attention: to focus entirely on the person or task at hand while also exerting self-control to block out interferences.

The central component of the Healthy Mind Platter for those concerned not just with brain health but also performance is undoubtedly focus time: the time we are able to focus, stay focused and refocus efficiently and effectively.

There are three key areas to focus time. Firstly the executive part of the brain that enables us to focus is the well-developed prefrontal cortex (PFC). It is responsible for important capacities such as (1) working memory, involved in organising and structuring information, remembering self and creating images of the possible future, for consequence evaluation, and long-term planning; and (2) processes for monitoring behaviour and inhibiting pre potent responses, including emotion regulation and self-observation. To focus is to pay close attention. Attention is a complex process involving multiple parts of the brain related to perception, arousal, emotion, and memory.

What is critical for your PFC is your level of arousal. A lack of stimulation (boredom) and overstimulation (stress) leads to impairment of executive functions, distraction, and lack of focus. In these conditions, the brain can be altered to enter a state of hypo- or hyper-vigilance that can impair performance. Attention can therefore be considered to be dependent on a state of optimal arousal that activates our body and mind to process the incoming information and respond adequately. In order for a person to function at optimal levels of arousal, predictability and a sense of control are necessary. Deep breathing, mindfulness (openness and acceptance to what arises in the field of attention), and framing the stressor as controllable or transient can also help to maintain or bring a person back to optimal levels of arousal and attentional focus. In short, there is a direct relationship between stress, focus, and health.

Secondly, another aspect of focus time is sustaining attention, or staying focused, which is a function of self-control. The exertion of self-control appears to depend on a limited resource. Just as a muscle gets tired from exertion, acts of self-control cause short-term impairments (mental depletion) in subsequent self-control, even on unrelated tasks.

Thirdly, there is the capacity to re-focus following distraction or during multi-tasking. Given the limited capacity of our working memory, rather than processing multiple sources of information simultaneously, we continuously switch our spotlight of attention back and forth between different stimuli. As a consequence we divide attention, and allocate less time to each task, or distribute a given focus in divided ways over a longer time span. The logical consequence is that multi-tasking impairs performance, also referred to as “dual task interference.”

In the Healthy Mind Platter, focus time involves the application of a singular attentional focus on a task that permits a sense of mastery and completion. Focus time enables an individual to avoid the sense of being overwhelmed and incomplete that so often accompanies multitasking. Focus time is both a cognitive process necessary for effective performance, and an intentional effort that requires self-control, both of which require energy and the management of stress. This has important implications for self-management – keeping down the “switching-time costs” of multitasking which diminishes cognitive performance. In these ways, focus time is helpful for the process of a sense of efficacy in the outcome of efforts and the effective sense of contributing to work output.

In conclusion in my summary of the SCARF Model and Healthy Mind Platter I want to really acknowledge the authors of this work, as I am clear that using these models will greatly improve and enhance your capacity for performance, productivity and overall wellness – giving you the best opportunity to use your mind as a weapon for success this year. The authors intent is that it is a framework for managing our lives and promoting mental, relational, and brain health.

I am committed that after reading this article and applying all four of the areas discussed, and hopefully by also reading the full articles I have used here by David Rock et. al., that you can create an extraordinary year, that has you discovering new levels of performance, productivity and overall wellness – in mind and body. Here's to a successful and happy 2013! 🍀

For more information on The Wellness Guy – Drew Knowles - and his specialised coaching and training on managing your mind and dealing with stressors go to thewellnessguy.co.nz