

FOCUSING YOUR MIND FOR A PRODUCTIVE AND SUCCESSFUL 2015

One of the things I observe about people is that once the clock rolls over to the first day, of the first month of a new year, we suddenly start to reflect on the previous 12 months, while making all sorts of declarations for the year to come.

We are now well into 2015: back into the “business” of life. But CEOs and business owners that engage me, often seek help as they are either on the brink of burn out or not far from falling off the edge of the cliff. These are intelligent and ambitious people and when I can engage with them, in a matter of usually six to eight weeks, their allostatic load is right down, they’re functioning much better – coping with the volume of things coming at them – and after another month or so, they are finding themselves with more time to think, they are more present and available with their spouse/family, more productive and working less hours. They are back in control.

The source of this effectiveness is to get them to consider the “whole” environment they’re in, both current and historic, and the fact that they are a product of it; a co-constitutive element of it with constant reciprocal and consequential exchanges going on throughout their lifetime, with that environment. When I say “environment” I mean the aggregate of all surrounding things that you are in exchange with at all times – all of it. The people, things and objects, what’s in your mind or body, thoughts, content of your blood, your cells, physiology, biology and all that you have done from the past. Even before you were born you have a consequence on your mind and body that shapes your behaviour and actions and how you deal with situations and people today. So when I get a high-level CEO of a large company who says, “I don’t understand why I am feeling this way? I was fine last year, or the year before. I haven’t felt this stressed and unable to cope like this before!” I simply begin to explore their current circumstances, and then closely examine what has happened in the past. In other words what have they been occupying their mind and body with throughout their life? Very quickly it begins to make complete sense why they feel as if they’ve lost their “mojo”.

One of the questions I intend for you to ask yourself a lot this year is “WHAT AM I DOING?”

STAY FOCUSED ATTENTION MANAGEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE

Focusing in today’s modern info-tech world is a challenge. The consequences of having your attention constantly split/diverted between multiple things, and engaging in daily activities that poorly uses your brain’s resources; robbing you of the energy you need to perform other important functions and tasks which requires a fully functioning brain, ultimately leaves you more stressed, not coping and not having the energy you need for other important areas of your life outside work.

In today’s business paradigm we’ve developed habits and behaviours that have our time completely fragmented. Firms expect their managers to be able to be at the beckoning of the increased customer demands. In this world our focus and

attention is increasingly scattered. “There is less time available for more tasks and responsibilities. Since time is a scarce resource, those skilled in (re-)focusing quickly and staying focused within fragments of time will thrive and be more successful. 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 executive capacity to focus is dependent on a well-developed prefrontal cortex (PFC), also referred to as the executive part of the brain, responsible for most of the higher cognitive functions organising actions, both physical and mental. The PFC’s functions are wide and varied; they include 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. Our executive functions allow us to reconsider the environment moment to moment and make choices that may be different to our automatic responses” (David Rock et.al, 2012).

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. It requires higher cognitive functions in the PFC which requires adequate levels of dopamine or adrenaline/nor-adrenaline, which can be altered by levels of arousal or stress. If you are under-stimulated, presenting boredom, or over-stimulated, presenting stress, you will get impairment of executive functions, distraction, and lack of focus.

Various studies cited by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the report “Stress at Work” indicate that between 26 percent and 40 percent of all workers today feel stressed or burnt out by work. Roughly 60 percent of doctor visits stem from stress-related complaints and illnesses.

“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. One could even propose that the capacity to focus attention is an ongoing indicator of mental fitness. Many mental difficulties such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), schizophrenia, and Alzheimer’s disease are characterised by attention problems” (David Rock et.al. 2012).

I wrote a four-part series in 2013 that explored a phenomenon I call “Brain Burnout” that so many of us are dealing with in our day-to-day lives, at varying degrees. Some of us deal with the

short-term effects of burning out our brains on a daily or weekly basis and are managing to deal with the short term effects of it or are just surviving it currently. But many – from my own professional experience with my clients who are mostly high level CEOs/ executives, company owners or successful entrepreneurs – have been misusing and over-working their brain for so long that they are in what I call chronic brain burnout, which is debilitating and can take you completely out of your capacity to function as a professional in the workplace and in your life.

From time to time we find ourselves working on a task, or in a conversation with someone, and it becomes very obvious consciously that you are not able to think as clearly as normal, retrieving information and thought from the recesses of your brain is challenged and it seems neurons are just not firing properly, you are slower in being able to respond or think about what action to take next, and you have to work really hard to stay focused and concentrate on whatever it is that you are trying to accomplish. This happens to all of us, and it even happens to me as an expert in being able to manage my own mind and brain, keep my stress levels low, and perform at a high level.

When this is left unchecked and this state is chronic day-to-day and week-to-week for an extended period (months for some, or years for most), then you will inevitably experience brain burn out. It may be diagnosed as “depression”, “anxiety or panic attacks”, “burnout”, “adrenal fatigue”, “mental fatigue” and a few other possible names that are all the result of chronic levels of stress over an extended period. In the case of most people in the modern world, the stress is mental and emotional, and the brain becomes burnt out. Your mental faculties don’t function properly, and it will also show up in all sorts of physical symptoms and ailments. Hence the popular and well documented notion that the mind and body are completely connected as an holistic and self-regulating system that is always seeking to stay in balance. If it cannot stay in balance, then no amount of telling yourself (with the power of language) to just “keep going”, “harden up”, “push through”, “soilder on”, “suck it up” or any other thing we tell ourselves to override our fundamental physiological and biological nature will completely suffice.

Brain burnout is a real phenomenon that I have helped many people with, who are or were performing at a high level, very productive and successful across most areas of their life, yet have lost the capacity to maintain it and are not functioning properly. You must bring some awareness and consciousness to what is happening, and begin to understand that these symptoms are NOT just part of what you have to endure to be in the working world and modern day life. There are ways to have the full and busy lives you have got, and not feel like a rat on a wheel hoping for this imaginary time when it won’t be as relentless and non-stop as it is (some call this holidays).

You may not be “feeling” stressed, but the feeling of stress is not what stress is. You may just hear yourself saying what I think is one of the most common catch phrases of the 21st century when asked how are you? And you reply “BUSY” (or some version of busy). Stress is a physiological response the mind-body has to any mental/emotional, physical or environmental stressor that we encounter where some threat is produced in the brain or the body that we either consciously or unconsciously deal with to attempt to get rid of the negative stressor. We are programmed to do this as human beings, and when stressors are not removed, reduced or mitigated sufficiently for the body to restore homeostasis (balance), which it is always at work on trying to maintain, then our body and mind will have to start making adaptations to deal with the stressor stimulating a stress response – these adaptations over time present themselves as health issues, burnout, adrenal fatigue, depression, anxiety and all the symptoms that go with these common health issues.

The bottom line is that you must understand stressors and the nature of stress to prevent you from burning out your brain, and having your performance, productivity, and overall health of your state of mind at its best as you attempt to deal with the overload of things to manage and do and handle in your day-to-day, busy

and frantic life. You can do all you like to try and deal with the symptoms of chronic stress levels through your diet, exercise, affirmations, breathing techniques, medication and whatever other things we use to try and deal with stress, but you must fundamentally stop and look at the source of your stress which will be a culmination of all of the stressors you have in your life (past and present) and go to work on reducing, removing or mitigating those stressors. You will find your techniques for reducing or lowering stress will be much more effective in the long term.

MAXIMISING THE LIMITED ENERGY YOUR BRAIN HAS TO PERFORM AT ITS 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 its 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. Here are three key things to work on.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Try and limit multi-tasking and constantly diverting your attention between different tasks as it is scientifically shown 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.

I am committed that after reading this article and beginning to apply what you learn, you can create an extraordinary year, that has you discovering new levels of performance, productivity and overall wellness – in mind and body.

What you do with your mind and body (how you occupy yourself) is the key to continuing to understand and recognise the consequence of stressors that you must deal with daily to perform at your best. The more you continue to take into consideration all that is going on in your environment – the things in your environment, and the consequence of all the thoughts, actions, situations, circumstances that are happening and have happened, the more you will be able to maximise the use of your mind and body for the things that have you reaching your aims.

Start with questioning why you are doing what you are doing, if you think it may be aimless or unproductive say NO or decline to do things that you know you do not need to be occupying yourself with, and maybe ask for more help (delegate) instead of trying to handle or do all things, yourself. Happy 2015! 🎯

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