

Your Brain on Stress by Dave Byers

We live in a time where physical fitness, diet, heart health, etc. are often discussed. But rarely do we consider or receive information on brain health. And yet, our brains are involved in everything we do. Every decision we make, every feeling we have, every activity we undertake, every aspect of our life is based on our brain and its ability to function at its best.

Due to technological advances in the last few years though, we are now beginning to understand just how our thinking affects our brain, our wellbeing and overall health. In fact, communication, time management, coaching for performance and leadership to name a few now include this "new" view of how to be effective. New fields become more established when words and concepts become part of our language and conversations. For example, David Rock, CEO and founder of the Neuroleadership Group and co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, has coined the phrase "neuroleadership." FranklinCovey's revised time management course refers to the daily bombardment of information coming at us as a "Brain Attack". And Daniel

Amen, M.D. a clinical neuroscientist, psychiatrist and brain – imaging expert says in order to be at our best we need to learn to manage those A.N.T.s in our lives, those Automatic Negative Thoughts. In other words, "Don't believe everything you think!"

This article will briefly cover how stress impacts our ability to think and what we can do to be at our best. Or as Dr. Amen says "When your brain works right, you work right."

This first thing to recognize is that our brains are not designed to handle too many pieces of information at the same time. The belief that we can effectively multitask is a myth. And yet we have so much information, demands, emails, phone calls, texts, IM's etc. coming at us that we think we have to respond to everything now. This has created a problem for our culture and caused thousands of adults to feel stress and that they may have attention deficit disorders because focused thinking is so hard. In fact, the brain changes structurally and functionally based on where we place our attention. We have created addictions to technology and

feel the "need" to respond to everything that comes at us. Some people won't allow the cell phone call to roll to voice mail, some react immediately to the texts they received, some think that the emails have to be answered now. So the first step to removing the stress that all incoming information causes is to recognize that we live in a time that has reinforced the concept of reacting to everything and that we do not have to react to it all. Choose to be proactive and act on those things that are most important at the time. Yes, there will always be many things coming at us, but choosing what to handle first, having a plan, having the discipline to act on the important first instead of trying to handle it all at once, helps us manage our hectic lives and reduces our stress levels. Time management helps and in the course "The Five Choices to Extraordinary Productivity" the strategy is to:

1. Act on the Important, Don't React to the Urgent
2. Go for Extraordinary, Don't Settle for Ordinary
3. Schedule the Big Rocks, Don't Sort Gravel
4. Rule Your Technology, Don't Let it Rule You
5. Fuel Your Fire, Don't Burn Out

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The next best thing we can do is to name the emotions we are feeling when life is chaotic and we feel stressed. Naming our emotions and having self-talk that says "I am feeling ___ and I am going to put this aside for now" helps our brains function. Our brain is not trying to figure out what to do with the emotion, and handle the problem, or information you have in front of you at the same time. We can become more mindful of our thoughts and feelings. And naming them helps us to again focus on the most important task at hand. So every time you find yourself being overwhelmed by your emotions, "Name and tame them." I challenge you to try this 10 times and let me know how it worked for you.

Finally, understand that the brain sees and processes information through a social lens. We are all impacted by variables in our conversations that may make us feel threatened or comfortable. People are concerned with the variables of Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness. And when these elements are tended to, we are less threatened, less stressed and more open to communication. These concepts are the basis of

David Rock's book *Quiet Leadership: Help People Think Better, Don't Tell Them What to Do*, and are foundational for the OBFS course *Coaching: Collaborative Conversations that Drive Positive Change*. Asking someone's permission to have a conversation, when to have a conversation, to ask for more information in a conversation etc. reduces the threat level because permission tends to the Status, Autonomy and Fairness elements needed in the brain for effective functioning. Letting someone know in advance what you would like to talk about, how long it should take, why this is important to you, etc. helps the brain have Certainty and reduces stress. Sharing your thoughts and being authentic with others helps with Relatedness and Fairness and also builds trust.

The good news from the new brain research is that our brains continue developing all of our lives. And that change in our brains occurs through paying attention. The brain loves to make new connections and to develop. If we notice more what stresses us, what comforts us, what works, what we want to change, how to change, and think about the solutions we

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can have, instead of the problems we have, we can develop in ways we may have never thought possible.

If you are interested in learning more about brain health and how to be at your best, I suggest you read "Making a Good Brain a Great Brain" by Daniel Amen, M.D., "Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation" by Daniel Siegel, M.D., and "Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long" by David Rock.



*"Nothing can stop the man
with the right mental attitude
from achieving his goals;
nothing on earth can help
the man with the wrong
mental attitude."*

~ Thomas Jefferson