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“The telephone is an amazing invention, but who will ever use it?”

– Rutherford B. Hayes, U.S. President, 1875.

“The only difference between a rut and a grave are the dimensions.”

– Ellen Glasgow, Novelist

Stressed Rats in a Shriveled Brain Rut

A recent New York Times [article](#) on the brain and stress made the rounds in our office, and it was both affirming and eye-opening. For those living in a cave, folks are pretty stressed right now. It’s not difficult to be stressed over the recession and economy, bailouts, layoffs, foreclosures, failing banks, just to name a few.

If you feel like your brain is on auto-pilot in some ways, it probably is, new research shows. Researcher [Nuno Sousa](#), MD, PhD, Life and Health Sciences Research Institute, University of Minho in Portugal and his colleagues discovered chronically stressed rats “lost their elastic rat cunning and instead fell back on familiar routines and rote responses, like compulsively pressing a bar for food pellets they had no intention of eating.” Sousa’s research focuses on stress and cognition.

Stress has been known to cause quite a few physical ailments in the body, such as increasing blood pressure, depression, diabetes and Alzheimer’s. In fact, statistics show that 80% of our illnesses are stress related, and I’m sure those numbers are a bit higher since the recession hit. Stress also stiffens your arteries and suppresses your immune system – one of the reasons why you suddenly fall over with the flu when you’re running around like a maniac. If we don’t follow the instruction book for our bodies, they stop and let us know.

Turns out our brains are not immune to the sting of stress either. The areas in charge of executive decision-making and goal-directed behaviors shrivel with stress, but “brain sectors linked to habit formation had bloomed,” the *Times* article stated.

Basically, we put ourselves into what Dr. Sousa calls a vicious circle. We keep doing the same thing over and over again – digging ourselves into a giant rut like pressing the bar for food pellets. Our stressed selves can’t seem to recognize that we’re not coping normally and get back to goal-directed behaviors to help us out of the rut.

The article points out that although perseverance is usually considered an admirable trait and a key to success, uncontrolled repetition takes it too far. It reminds me of those old wind-up toys. You wind them up and let them walk until they hit a wall and keep walking to nowhere. In real life, it's not so amusing. "Unfortunately, the dynamism of our stress response makes it vulnerable to disruption, especially when the system is treated too roughly and not according to instructions," the article's author reported.

We can, however, reverse our stressed out brains. Sousa and his fellow researchers gave their stressed rats a vacation. With less stress, those shriveled parts of our brains "resprouted" to let us innovate, discriminate and stop pushing the darn food pellet bar. The overgrown areas on habit formation in our brains also shrink. We go back to normal – whatever that is for each of us.

To highlight a few more examples of the stress we give ourselves, I came across another article on Blackberry usage. In a survey by Neverfail Inc. in Austin, 80% of those surveyed said they have used a mobile messaging device while driving a car, and 79% have used one while in the bathroom. Really? There's no need to read your e-mails or make phone calls while in the bathroom.

The survey also reported:

- 41% reported using a mobile messaging device on a plane, despite prohibitions
- 16% have used it during a funeral or memorial service
- 11% couldn't keep away from their Blackberry during a romantic moment
- 76% take their mobile device on vacation, 20% said they sometimes do, and only 4% never take it with them on vacation.

Keith Ferrazzi, author of *Who's Got Your Back*, says we have more or less worked the same amount of hours since World War II and actually have more leisure time. "At the same time, as a culture, we complain of a lack of balance in our lives – that we spend all our time working, thinking about work, winding down from work, or getting ready for work," Ferrazzi writes. "Whose fault is it if you keep your Blackberry glued to your knuckles while you're on vacation or at the gym?"

I've had a serious chat with some of my organizing clients who can't seem to let go of their Blackberries. I ask if there's a rule that they must answer an e-mail at night or on the weekends, and they stammer out a "no." So why do you feel compelled to read them when they can wait until Monday or when you're back in the office?

People are afraid to let their e-mail stack up in the inboxes while on vacation, and as I've been told, they just want to keep on top of it. If you're a manager, is this the kind of behavior that you want from your employees? Do you want to hear them from every moment while they're off for the weekend or on vacation? If you want healthy and happy employees, the answer should be no. If you don't expect your staff to do that, you shouldn't expect it from yourself either. It sends a hypocritical message to your staff, that classic "do what I say, not as I do" message which confuses employees on what to do.

What everyone seems to say is every now and again put down the Blackberries, cell phones, IM's, Twitter and Facebook updates, and mindless email and Internet surfing. We need to do this to save our brain, one of our major organs. Our poor, shriveled brains wind us up and keep us walking into the wall over and over again, walking forever to nowhere.

To resprout your brain, separate your work time from your “life” time. Go a weekend without your Blackberry and other work. When going on vacation, don’t do work, call in or come in and say, “I’m not really here.” If we see you, you’re here. Vacations are not just for you, but the people around you too. Work will wait until you come back, and no one can miss you or appreciate your contributions if you **never** leave.

Get out the calendar and plan now for next fiscal year’s vacation. If you lose vacation days because you didn’t take enough days off for the remainder of last year, you suffer from poor time management. Don’t be one of those who have to burn so many days last minute or lose them from your vacation totals. There’s no excuse for that. The shriveled parts of our stressed brains need the time.

Take a week or two and regrow those brain cells. Until you do that, your brain will be over in the corner walking to nowhere against the wall and pushing the food pellet bar. Over and over again.

Financial Planning Advice on the Web

If you can’t afford a financial planner, Good Morning America’s correspondent Mellody Hobson [discussed four websites](#) you can use to be your own planner.

- **Mint.com** lets you track your spending and helps you create a budget and monitor how much you spend in every area of your life. On your first visit, enter the User ID and passwords of your bank, savings, and credit card accounts. The website, which has bank level security and was founded by Money magazine, does not ask for your account number nor do they keep them.
- **Bankrate.com**. Compare rates of banks on many services and credit cards and all sorts of financial calculators, including ones on mortgages, debt consolidation and car-buying.
- **Google’s Tip Jar**. Need ideas on how to save money? Visit the Tip Jar for great tips from all of you out there in cyber space. The most popular ideas are closer to the top so you don’t have to scroll through a bunch to find a gem. One idea on gift-giving: give a service instead of a thing. Offer babysitting one night for a couple with children or mow the lawn for someone who can’t.
- **Simplifi.net**. Sophie, the site’s virtual financial advisor, will help you create a financial plan for your money and your life. The one good thing about having an avatar for a planner is that she’s always friendly. No bad customer service there.

Organizing Tidbits

Perfectionism and Breast Cancer. Professional organizer Debbie Jordan Kravitz details her battle with overcoming breast cancer and perfectionism in her new book. *Everything I Know About Perfectionism I Learned from My Breasts: Secrets and Solutions for Overpowering Perfectionism* is available via Debbie’s website www.malizapublishing.com.

Saving Money on Filing. To save money on file folders, using removable labels is the way to go. Administrative Assistant Charlotte Burrell told me how she uses Avery 8066 White Removable Labels, and she has used the same set of folders for her faculty for three years. “These labels are outstanding for temporary or permanent files because they stay on till you take them off,” she said. Charlotte uses the labels to create temporary travel folders or permanent file folders.

Procrastinator's Clock. Mac users can install a "Procrastinator's Clock" to help monitor the time to get them out of the door a bit faster. The clock doesn't let you know if it's running on time or up to as much as 15 minutes ahead. For more information, check out this [website](#).

Repurposing and Redecorating. A fellow organizer on Twitter tweeted about an artist who created a "recycled office" with old tables. Check it out [here](#). Very clever idea. What can you reuse as something else?

Got Clutter? I have developed 30 minute and 45 minute presentations on organizing, time management, productivity and **my new presentation on Team Productivity**. Longer workshops are available upon request. Moving to a new building? I also have a 30-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department. I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution to your organizing problems. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call 713-792-8061 or email jsimon@mdanderson.org. **For past newsletters, click [here](#)**. *Follow me on Twitter! Look up JaniceSimon. For Facebook, look for Janice M. Simon. My personal blog is: www.theclutterprincess.com.*

Happy Organizing!

Janice

Links:

NY Time Article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/science/18angier.html?emc=eta1>

Nuno Sousa, MD, PhD: <http://www.icvs.uminho.pt/icvs/domains/neurc/index.htm>

Financial Planning: <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/MellodyHobson/Story?id=8315795&page=2>

Perfectionism and Breast Cancer: www.malizapublishing.com

Procrastinator's Time Clock: <http://componentx.com/Alltock/>

Repurposing and Reusing: <http://unclutterer.com/2009/08/17/a-recycled-office/>