The Importance of Doing Nothing

By giving the brain 'downtime' we can improve mental health and allow ideas to incubate.

"Learning without reflection is a waste, reflection without learning is dangerous" - Confucius

In today's networked society we are at risk of becoming victims of information overload. Introspection and reflection have become lost arts as the temptation to 'just finish this' or 'find out that' is often too great to resist. But working harder is not necessarily working smarter. In fact slacking off and setting aside regular periods of 'doing nothing' may be the best thing we can do to induce states of mind that nurture our imagination and improve our mental health.

Busyness vs productive occupation

Our lives have become defined by busyness. Look around you at the train station, in cafes, out on the street, people are glued to their mobile handset or tablet.

I recently asked an executive I once coached how many emails she received a day. "Five hundred," she told me. "But I don't read any of them. If I did, I wouldn't be doing my job."

The challenge, she said wasn't attaining information but "pushing it away so I don't suffer from information overload. I need time to think."

Helen, as I'll call her, has an assistant who goes through all her emails and she spends a few hours every week discussing problematic ones with him. "I'm not paid to do that kind of work," she explained "if I'm so busy doing what people expect me to do there will be no time left for what I ought to do. You can't do creative work at a cyber-pace."

Helen has a point and I have learnt from experience that many people would be better off if they did less and reflected more.

But doing nothing has never really been acceptable. We associate it with irresponsibility, wasting our life. Most of us feel guilty if we don't have something to do. On the other hand we get a buzz when we feel really busy. Distraction-inducing behaviours like constantly checking email stimulate the brain to shoot dopamine into the bloodstream giving us a rush that can make stopping so much harder.

The danger is we may lose our connections, not just with one another but with ourselves. If we don't allow ourselves periods of uninterrupted, freely associated thought then personal growth, insight and creativity are less likely to emerge.

The benefits of boredom

Doing nothing and boredom are closely intertwined, as noted in my recent paper **Doing Nothing and**

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Nothing To Do: The Hidden value of Empty Time and Boredom. While most of us find it hard to tolerate in many instances boredom can be a prelude to something. It can trigger our imagination and creativity. In a sense, boredom can be seen as a liminal space, a critical resource that pushes us to seek the unfamiliar.

But in the cyber age, where we have an almost limitless selection of entertainment and distraction to hand, it's easier to find ourselves in a state of constant busyness than it is to do nothing. Our frenetic activities in cyberspace – a world of multitasking and hyperactivity – help us to delude ourselves that we are productive. The reality is that social media is very reactive but not very original. It contracts creativity and can impact mental health. If we don't know how to calibrate the balance between action and reflection we may become a casualty of psychological burnout.

Workplace

Unfortunately in contemporary organisations work addicts are highly encouraged, supported and even rewarded. The insidious development of the manic defence is difficult to counter because such behaviour is useful to organisations. And there is an element of control. There's the attitude, "I'm paying that person a good wage, why aren't they at their desk working?"

But there isn't necessarily a relationship between working hard and working smart. In fact a workaholic environment may contribute to serious personal and mental health problems including low morale, depression, substance abuse, workplace harassment, relationship breakdown and above average absenteeism.

The most effective executives are those who can both act and reflect, which means unplugging themselves from the compulsion to keep busy.

Three ways to make time for doing nothing

1. Maintain relationships

We need meaningful contact with people to feel fully alive. Maintaining our relationships needs interaction, engagement and time out.

2. Saying No

Being able to say no is one of the most useful skills we can develop. Saying no is not necessarily selfish and saying yes to every request is not healthy. Saying no to unimportant requests can free up time for more important things.

3. Managing sleep habits

In a perfect world we should all sleep eight hours a night. Sleep is essential for personal growth and creativity. Poor sleeping habits are proof we haven't stepped off the treadmill of busyness.

Incubating ideas through subconscious thought

Doing nothing or having nothing to do, are valuable opportunities for stimulating unconscious thought processes. Unconscious thought excels at integrating and associating information, by subconsciously carrying out associative searches across our broad database of knowledge. In this region of the mind we are less constrained by conventional associations and more likely to generate novel ideas than when we consciously focus on problem solving.

The outcome of these processes might not always enter our consciousness immediately. They may need time to incubate. The suggestion here is that as well as being the best thing for our mental health, doing nothing – or slacking off – may turn out to be the best way to resolve complex issues.

A good problem solver continues to work unconsciously on a problem after abandoning the conscious work. Creative solutions can be found by working intermittently on the problem while attending to mundane activities, such as taking a walk, driving, reading or playing with children.

The benefits of tuning out and focusing on the present is gaining in popularity in the corporate world with many executives now turning to mindfulness meditation to assist their decision making and problem solving. This can be a band-aid solution if an executive works manically for nine hours then attends a mindfulness session at the end. Ideally time should be taken during the day. A walk around outside or time spent with your feet on the desk, can be more productive than working through a lunch-break.

Italian painter Giorgio Vasari summed it up well when he said "Men of genius sometimes accomplish most when they work least".

There are many well-known examples of brilliant ideas that came to people "out of nowhere", from Archimedes in his bath, to Newton in his Lincolnshire garden and Paul McCartney who woke one morning having composed the tune for "Yesterday" in his sleep.

Incubation time can be introduced in many ways. Companies such as 3M, Pixar, Google, Twitter and Facebook have made 'disconnected time' key aspects of their workplace.

Recognising the need to work smarter

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Often the give-away that we are working too hard (and not smart enough) is when we find ourselves in a place where there's always more to do. We fool ourselves into thinking that if we do just one more thing we will be able to relax. This thinking is delusional; either our to-do list will continue to lengthen or we feel we could do things a little bit better. If we get stuck in this mindset it's time to get off the treadmill and take a break. And surprisingly, often after a period of disconnection the problem will look quite different and we might find the answer was right there all along, staring us in the face.

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