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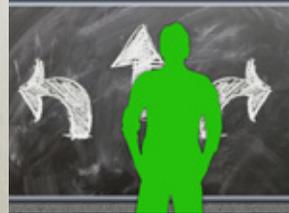
NEWS

January | 2019



Less is more

– why less stimulation is better for the brain



Back in the feel-good zone!

About power and powerlessness in all kinds of relationships

Dear readers,



I hope you have enjoyed a good start to the year and wish you a truly fulfilling 2019! Fulfilment can best be achieved when our attitude to life focuses on fullness rather than emptiness – i.e. when we have faith that life will serve us well. However, abstention can also be a helpful approach for attaining a sense of fulfilment. Read more about this in our newsletter – and let it inspire you to act to the best of your abilities.

With best regards,

Reinhild Fürstenberg

Less is more – why less stimulation is better for the brain

A click in the online shop, a feeling of joyful expectation. Shortly afterwards, I'm holding a brand new blouse in my hands. It fits! For a while, I am filled with a sense of bliss, until the feeling is replaced by restlessness just a few days later. Maybe I should also buy the matching skirt that Google keeps forcing on me with tempting images whenever I enter the digital world of the smartphone? By the time I have seen the ad on my display for the fifth time, while I was looking for something else, I can no longer control my impulses. Another click, another short-lived rush, and a new skirt arrives a couple of days later. A few satisfied turns in front of the mirror, before familiarisation slowly sets in. After just one week, the new outfit is taken for granted. And oh yes, didn't I also need a pair of boots ...?

This is how the chain of developing desires and then satisfying them continues for eternity.

It is worth noting, however, that the process that takes place in our brain is originally a sophisticated mechanism of evolution. When we rate a stimulation as positive, certain nerve cells release the reward-based neurotransmitter dopamine. In addition, the transmitter GABA is emitted, which binds to the corresponding receptors in the nerve cells to give a calming, relaxing effect. This is how our ancestors made best use of their available resources, such as food.

The more stimulations we have, the faster the transporters and their neurotransmitters empty, and the more the receptors become dulled.



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This means that, over time, less dopamine and GABA are released, while the need for new and more powerful stimulations increases. This is how nature, in times of excess, made sure that as much food as possible was consumed and that the positive sources of stimulation were fully exploited. In times of shortage, the dopamine transporters were able to fill up again so that sufficient reward substances would be available in more plentiful times in order to motivate people to act and use their resources.

In our affluent society, shortage has all but disappeared from our experience. Our reward system is constantly stimulated by the huge numbers of possibilities. A short trip to Paris, or rather a week in Mallorca? A new tablet, the latest games console, the special offer from the electronics store ...?

By the way, our reward system reacts powerfully to surprising and unexpected stimulations. This is how we are tricked by sales and spe-

cial offers. The phrase “For a limited period only” boosts the release of dopamine due to the anticipation of a wonderful experience that is only on offer temporarily. This makes total sense from an evolutionary viewpoint, as resources that appeared unexpectedly would be used as quickly as possible. Due to the increased emptying of the reward transporter and the dulling of the receptors that the reward substances bind to, fulfilment immediately generates the need for even more stimulation, which has to be much stronger than the first one. This is the only way to force the receptors to react again.

As a result, we find we really do need that skirt to go with the blouse and the trip to Mallorca should also include a boat excursion and a surf course. This leads to a craving for newer and stronger stimulations, as the brain also gets used to beautiful experiences. People who travel to the Maldives every year think the turquoise water is normal – their reward transporters are empty and they cannot get rid of the feeling that they need another, even more exciting kick. By contrast, when the transporters are empty, the calming GABA transmitter can no longer bind to the dulled receptors, meaning we are left with an inner restlessness that can only be fought off by hunting for new inputs which, in turn, end up emptying the reward transporters even further.

A vicious circle then ensues. In the end, we remain unsatisfied and, in the true sense of the word, empty. Originally, this mechanism aided our survival as a species. Mother Nature motivated prehistoric man to use this inner restlessness due to a lack of GABA to become more active and seek out new resources. These days, however, our brains have become accustomed to constant input. Studies have shown that some people need a new stimulation every 11 minutes – by checking their phones, flicking through the headlines of news websites, posting something on Facebook and so on, as they feel bored otherwise. The

shortage of rewarding transmitters that have mostly been used up by over-stimulation creates this inner restlessness and leaves people searching for new, stronger stimulations.

What can be done against this?

Having a lack of things to do is actually exactly what we are missing. Yes, you read that right – a lack of things to do! Not having anything to do or abstaining from things is the beneficial regulation we need for the dopamine transporters to fill up again so that the relaxing, calming transmitter GABA can be released. **A lack of things to do, or restricting the things we do, is the basis for creativity and feelings of happiness.** Only once our transporters have been replenished is it possible to experience even small stimulations as pleasing and intense. This is why someone who has been ill for a long time (lacking things to do/abstention) and goes for a walk in the park again experiences the outing more intensely than someone who sails around the Maldives on their yacht every year.

In this context, I can still vividly recall a school trip when I was in 10th grade and had to go without all kinds of delicious things that we always had in full supply at home. Even today, I can fully remember the joy of eating a fruit yoghurt again after getting back home ...

What does this mean for your everyday life?

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus also knew that happiness and satisfaction lie more in abstaining from wishes and desires than in succumbing to them. **Practice abstention!** Put your phone and other digital devices away for a while every day and do some simple activities

instead, but do them consciously (going for a walk, washing the dishes, building a Lego tower with your children, ...). Keep your attention in the here and now. This will help you to experience what you are doing more intensely and consciously. You won't then blow away all your dopamine for ever more powerful and frequently occurring stimulations, but can save it up and enjoy such brief moments better.

With full dopamine transporters, even washing the dishes can be a fulfilling experience. This is the **secret of mindfulness: enjoy what you're doing and do it consciously.** The experience will then assume a different quality.

With this in mind, I wish you all the very best in rediscovering the simple things in life.

Source:
Ingo Schymanski:
"Im Teufelskreis der Lust"
(In the vicious circle of
pleasure)

How can I improve my time management?

"I'll do it tomorrow!" – Everyone knows this feeling when thinking about lengthy to-do lists for work and in your private life, and then looking at how much time is left to get through them. *"I don't have time to do that today anyway." "I'll have more energy for it tomorrow."* There is technical term for this state of mind: **procrastination** ... or put more simply, *"putting things off"*.

Why do we put things off so often?

In many cases, the reason is the number of tasks and the complexity of projects that we have. The more work we have on our desk, the more unlikely it is that we will find the energy to finish it. Other reasons include the fear of making mistakes or making unrealistic demands of ourselves.

So how can we improve our time management?

It's easy: Actively undertake to improve your planning and consider where your priorities lie and what you wish to achieve and/or complete. Look for a time management tool that suits you.

In the following extract, you will receive a few tips on improving the way you divide your time from one of the simplest and most successful practices in the time management universe:

ALPEN method (acc. to Lothar J. Seiwert)

The ALPEN method is a tried-and-tested tool in traditional time management and invites you to write down, plan and rate your tasks every day. It is easy to implement and is highly effective if carried out properly.

Implementation

Write down tasks

► Draw up a list of all the tasks for the day and include any tasks left over from the previous day. It is important to focus here. Example questions include: *What has to be done? Is a meeting planned? Do any documents need to be sent/printed/packed for a trip? If yes, which ones? (...)*

Estimate the time needed

► Take a look at every single item on your list and consider: *How much time do I realistically need for that? Have I already worked on this kind of task and can say exactly how much time I will need?* Set yourself a time limit for each task and if they involve fixed deadlines, make a note of the time and date.

Extra tip for fast workers: *If a task can be completed inside two minutes, don't spend much time thinking about it and just finish it straight away. This will cut the length of the list and give you your first feeling of achievement, which will quickly motivate you to go further.*

Plan the buffer time

► As you cannot know exactly how much time you will need for certain projects, you should always add buffer times. In general, it is good to work with the following division: 60% of the working

day can be filled with tasks and the remaining 40% is free for all the risks that a typical day brings: IT problems, lengthy coffee breaks or conferences (...)

wie Entscheidungen treffen

► *What is important today? Are there deadlines?* Set priorities! Bear in mind that the day will not last forever and focus on a maximum of three tasks that you really want to finish that day.

N Review what you have done

► At the end of the day and before you write a new list, you should always consider the result and be willing to accelerate processes or improve them. *Did I complete my 3 main tasks? Were there any problems? Was the buffer time enough?*



Perhaps this method has already helped you. Otherwise, you can also make use of the **following tips**:

- **Put your phone away!** Mobile phones can be a great help, but checking social networks and messages is also a serious form of distraction in times when concentration is required. If you have to perform a task that requires peace and quiet (such as writing an article for a newsletter), simply put your phone out of your reach. Extra tip: if you need your phone for work, there are special programs that allow you to block certain apps, websites and other services for a specific period of time. (see "App tips")
- **Divide large tasks** into smaller sections so that it is easier to see how much progress you are making.
- **Put a small notepad on your bedside table.** Before dropping off to sleep, people unfortunately often think of tasks that they have to finish the next day. To help you relax, write these things down straight away. Afterwards, your mind will be free and you can look forward to a good night's sleep.
- **Take a break!** You are probably wondering how taking a break is supposed to help you complete your tasks. The answer is simple: a rested brain is a productive brain, so don't stress and give yourself some time out every now and then to recharge.



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More best practices about self-management:

- ▶ **Eisenhower method** (for managers)
Categorises tasks based on their importance and urgency, and helps you to delegate tasks to employees
- ▶ **Getting Things Done** (acc. to David Allen)
Also a list-based method, but in this case with a greater focus on priorities and order of the tasks
- ▶ **Not-To-Do-List**
You need to be aware of what keeps you from doing your work and unnecessarily takes up too much of your time or makes you unproductive. Once you have written down the names of the culprits, it will be easier for you to avoid them.

When you have successfully applied these tips and reduced your workload, you will be able to find the time for the more enjoyable things in life. Take good care of your well-being, go for regular walks, visit your favourite restaurant and enjoy the positive feeling that comes from productivity.



App tips:

- ▶ **Wunderlist**
For all those who prefer to live digitally and free of paper, "Wunderlist" is exactly what you need. Draw up lists for various categories and share them with colleagues or friends.
- ▶ **Freedom**
This app blocks certain sites to help you stay focused and productive. Please note that the programs cannot be unblocked again before the set time has elapsed.
- ▶ **Forest**
This is for people who waste too much time every day on their phones and in social networks. This app lets you plant small trees so you can see how long you have managed to stay away from the *world wide web*. It is ideal for nature lovers and people who would like to spend less time on their phones.

Less helplessness and more ability to act! About power and powerlessness in our relationships



Please finish off the following sentence in your mind: “My ... (boss/colleague/partner/spouse/child ...) is driving me mad! It just *cannot* go on any longer! He must finally stop ... – and should start ...”

Most people can complete this exercise easily. We all have needs that we want to satisfy. If they are not satisfied, we become unbalanced, thin-skinned, quick-tempered, weepy, lose sleep, suffer palpitations – it can really make us ill! In short, we feel helpless and powerless. It’s no wonder we feel this way because so long as we need others to change before we feel better, the *others* will have the power over own feelings.

Power and powerlessness – we are often unaware how much these two states influence our lives. Yet so much strength lies in becoming more aware of our own power and knowing how to shape it actively, i.e. how to win it back for ourselves!

But how do we do that? Next time you feel helpless and powerless, ask yourself this simple question: **Who exactly has got a problem here?**

At best, you say “I have”, because then you can do something. This realisation alone mostly makes people feel better than before ... But what can be done? How can you get the power back?

To find the answer, we also need to ask ourselves exactly when we feel

“powerful”. This feeling is linked to three conditions, as testified by the Whitehall Study – one of the largest and most extensive epidemiological studies ever undertaken:

- ▶ Control over one’s own actions
- ▶ A feeling of self-determination
- ▶ Freedom of decision

If these conditions are given, we feel good and do not feel powerless.

Freedom of choice is central to these conditions – people need to be able to make choices so that they feel active and have a sense of being able to act independently.

In reality, we **always** have three options, although this is often forgotten:

- a) **Going** – this means moving away from the problem situation and solving the problem instead of continuing to complain
- b) **Staying** – this means leaving everything the way it is and deciding to keep the problem. There is sometimes a good reason for this, or other problems are more urgent.
- c) **Letting go** – We can also let a problem stop being a problem and not make one of it anymore, because the problem is not the problem itself but how we evaluate it.

We *always* have a choice. Decide which one is yours!



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Please note:

It doesn't really matter which of the three options we choose – every decision leads to the current situation being decided by us. Even with the second option, a problem feels different after you decide to stick with it – I promise!

For the third option, of simply not making a problem of a problem, there is a wonderful trick from the field of behavioural therapy that is known as "The Work" by Byron Katie.

Ask yourself the following four questions and make your problem disappear into thin air:

1. What am I convinced of in this situation right now? Is it true?
2. Is it *really* true? 100% true? 24/7? How does being convinced of this make me behave?
3. What if I wasn't convinced? How would I behave then?
4. What could I be convinced of instead so that it is no longer a problem for me?

Let us apply these four questions to an example:

1. A boss "never" shows appreciation for the work done by a member of his team, as she says. He always makes her do overtime and "never" notices all the things she has already done. **Is that true?** Yes, screams her soul.
2. **But is it really true? Always? 100% true? 24/7?** At this point, we often have to admit that there are, of course, also exceptions – the employee's soul starts to ponder ... The important thing here is the question as to how being so convinced makes us behave: Biased? With caution?

3. **We would behave differently if we were not so convinced of things!** In our example, it would be possible for the employee to no longer take the attacks personally.

4. The "space" that then opens up can be used to consider **what thoughts, what convictions would be more helpful**. Perhaps the employee could ask herself why her boss behaves in this way. She may then be able to see that he faces enormous pressures himself. That would probably change her behaviour which, in most cases, also changes the behaviour of others – the wonder of the systemic approach – and the result is an inner distance to the problem.

Personally, I like to add three more questions to those asked by Byron Katie:

5. What should the other person do so that I feel better?
6. And how can I help to achieve that?
7. What exactly are my options?

We can either change the situation or ourselves.

Please note:

The key point is to realise that we always have a choice, even if it sometimes doesn't look that way. But we are free to assume a different position to the problem, just like Pippi Longstocking, who always had so many problems – except for her, they were never problems but always exciting challenges!

With this in mind, create a world in which you like yourself! Use your freedom of choice to take back the power over your current situation and shape your own life.



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