

AP4CTE AP Seminar: Building a Dynamic Workforce

Research Strategies for Innovating and Problem-solving Across Career Paths

Module 6

Why Neuroscientists Say, ‘Boredom Is Good For Your Brain’s Health’

By Bryan Robinson, Ph.D. (contributor)

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Your brain works 24/7. Even when you’re asleep, it never is. It’s listening, sensing and dealing with stressors to keep you safe and sound. It’s resolving solutions, making decisions and thinking about possibilities even when you’re not aware of it. This “always on” organ is so devoted, it never takes a break or a vacation. But neuroscientists also say it has its limits. Sleep is one way your brain cleans up after a full day, although it’s still on the job.

Go To The Land of Nod

According to brain scientist, Jill Bolte Taylor, author of *My Stroke Of Insight*, “Every ability you have, you have brain cells that are communicating. When you’re walking, you have brain cells communicating with the muscles to move. The cells in your brain are constantly working. They eat and they create waste, so sleep is the optimal time for the waste to be cleared out between the cells so they can actually function. I compare it to when the garbage collectors go on strike, we know how congested the streets become. That’s exactly the same thing going on with the brain cells. If you wake up to an alarm before your system is ready to wake up, you have cut part of a cycle of sleep off that your brain wanted. Sleep is about rejuvenating the brain.” A study at Iowa State University published this month in the journal *Sleep* shows that sleep restriction actually amplifies your anger. It’s as if the brain gets mad when it doesn’t get the rest it needs.

Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There

“Sit and do nothing?” you ask. I can imagine you rolling your eyes, glancing at your to-do list. You’re up to your eyeballs in work, deadlines loom and you can’t find enough hours in the day to juggle emails, work remotely and home school the kids. It’s counter-intuitive, but doing nothing is productivity’s brakes to doing something’s gas. If you were a car without brakes, you’d burn out your engine, but you don’t have to let that happen to achieve career success. According to neuroscientists, boredom has gotten a bum rap, and it can actually amp up your creativity, task engagement and job productivity.

Neuroscientist Alicia Walf, a researcher in the Department of Cognitive Science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, says it’s critical for brain health to let yourself be bored from time to time. Being bored, she says, improves social connections. Social neuroscientists have found that the brain has a default network mode that is on when we’re disengaged from doing. Boredom can actually foster creative ideas, refilling your dwindling reservoir, replenishing your work mojo and providing an incubation period for embryonic work ideas to hatch. In those moments that might seem boring, empty and needless, strategies and solutions that have been there all along in some embryonic form are given space and come to life. And your brain gets a much needed rest when we’re not working it too hard. Famous writers have said their most creative ideas come to them when they’re moving furniture, taking a shower or pulling weeds. These eureka moments are called insight.

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Make A To-Be List

The Italians have a name for it: “il dolce far niente”—the sweetness of doing nothing. It doesn’t translate in the United States, where tasks and schedules define us. The closest translation we have is “killing time.” But “il dolce far niente” demands more: to intentionally let go and prioritize *being* alongside of *doing*. Doing nothing has been compared to the pauses integral to a beautiful piece of music. Without the absences of sound, the music would be just noise. “Il dolce far niente” provides the brain the brakes it needs to recharge so that it can be more productive.

So ditch that outdated adage, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” and alongside your to-do list, create a to-be list—a time when you can be mindfully present in each moment. You give yourself elbowroom to stretch and deep breathe between appointments, time to walk around the block and clear your head. Or meditate, pray, practice chair yoga at your desk, watch the grass grow or just contemplate the universe. Your brain will be happier and healthier when it coexists with idle moments without imperatives, nothing to rush to, fix, or accomplish. After applying the brakes and doing something for nothing more than the sheer pleasure of it, you’re ready to go again. Then watch your resilience, creativity and productivity soar.

Reference

Krizan, Z., et al. (2020). Does losing sleep unleash anger? *Sleep*, 43. DOI.org/10.1093/sleep/zsaa056.274

Per Forbes: Bryan Robinson, Ph.D. is the Founder and Chief Architect Officer (CAO) of ComfortZones Digital, Inc., (comfortzonesdigital.com). He is author of 40 nonfiction books, including *CHAINED TO THE DESK: A GUIDE TO MANAGE WORKAHOLISM AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN A HYBRID WORLD* (New York University Press, 2023) and *#CHILL: TURN OFF YOUR JOB AND TURN ON YOUR LIFE* (William Morrow, 2019). His books have been translated into 15 languages. He is also the Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he conducted the first studies on children of workaholics and the effects of workaholism on marriage. He built his career on the themes of reliance and work-life balance, and has lecture throughout the world on work addiction and workplace issues. His research was featured on 20/20, Good Morning America, ABC’s World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, NBC Universal, The CBS Early Show, CNBS’s *The Big Idea*, and NPR’s Marketplace. He hosted the PBS documentary, *Overdoing it: How to Slow Down and Take Care of Yourself*. Finally, he maintains a private psychotherapy practice in Asheville, NC and resides in the Blue Ridge Mountains with his spouse, three dogs, one cat, and several tropical birds and the occasional bears at night.