

“Modern office life and an increasingly common condition called "attention deficit trait" are turning steady executives into frenzied underachievers.”

In 1999, Jen, my friend and colleague, gave me a copy of an inspiring article: “The Human Moment at Work” by Edward M. Hallowell (Harvard Business Review, Jan 1999). Fast forward to January 2005, I’m in my local newsagent purchasing that month’s HBR on the strength of a number of articles, including Hallowell’s latest: “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform” - interesting, inspiring and relevant.

In this month’s email: summary points and quotes from that article.

Attention Deficit Trait (ADT)

This is the term Hallowell invented to describe the problem of brain overload. Drawing from his extensive psychiatric experience, his understanding of the brain, and his treatment of ADD and ADHD, Hallowell suggests that **ADT** is a new, related condition which *“springs entirely from the environment... it is brought on by the demands on our time and attention that have exploded over the past two decades. As our minds fill with noise, the brain gradually loses its capacity to attend fully and thoroughly to anything.”* The symptoms come on gradually, and at their extreme include:

- distractibility, inner frenzy, impatience, hurried, unfocused
- difficulty staying organised, setting priorities, and managing time
- a constant low level of panic and guilt

“ADT is purely a response to the hyperkinetic environment in which we live. Never in history has the human brain been asked to track so many data points”.

The Brain

“As the human brain is asked to process dizzying amounts of data, its ability to solve problems flexibly and creatively declines and the number of mistakes increases.”

The frontal lobes govern things such decision making, planning, organising, prioritising and other managerial tasks. Beneath the frontal lobes are the survival parts of the brain. When things go well, they send messages of *“excitement, satisfaction, and joy; pump up your motivation, help you maintain attention, and don't interfere with working memory”.*

But, when the brain becomes overloaded, panic, fear, anxiety, impatience, irritability, or anger occur: *“fear shifts us into survival mode and thus prevents fluid learning and nuanced understanding”.* The brain *“reverts to simpleminded black-and-white thinking; perspective and shades of grey disappear. Intelligence dims. In a futile attempt to do more than is possible, the brain paradoxically reduces its ability to think clearly.”*

Other effects can include:

- impulsive judgments
- rushing to complete
- reduced flexibility
- loss of sense of humour
- forgetting the big picture, goals and values
- loss of creativity
- prone to melt down
- self-sabotage
- denial, avoidance

What to do?

- * acknowledge that ADT can occur, talk about it; don't see people with it as deficient or weak
- * create a positive, fear-free emotional environment
- * ensure there is an environment of connection, trust and respect

"Fostering connections and reducing fear promote brainpower. When you make time at least every four to six hours for a "human moment," a face-to-face exchange with a person you like, you are giving your brain what it needs."

- * improve your sleep, diet and exercise
- * break large tasks into smaller tasks
- * keep a portion of your day, desk and workspace clear
- * stop demanding fast thinking
- * don't ask you or your staff to do more with less
- * match skills to tasks

"When managers assign goals that stretch people too far or ask workers to focus on what they're not good at rather than what they do well, stress rises"

- * make time for 'think time'
- * do important tasks first before dealing with emails
- * at the end of the day, write a short list of the important things to do tomorrow
- * don't let papers accumulate
- * do important work when you are at your best
- * slow down
- * do easy rote tasks to give your brain a break
- * move around, get out of your chair
- * do what you need to do to create an environment which improves your focus

About this article

Each month, I aim to provide personal and professional development information for you and your staff. Topics covered are based on areas of interest raised by clients and colleagues, with material drawn from journals, books, articles and shared experiences.

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