

HEAD

Mind Over Madness

How to beat stress by rebuilding your brain

by KATE SIBER

On a recent afternoon, I was staring down nine deadlines, managing an infuriating case of tendinitis, and arranging care for an ill family member. But there I was, staring at clouds out my office window and plotting my evening run. Procrastinating? No. I was busy rewiring my brain.

As numerous studies have shown over the past decade, it's possible to increase blood flow to certain regions of your gray matter, create new neurons, and strengthen neural pathways just by directing your thoughts. Neuroplasticity, as this phenomenon is called, has been used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, even dyslexia. Now physicians and therapists have begun developing mental exercises to alleviate a more widespread affliction: stress.

Being a textbook stress case – stomach aches, a fidgety Elvis leg - I looked up a leader in the field, Don Goewey. The former executive director of the International Center for Attitudinal Healing and author of 2009's *Mystic Cool*, Goewey has helped chronically ill patients, families of returning soldiers, and CEOs train their brains to transcend stress. I figured he could handle me.

As Goewey explains it, most stress is caused by our fight-or-flight response, which starts in the primitive brain, and sets off a chain of chemical and physiological reactions designed to help us, say, fend off a hungry grizzly. Problem is, our hectic modern lives are packed with routine events-traffic on the highway, a blind date-that can trigger lower-intensity versions of this response. "Our primitive brain can't tell the difference between a real emergency and a mind-made one;" says Goewey. Over time, cumulative reactions can lead to chronic stress and a glut of ailments, from head-aches and hair loss to depression and dementia.

According to Goewey, you can prevent this by shifting control of your experience from the primitive brain to the higher brain. Over several weeks, he guided me through his approach: develop awareness of stress provoking thoughts, switch reactions from fearful to rational, then make it a practice. I started by tuning in to my many anxious



thoughts, which he said the primitive brain translates into fear. Don't try to change them, Goewey advised; passive observation would reduce my negative responses. He also had me disrupt marathon sessions at my desk with three-minute breaks every 90 minutes. Before high-stress situations, I started visualizing calm behavior.

Three weeks into my effort, I'd become faster at recognizing troubling thoughts and much better at maintaining a calm, pragmatic mind-set. It was easier to solve problems, which made them less stressful. My stomachaches disappeared. Still, I had a lingering question: Doesn't stress help me perform sometimes? Not when it comes to thinking tasks, says Goewey. What you want is to recognize the cause of your stress, then act sanely to solve it. I'll buy that. So far, in my new calmer state, I'm much more productive, even with all the cloud watching.

For information on Mystic Cool go to <http://mysticcool.com>

The Helping Hand

Feeling overwhelmed? Try Goewey's "clear button." 1. Imagine a button on your left palm. 2. Press it; this sends a *stop* signal to your brain. 3. Take three breaths, and with each one imagine a different color. (Always use the same colors.) 4. Relax. You've engaged your higher brain and can think clearly again. Over time, the button should work better and better.

