

Why smart people underperform

“Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform”

by Edward M. Hallowell

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The Idea in Brief

Frenzied executives who fidget through meetings, miss appointments, and jab at the elevator’s “door close” button aren’t crazy – just crazed. They’re suffering from a newly recognized neurological phenomenon called **attention deficit trait (ADT)**. Marked by distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience, ADT prevents managers from clarifying priorities, making smart decisions, and managing their time. This insidious condition turns otherwise talented performers into harried underachievers. And it’s reaching epidemic proportions.

ADT isn’t an illness or character defect. It’s our brains’ natural response to exploding demands on our time and attention. As data increasingly floods our brains, we lose our ability to solve problems and handle the unknown. Creativity shrivels; mistakes multiply. Some sufferers eventually melt down.

How to control ADT’s ravaging impact on performance?

Forster positive emotions by connecting face-to-face with people you like throughout the day. Take care of your brain by getting enough sleep, eating healthfully, and exercising regularly. Organize for

ADT, designating part of each day for thinking and planning, and setting up your office to foster mental functioning (for example, keep part of your desk clear at all times).

These strategies may seem like no-brainers, but they can help vanquish the ADT demon before it can strike.

The Idea in Practice: How you can combat ADT

Promote positive emotions

Negative emotions – especially fear – can hamper productive brain functioning. To promote positive feelings, especially during highly stressful times, interact directly with someone you like at least every four to six hours. In environments where people are in physical contact with people they trust, brain functioning hums. By connecting comfortably with colleagues, you’ll help your brain’s “executive” center (responsible for decision making, planning, and information prioritizing) perform at its best.

Take physical care of your brain

Ample sleep, a good diet, and exercise are critical for staving off ADT. You’re getting enough sleep

if you can awake without an alarm clock. You're eating well if you're avoiding sugar and white flour and consuming more fruits, whole grains, vegetables, and protein instead.

You're exercising enough if you're taking a brisk walk or going up and down a flight of stairs a few times a day.

Organize for ADT

Instead of getting sucked into the vortices of e-mail or voice mail first thing in the morning, attend a critical task. With paperwork, apply the OHIO ("Only handle it once") rule: whenever you touch a document, act on it, file it, or throw it away. Do crucial work during times of the day when you perform at your best. Use whatever small strategies help you function well mentally – whether it's listening to music or walking around while working, or doodling during meetings. And before you leave for the day, list three to five priority items you'll need to address tomorrow.

What your company can do

In firms that ignore ADT symptoms, employees underachieve, create clutter, and cut corners. Careless mistakes, illness, and turnover increase, as people squander their brainpower.

To counteract ADT and harness employees' brainpower, invest in amenities that foster a positive, productive atmosphere.

Example:

Major software company SAS Institute creates a warm, connected, and relaxed work environment by offering employees perks such as a seven-hour workday that ends at 5:00; large on-site gym and

day-care facility; and cafeteria that provides baby seats and high chairs so parents can eat lunch with their children. The payoff? Employees return the favors with high productivity. And SAS's turnover never exceeds 5% – saving the company millions on recruiting, training, and severance.

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Sims Wyeth

SIMS WYETH & Co.

Business Communication Training and Consulting

Tel: 973-783-4205

Email: swyeth@simswyeth.com

Website: www.simswyeth.com