



turning potential into performance

Did You Know That Your Brain is Wired Not Only to Learn ©

Chris L. Johnson, PsyD.

Here in the Chicago, where typically sauna-like conditions of midsummer have given way to temperatures evoking images of warm blankets during football season, we've not yet reached the 90 degree mark. With this summer the second coldest on record the weather is an incessant topic of conversation; most simply cannot believe the weather—it just feels, well, wrong.

Did you know that your brain is wired not only to learn, but also to resist change (even changing weather)? The very act of learning and making memory (encoding important stuff for later) is an extremely efficient process that allows us to do truly amazing things like actually *remembering* where we put our keys or making that tough decision at work. However, this evolved capacity runs amok when we're required to make changes, even changes that are good for us or, for those of us in Chicago this summer, changes over which we have no control.

The brain loves novelty, yet integrating the novel into useful day-to-day action is something that our brains actively 'resist' for a few simple reasons: 1) the relatively small size of our working memory; 2) the constant, streaming sensory input we receive at any given moment; and 3), the fact that our brains seek to attain balance. Seems our brains don't appreciate being 'told' what to do, but 'resist' and would rather 'discover' it independently. It's this discovery process that's responsible for generating that 'ah ha' moment of insight and the subsequent cascade of feel-good chemicals that race through the body. At that point we're more open to new learning.

To roll smoothly with life's punches, say to manage the disappointment in needing to wear a sweatshirt vs. a tank top on a July evening, heightens resiliency to stress and requires fostering flexibility. Determining to 'pay attention' to those novel moments each day is a start.

Now you may be one of those who isn't sure you experience novel moments very often. You, too, like a recent student of mine, may believe that for a moment to be worth noticing it has to be big, bold, terrifying or exhilarating. Intense emotion notwithstanding, we can explore the novel by *attending to the extraordinary in the ordinary moments* of our days.

This requires a few things:

1. Slowing down
2. Paying attention, with the breath being a great, portable focus
3. Becoming curious about what's right in front of you, namely either the breath or your body or the current life situation you're in.

Focusing your attention stabilizes your brain circuitry. So, whether it's putting your attention on that picture of your lost keys in your mind's eye, or on a feeling state such as anticipation or joy, or your current thought du jour, all focused attention maintains the neurochemical connections that reflect what you're paying attention to or what's important to you. Over time, what you pay attention to keeps the relevant brain circuitry open and dynamically alive; over time these circuits transform from mere chemical links to stable, physical changes in your brain's structure. What you experience, what you pay attention to, literally shapes who you are.

Paying attention to the novel weather in Chicago, becoming curious about your own reactions and those of others will enhance your own flexibility—even if you still need to grab that sweatshirt.