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## Hard labours lost in thought

MODERN MIND

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FOR those who think for a living, it is a serious drawback that there is nothing showy and impressive about the sight of a person deep in thought. Wrap your leg behind your ear in the contortions of an advanced yoga pose and on-lookers will exclaim in admiration and awe. By sorry contrast, sit quietly and think, and - no matter how complex the subject of your thoughts - you will never appear to be doing anything out of the ordinary.

Indeed, the spinning motors of the mind are so well concealed that thinking can be all too easily confused with doing nothing at all. This, perhaps, was the mistake made by the management of Liverpool Central Library in Britain who recently spent about \$30,000 on fitness machines for library users. One can only imagine that, disturbed by the sight of all those people sitting quietly, they felt the need to provide them with something useful to do.

Nor is the disadvantage of thinking simply that it is such an unspectacularly inert activity. Little sympathy is offered to those whose minds wander in unwanted directions. Rene Descartes insisted that if there is anything we can and should conquer in this world, it is our thoughts, and society tends to agree. The student or academic who complains of faltering attention is simply not seen as having as convincing an excuse for an unproductive day as would, say, a builder whose brick consignment had not yet arrived.

Yet, as we all know, on a bad day it can be just as hard to focus attention on a challenging topic as it is to build a wall without bricks. According to Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner, when you are feeling frazzled (or under mental load, as psychologists put it), the waywardness of the mind can be all but insuperable. What is worse, attempts to exert control create precisely the state of mind you are trying so hard to avoid.

According to Wegner's ironic process theory, when you set yourself the task of concentrating on a difficult topic, there's an unconscious monitoring process that helps by scanning for distractions that threaten to pop into consciousness from within. The irony is that this search has the unfortunate effect of making precisely the unwanted thoughts it is looking for more accessible to consciousness. It is a little like warning a small child to not even think about putting that soup bowl on his head. Immediately, he starts to toy with the idea.

When mental reserves are strong, this doesn't matter. The teamwork between conscious and unconscious is seamless and successful. Like the firm, effective parent whose gimlet eye quickly quashes all speculation that a soup bowl may make an original and attractive hat, consciousness is alerted to all potential unruliness and attention is quickly brought back in line.

However, when you are under stress, the unconscious warning system backfires horribly. The conscious side of the arrangement is too frazzled to follow through with mental discipline and - plop! - into consciousness splat the thoughts you didn't want and, ironically, would not have had if only you had never tried to stop them.

This slapstick approach to mental control means that staying focused in distracting circumstances is a herculean task. As Wegner's findings show, under mentally taxing conditions we become unusually sensitive to everything that doesn't happen to be what we ought to be thinking about. People asked to learn information that has been highlighted in yellow, but to ignore the rest, don't simply remember less of the material they are trying to commit to memory. Compared with undistracted volunteers, they also (and here's the ironic part again) remember more of the bits they are specifically trying to ignore. With a

deadline to meet, a determined attempt to ignore the construction work going on outside all but ensures that every tuneless clang and thud will be heard with monstrous clarity. Undue pressure on a researcher to be productive is likely to unstopper a flood of unproductive thoughts.

"The essential achievement of the will," William James wrote, "is to attend to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind." The exertions and battles that this entails take place unseen and are all too often under-appreciated. My husband, whose workday can include grappling with heavy planks and steel beams, has learned to keep his eyebrow from rising in sceptical astonishment when I claim fatigue after a hard day's thinking. Those in charge of Liverpool Central Library's budget, likewise, would do well to hold exercise of the mind in slightly higher esteem.

Perhaps some day the new brain imaging technologies that make the workings of the mind so colourfully visible will bring a much-needed ostentation to the act of thinking. In the meantime, there is a dignified response to those who seem unimpressed by cognitive endeavour. We can bring to their attention the subtly difficult mechanism of thought and suggest that they try to hold it "fast before the mind".

Preferably against the distracting whirr of a fitness machine.

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