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Brain traffic jam? Reboot yourself!

"There is more to life than increasing its speed." Mohandas K. Gandhi

Does your brain feel jammed? Do you ever wish you could push a delete button and get rid of all the junk in your noggin? Do you have fantasies of flying off to some deserted island — far away from the onslaught of cell phones, BlackBerries, e-mail, voice-mail and snail mail?

Of course you do, and there are some good reasons for that.

Paying attention to the barrage of information coming at us is costly. Most of us aren't aware that there are different kinds of attention; we spend most of our time engaged in narrow-objective focus, zeroing in on one or a few things in the foreground and ignoring the background.

In a new book, *The Open-Focus Brain* by Les Fehmi and Jim Robbins, Fehmi, relying on decades of research, says that the way we pay attention has a measurable impact on our brain waves. When engaged in narrow focus, the brain, being the master control panel for our mind and body, can induce changes in muscle tension, respiratory rate, and the flow of neurotransmitters and hormones. Everything is influenced by how we pay attention.

Getting back to that deserted island, one of the reasons we feel different (better) on vacation is that we stop narrowly focusing our attention and instead broaden our focus to take in the beauty of the ocean or the vastness of the sky and the briny fragrance of the sea.

Narrow focus serves a purpose. It allows us to see and deal with urgent or important situations. It is effective in helping us, in the short run, accomplish a lot. It was, however, designed to be an emergency mode of paying attention and, as such, it revs up our brain and body which, over time, can result in chronic stress problems such as anxiety, headaches, gastro-intestinal disorders, heart disease and insomnia.

So, what can you do?

You can take mini-vacations or "focus breaks" periodically throughout the day to offset the negative impact of too much time spent in narrow-objective focus.

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LAWYERING & LIVING

For example, when toiling away at your computer (narrow focus), occasionally sit back and allow your eyes to gaze at the space behind your computer. If you're lucky enough to have an office with a window, take a moment to look out and take in the largeness of the space outside. If you're stuck in a cubicle, shift your eyes away from your computer and look at the far wall or the ceiling.

The trick is not to zero in on any one object but to soften your gaze as you take in a sense of background or space. Exhale slowly three

times while doing this. It should not take too much time away from your work and you will return to your work feeling more relaxed and refreshed.

What does this do for you? According to Lehmi, when people gently direct their awareness to and imagine feeling space, the brain responds by changing its electrical activity to "synchronous alpha." This is good for you. Alpha brain waves are associated with feelings of relaxation and time spent in alpha produces positive changes in mood, energy, creativity, thinking and memory.

Not bad for a few moments spent gazing out a window.

Reboot the computer

Another quickie technique is called Rebooting Your Computer. When your PC freezes up and prevents you from working, what do you do? The only solution usually is to reboot. The same thing can be said for our very personal computers — our brains. When overloaded, we cannot think clearly (thanks to the release of certain chemicals from the brain that compromise our cognitive functioning). Here's how to reboot your brain.

This technique can come in handy when you become aware that things aren't going well, when you find yourself going off-track. With this method you will be able to get your computer, your mind, restarted and refocused.

- Close your eyes and exhale slowly 2 or 3 times.
- Say to yourself, "I'm going to turn my mind off."
- With your mind's eye, see a blank computer screen.
- Unhinge your jaw.
- Relax your tongue.
- Be still for 10 to 20 seconds.
- Then slowly open your eyes.
- Notice the space and stillness around you
- Start sending energy to your next objective or target.