

# CURING MENTAL CLUTTER

By Debbie Williams

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Do you suffer from mental clutter, "brain clutter", or "to-do-itis"? If you have any or all of the following symptoms, you are one of the millions of busy professionals suffering from this chronic ailment: you can't fall asleep at night, you read only the business section of the newspaper and use the rest for lining your birdcage, you can't shop at Kroger or Target without talking on your cell phone, and you're so adept at multi-tasking that you can't watch a movie without reading at the same time.

Does this sound like you or someone you know? Is there a cure for brain clutter, or are you doomed to live a life of stress and fatigue? You'll be relieved to learn that brain clutter isn't terminal, and after a short period of self-evaluation and organizational therapy, you too can live a brain clutter-free life.

## Write It Down and Let It Go

If you find yourself tossing and turning at night, unable to sleep for fear that you will sleep through an early morning meeting or forget to make an important call, then it's time to let go. Use your planner to make a list of things to do each day, limiting the list to 8 or 10 items if you are easily overwhelmed or your tasks are major ones. If you cringe at the thought of using a notebook planner, but delight in electronic toys, you now have permission to go toy shopping. Buy that PDA that you are dying to try out, or invest in a voice-recording device to help you remember important tasks. Too structured for you? Then why not buy a giant bulletin board or sticky board so you can cover it with Post-it(tm) notes or index cards - this is a great tool for those needing visual reminders beyond a list.

For those of you who are creative and inspired at all hours, keep a small notepad and pen beside your bed, in your car, in your briefcase or purse. You never know where the muse will strike, and you want to be prepared to capture those scathingly brilliant ideas on paper so that you don't forget them. And don't be so hard on yourself as you lean on reminder tools - no one expects you to remember every name, date, or detail that crosses your path. Even the most organized people I know, many of whom are professional organizers, use planners of some kind to document information and remind them of appointments with clients and friends.

Now for the tricky part: once you've written down your idea, note to yourself, or "to do", just let it go. Don't give it another thought. You don't have to keep all this informational clutter in your head - that's what the planner is for. Let it do its work. If this sounds trivial, then consider another tool of the trade: the saw. Now I'm no lumberjack (or Jill), but I've used a saw enough to realize that if I fight it, it doesn't cut well. If I tried too hard, the tool was ineffective and took twice as long as necessary. Once trained in the use of this wonderful tool, I was able to cut wood effectively and efficiently. The job was done in a jiffy, and it was painless.

Using a time management tool such as a planner, recorder, or calendar will do the work for you so that you can concentrate on what YOU do best: grow your business, guide your employees, and work on your career. The short amount of time you do have to spend with your family and friends will be much better than before because you'll actually hear what they say rather than focus on that little voice in your head mulling over the course of your day and plans for tomorrow.

## **Get Unplugged Without Coming Unglued**

I'm not against using modern technology to improve your efficiency and productivity, but becoming a slave to the telephone or beeper is rapidly becoming a reality in our busy lives. From mothers in Target talking on their cell phones to executives interrupted from a busy lunch meeting by a beeping pager, convenience has overstepped its bounds, crushing a few fragile toes in the process.

Is it time to toss your laptop into the pond or turn in your beeper for a life of leisure? That's probably unnecessary unless you're willing to quit your day job and move into a cave. Life goes on, and so do the interruptions. But with concerted effort on your part, you can control the interruptions rather than allowing them to control you.

Practice time management in time blocks, screening calls during lunch or busy productive times to focus on the tasks at hand. An interrupted meeting flows well, and you can always return your calls at the meeting's end. Eating lunch, even at your desk, gives you the fuel you need to continue with your important work, and is more beneficial to you and those around you if you take the time to relax as you're eating it. (We all know what happens during some working lunches: pass the Tums please.)

If you work from home, or find it difficult to relax once you finally do leave the office, consider screening calls or visitors during dinner or family time at your house. If mealtime is a steady stream of interruptions from phone solicitors and kids at the door, impose a House Rule and stick to it! Your stomach and nerves will thank you, even if your children don't.

Don't be afraid to close your door to limit interruptions, turn off your beeper when eating, or turn off the cell phone during the drive home. Transition is an important part of our day that is often overlooked, yet very necessary for our well being. Not only does it keep you from experiencing Road Rage on I45, but some of your best inventions and ideas will come to you during this time. Turn on relaxing music, practice deep breathing, or listen to an audio tape of your favorite book or motivational speaker. During those moments when you do occasionally lapse into work mode, dictate into your recorder to capture those thoughts, and then resume your relaxation exercises.

## **Too Much of a Good Thing**

Multi-tasking can be the office warrior's best friend and worst enemy. For decades, gurus of time management and organizational training have preached the virtues of doing several things simultaneously to increase productivity, but too much of a good thing is NOT good! Not only are you working harder when you multi-task, but you're losing your focus and doing nothing well. The exception to this is when you're in Wait Mode and don't need to pay attention to what you're doing. Waiting at the train station while reading a report is one thing; editing a proposal as you drive down the interstate is quite another!

Instead use down times or waiting periods to do tasks that require little brain power. While your computer is booting up for the day, make a phone call. Catch up on filing while you're waiting for an important fax to come through. Just don't try to carry on an important call with a client while you're writing a marketing plan or you might blurt out important company secrets!

## **Prescription**

Practice multi-tasking in moderation, write down and prioritize things you need to get done, and get away from it all a little bit each day. Try these simple exercises in the comfort of your home, office, or car. You should see noticeable improvement within a week or two. Repeat as needed for a long and happy life.