

MENTAL NOTES

A mind expanding e-newsletter from Mark Zust, *The Perceptionist*



April Foolin'

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“If you believe in me, I’ll believe in you. Do we have a bargain?”

Lewis Carroll, in an exchange between Alice and the Unicorn in Through the Looking Glass.

We may not always admit it, but human beings love to be fooled. Whether it’s getting caught up in a murder mystery during a live play, rooting for the underdog in an animated movie, playing games in a virtual environment on our Wii, or watching the impossible unfold at a magic show, we relish the opportunity to escape the mundane realities of everyday life. As it turns out, getting outside of our day to day routine is good therapy for our brains.



Surprising our mind with new activities and experiences creates new neural pathways by stimulating the area of the brain called the *hippocampus*. This area is responsible for memory and learning and it thrives on novelty. New experiences require the brain to create new connections that record a memorable event and relate it to stored memories. The more novel the new experience, the more likely it is to create a lasting impression on your brain. Your willingness to embrace the new and unexpected in life

encourages the brain to relate this new data to your existing view of the world. If the experience is outside of your current perception of the “way things are”, your brain expands to allow new neuronal pathways to form as it seeks out additional information to support and expand your understanding of the new experience. That’s why not long after you’ve had a new experience (such as attending a compelling avant garde theater performance or visiting a foreign country or reading about a provocative business

concept) you notice a related article in the newspaper, or hear an interview on the radio, or stumble onto a blog that’s related to the experience. Coincidence? Hardly. Your brain is subtly “tuning in” to complementary data and adding to your understanding. This process of seeking out information and looking for patterns is something our brains are hard-wired to do. The best part is that much of the heavy lifting is performed by your subconscious. Your brain does the work while you have all the fun. No foolin’!

Fun ways to be fooled (and grow your brain at the same time):

- 1. Attend a live magic show.** Sure, you’ve watched a few TV specials. You may have even thought: “Well, they can do anything on television” or “I would have seen how that trick was done if I were in the audience.” If the long-term popularity of David Copperfield (An average of 350 live shows performed throughout the United States each year for the past ten years) or the sold-out shows of magicians Lance Burton or Penn & Teller in Las Vegas are any indication, there’s no substitute for being fooled in the flesh. According to *Psychology Today*, the brain thrives on visual novelty. Nothing beats the mental stimulation (or just plain fun) of seeing an elephant disappear or a glowing lightbulb float overhead, just above you. A less expensive alternative to attending a big stage show is to seek out a local restaurant that features a “close-up” magician. These men and women do the impossible just inches away and often in your hands!
- 2. Go Wii.** Playing video games have been linked to improving spatial acuity and coordination. Add the exercise benefit of practicing yoga poses in a virtual Taj Mahal or surfing in a Wii-created Maui and you have the perfect combination of physical exercise and visual stimulation. Before you know it, your brain actually starts to “smell” the jasmine or “feel” the waves lapping at your surfboard. Who knew being fooled could be so much fun?
- 3. Watch a 3-D movie.** For sheer “messin’ with your mind”, there’s nothing like putting on those funny black-rimmed glasses and enjoying a flick in 3-D. The advances in 3-D simulation in just the past three years is nothing short of breathtaking. Avoid the cheesy slasher flicks (the 3-D effects don’t look that good, anyway) in favor of animated films like “Bolt” or the amazing stop-action movie “Coraline”. Kiddie flicks? Hardly! You’ll enjoy the story and the spectacle.

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