Have you ever had one of those weeks that kind of come with a theme attached?

Well, last week was BRAIN week for me.

On Monday, I had a long chat with the legendary Gary Bencivenga – one of the greatest copywriters ever to draw a breath, and one of the sweetest guys you will ever meet.

Gary and I spent two full hours on the phone discussing the techniques he's used throughout his career to produce bigger winners, more often. And Gary set the theme for my week with his inspired insights into how he uses his subconscious BRAIN to solve problems for him. Awesome stuff.

Then, I spent an hour on the phone with a friend who was suffering from one of the worst cases of Writer's Block I've ever seen. She was in complete brain lock (my fault, as it turns out).

In each case, THE BRAIN seemed to be the topic of discussion. So when I sat down to write this essay, I figured, "Why fight it? Most of us have a brain – why not write about how to help it work better for you?

Now, I'm no psychologist, nor have I ever played one on TV. But if your brain is getting in the way of your productivity ... or even if you'd just like to find ways to help your brain overcome your greatest productivity killers ... I'm hoping what I've learned will help you ...

Productivity Killer #1: Depression

Once upon a time, I got so down in the dumps that I couldn't do a lick of work.

A client of mine suddenly began doing things to destroy his own company – a company that I had quadrupled for him and felt a huge personal stake in. And, well, I got depressed.

Suddenly, I had the attention span of a three-year-old. I couldn't focus long enough to write a coherent sentence – let alone rise to the challenges of work.
Next thing you know, I'm on a couch, pouring my guts out to a brilliant, 86-year-old shrink – who, by the way, should have probably seen another shrink about his workaholism. Not only hadn't he been able to bring himself to retire at age 86 – in addition to treating me and his full schedule of patients, he was also Professor Emeritus of psychology at a major university.

Now, there are lots of flavors of psychology out there. Dr. Samuelson was sold on something called the "Cognitive-Behavioral" school – pioneered by Dr. Aaron Beck and Dr. Albert Ellis, and popularized in the 700-plus page doorstop of a book entitled, "Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy" (and yes, he made me read every blessed word – the bastard!).

Right off the bat, Dr. Samuelson spotted my problem. First, he explained that emotions – depression in my case – do not spring up out of nowhere. Actually, they are just a link in a longer chain:

- **LINK #1: An event**: Something that happens in your life. The vast majority of events are neither good nor bad in the absolute sense. They are neutral.

- **LINK #2: Your "Belief Filters"**: These are a set of pre-existing beliefs you have about yourself and the world around you through which information about the event is transmitted.

- **LINK #3: A thought**: Information about the event passes through your belief filters, and then is kicked up to your conscious brain as a recognizable thought. But sometimes, they're not so recognizable. Sometimes they flash through your mind so fast, you don't even realize you're having them.

- **LINK #4: An Emotion**: Or even a big, ugly, tangled rat's nest of them – arise in response to the thought. These, you definitely notice. You can't help it. They can be pretty intense. If you remember thinking the thought that triggered them, you probably know where these feelings came from. If not, they can seem to come out of nowhere.

- **LINK #5: An action**: Or actually, a RE-action to the emotion that was triggered by the thought that was triggered by the subconscious belief filters through which information of the event originally passed.

Are we all on the same page, here?

Good. Well, anyhow, in my case, the chain went something like this …

**EVENT**: My client, whom I had made richer than Croesus, was suddenly and inexplicably ignoring my counsel, listening to drooling morons and making decisions that were so obviously self-destructive, his employees and I were convinced that he was intentionally trying to kill his own company.

**MY BELIEF FILTERS**: I came from nowhere. I don't deserve all of this success. Someday, I'll be back where I started – in poverty.

**THOUGHT(s)**: I'm going to go broke. Everyone who envies me now will be making fun of me. I'll be the laughing stock of the industry. I won't be able to get a job. I'll lose my house, my car, my wife, and have to break my daughter's heart by selling her beloved thoroughbred. I'll probably wind up under a car somewhere drinking anti-freeze to get my daily adult requirement of
EMOTION: Depression.

ACTION: Every symptom I had. Sulking. Angry outbursts at work. Flare-ups with the wife. Over-reacting with the kids. Revenge fantasies involving the client, 10 kerosene-soaked bamboo splints and a book of matches (well, at least a big, fat lemon meringue pie in the face).

Plus, bizarre physical symptoms like sudden dizziness, digestive problems, and of course, complete brain freeze. I found it impossible to write a word or think my way through a work problem of any kind.

THE THERAPY: The good doctor helped me realize that all the belief filters and thoughts that were triggering my depression were – and I think this is the official, medical term for it – “NUTS.”

Then, he helped me examine the belief filters that were causing these completely invalid thoughts, and change the ones that were responsible.

Finally, he showed me how to backtrack from any emotion I was experiencing … identify the thought behind it … figure out whether it was valid or nuts … and if it was nuts, then identify and change the belief filter that triggered it.

RESULT: No more depression. I thanked the shrink, fired the client and moved on to far greater successes and much, much greater riches.

If you sometimes find yourself feeling so bummed out that you just can't focus, do yourself a favor: Get help. Depression is more than just a "productivity killer" – it’s a mass-murderer of human beings. It destroys your energy levels, devastates your immune system, and worse.

Reading FEELING GOOD and schmoozing with a shrink for a few hours helped me enormously. I've used these techniques to end depression quickly, diffuse stress and ramp up my productivity levels for 16 years – highly recommended.

Productivity Killer #2: Creative Block

We've all been there. You're stuck for a creative idea. Maybe a headline, a subhead, or a creative way to drive a copy point home to your reader. But your creative muse is AWOL.


Here's why – and how it works:

When I was in my twenties, I took an aptitude test just for fun. The test explained that there are only two basic aptitudes:
The Creative Aptitude: This is the "right-brain" part of you that is active when you're being the most childlike -- wild, free, playful, and well, creative.

The creative aptitude couldn't care less about order, or rules, or details, or even what's true. Like a child, it's just interested in having a good time.

In short, it's where great art, music, poetry, innovations and inventions, most Congressional testimony, and nearly everything politicians say comes from.

2.

The Accounting Aptitude: This is the "adult" -- the old-timey Methodist minister -- who lives on the left side of your brain. It does not approve of play. It frowns on frolic and is suspicious of anything that is not substantiated six ways from sundown.

And it loves rules: Both making them and following them to the letter.

The accounting aptitude is the voice in your head that shouts down every creative idea you've ever had. It points out the problems wrapped inside your creative solutions. It is strict, self-disciplined, detail-oriented, and in some folks, anal-retentive.

The test went on to explain that all of us have varying degrees of both aptitudes. Nobody is 100% creative or 100% accounting.

Most kids under the age of six tend to be way to the right-hand side -- the creative side -- of the aptitude scale. So are abstract artists, most Hollywood actors and others who have lost all touch with reality.

Really good bean counters, proofreaders, compliance officers and most traffic cops I've encountered in my colorful career as a motorist tend to be most of the way to the left-hand side. They live their lives on the "just the facts, ma'am" accounting end of the scale.

But most of us are somewhere in-between. A great songwriter like Elton John or Paul McCartney, for example, needs to write both words and music. The lyrics demand a tremendous amount of creativity, but also enough detail orientation to get the rhyme, rhythm and spelling half-way right. The melodies and harmonies are partly creative and partly directed by music theory -- rules which are, surprisingly, mathematical in nature.

Now here’s the key: To function at peak efficiency, we each need to exercise our creative aptitudes AND our accounting aptitudes on a regular basis.

When one of these two aptitudes is not getting enough exercise, it starts jumping around, raising its hand and interrupting everything we're trying to do with the other one.
Example: You're trying to proofread your copy for typos – a task in which your meticulous, detail-oriented accounting aptitude is fully involved – but you keep getting distracted. Your brain keeps feeding you creative ways to punch up the subheads. Before you know it, you're not proofreading, you're editing!

The opposite happens when you've been working creatively in your copy for some time: Your accounting aptitude gets jealous, jumps up and starts shouting, doing its dead-level best to kill every germ of a creative idea you're working with.

What's the solution?

Mix it up! In most cases, the copy projects you work on require the healthy exercise of both aptitudes.

Research, organization, substantiation and documentation are largely done on the left side of the brain.

Creating major themes, headlines and subheads, dimensionalizing benefits, and crafting the prose itself require a hefty dose of right-brain work.

So here is what I do, I work on one type of task until I'm exhausted, then turn to the other type.

The sales copy I delivered for a health newsletter last week required me to spend four days reading five years of back issues – plus half-dozen premiums and scanning four or five books. And while I was doing all that reading, I was also meticulously pasting material I thought I might use into the appropriate places in my outline.

Although the material was very well written and entertaining, I was bored to tears after the first day. So the next day, I turned to more creative tasks – headlines, subheads, sidebar ideas and so forth. And the next day, with my creative aptitude satisfied, I returned to studying the client's material.

What's that you say? You're creatively blocked and you don't have any detail-oriented work to do?

Try this to humor the accountant inside you …

Jot down a list of, say 20 or 30 four-digit and five-digit numbers.

Add them up by hand.

Then divide by 7,329 and carry your answer out to the 21st decimal place.

Then, multiply that by Pi: 3.14159265

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, your accounting aptitude will be satisfied, shut the heck up, and you'll be able to return to the creative task at hand.
In rare instances when this fails, my next tactic is to do some other detail-oriented task for an hour. You could pay your bills, for example. Or work on the household budget.

Don't have a detail-oriented task to do? Then disengage entirely. Mow the lawn. Stack firewood. Work out. Hit the local bookstore for an hour. Then try again.

Does it always work for me? Not always. On extremely rare occasions, the only solution is a good night's sleep …

**Productivity Killer #3: "Unsolvable" Problems**

Again – I’m no shrink. But I have read a lot about how our brains work. And it turns out, you actually have four brains.

1. A reptilian brain that controls autonomic systems – breathing, heartbeat, digestion, your immune system, hormone production, and organ functions, etc. …

2. A conscious left brain for detail-oriented tasks …

3. A conscious right brain for creative tasks, and …

4. A subconscious brain for storing stuff.

Both halves of your conscious brain – right and left – are at work only when you're awake. They're responsible for perceiving the world around you, acquiring input and for thinking.

Your subconscious brain is for remembering. It's kind of like a hard drive in a computer. Each day, it stores every piece of new sensory input that passed through your conscious mind – everything you saw, read, heard, smelled, touched, thought about and experienced.

When you snooze at night, your conscious mind conks out and the flow of new information ebbs. That gives your subconscious mind time to sort through all these new files and make connections between them and older files it has stored away over the years.

Your subconscious makes these connections by comparing new information with the stuff already in its files in a kind of "This-is-like-that" way. If you struggled with a problem during the day, for example, your subconscious says, "This problem is a lot like another problem we solved (or saw someone else solve) years ago."

Then, your subconscious creates a connection that your conscious brain can use to access the solution. When you are awake, all of these new connections are available to your conscious mind to draw from.

So how do you solve unsolvable problems? You sleep through them!
Thomas Edison was famous for taking naps. Visitors would often come to his offices in hopes of seeing the great man in action – only to find the old codger sawing logs on a couch in his office.

But he wasn't really sleeping. He was getting his conscious mind out of the way so his subconscious could solve a problem for him. And many times when he awoke, he'd have the solution.

Last week when I talked with Gary Bencivenga, he told me that he writes great copy in his sleep.

When Gary finds himself struggling with something during the day, he sets it aside and moves on to something else. Then, just before he turns in for the evening, he reads or thinks in detail about the "unsolvable problem" – and more often than not, his subconscious mind solves it for him by morning.

And although Gary and I had never discussed this before, I have done precisely the same thing for the past two decades or so.

Sometimes, I print an entire chunk of sales copy and take it to bed with me, and read it thoroughly just before turning out the light. Then, I continue thinking about the problem as I drift off to sleep. More often than not, the solution arrives with my first waking thoughts in the morning.

Try it – you'll be amazed.

Productivity Killer #4: Negative Mental Images

Last week, my copywriter friend was a basket case – and it was my fault. She had submitted a draft she was proud of, expecting me to be thrilled and impressed and for the client to be blown away by it.

And although most of the copy was excellent, she had failed to clearly establish her main theme or to carry it through the copy (no clarity of vision) … her tone wasn't quite right in spots … and the organization left a lot to be desired.

I sent her a nice memo, giving her my suggestions for sharpening the copy. I was complementary of the "good" parts, but firm: The copy still had a ways to go before we could show it to the client. And I did my best to be encouraging and to motivate her to put in this last bit of effort to really make it shine.

I was, as it turns out, a miserable failure.

A couple of days later, I called to see how her next draft was coming along. "Terrible. I'm completely blocked. I just can't get going."

I spotted her problem immediately. I've been where she was a thousand times …

As she was writing her first draft, she was excited about the project. She was playing with mental images of how the client and I would be awed by her tremendous creativity, consummate skill and her ability to deliver grand-slam copy on a tight deadline.
She envisioned the copy sailing through the production process … being mailed … and producing heretofore unimagined response rates. She imagined her new control becoming the talk of the industry … held up as the ultimate example of what direct response copy should be. Who knows? Maybe even an award – would a tickertape parade in her honor be too much to ask?

But when I burst her bubble, she suddenly had a very different set of mental images to deal with.

Now as she returned to the work, she was feeling as though she had let me down. She was embarrassed … disappointed … perhaps even a little resentful at my luke-warm response to her copy. She was nearly obsessed with the fear that the client would go ballistic over the blown deadline.

And because (like most of us), she has a belief filter that says, "I don't deserve my success. I'm a fraud; and someday, the world is going to find out what a phony I am" – these thoughts blew the lid off of a Pandora's Box of negative emotions within her.

As bad as all of that was, she now had a new set of mental images to deal with: Of presenting her next draft and getting another luke-warm response and another blown deadline.

No wonder she wasn't having fun anymore. No wonder she found it impossible to focus on ways to strengthen the copy!

The good news is, an hour and a half later, I had helped her discard most of her negative feelings about the job … given her a whole new positive set of mental images to work with … and she happily went back to work, producing what I'm sure will be a draft that will knock everyone's socks off.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY: As you work, never take your eyes off the prize. Visualize success at every step of the process. See it, then achieve it.

Regale yourself with fantasies of how you'll feel when your client calls to rave about your first draft. Imagine the client calling to say that your copy blew the doors off of his control … that he's dropping three million pieces next month … he's Fed-Exing your $90,000 royalty to you … that he'd like three more packages from you right away – and that if you'll just say, "yes," he'll rush another fat advance check to you right away.

Picture how it will feel to find that money in your mailbox … proudly showing it to your astonished and delighted significant other … and chuckle to yourself at the bank teller's amazement when she sees the amount on the deposit slip.

Paint a vivid picture of what you'll do with the money: The freedom from debt and worry … the rich leather, fine, clockwork engineering and breathtaking acceleration in the new Porsche you'll buy … the luxurious vacation you'll treat yourself to.


Related Content:
This is an awesome article! I have primarily written fiction and am getting into the copywriting, but this article is applicable to both. Actually, it's applicable to any life situation where you are stuck!
Thanks so much for this article and the wisdom and insight shared.

Guest (Brenda) – July 19, 2013 at 9:31 am

I can really relate to the belief filters here. Constantly need to work on them.
I had never thought of totally focusing on the "accountant" way of thinking to satisfy it. I am going to try this tactic soon.
Thank you Clayton!

Guest (Anna Marie Erickson) – July 23, 2013 at 4:07 pm

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