Our Brains Aren't Made for this Much Uncertainty
By
Daniel E. White January 29, 2024

Heidi Grant, a social psychologist, and Tal Goldhamer, chief learning officer for Ernst Young, published an article in the Harvard Business Review on September 22, 2021 with the title above. They began:

"Prior to the pandemic, the working world already felt to most of us like it was undergoing rapid, unrelenting change — changes in customer preferences, client and employee expectations, and competitive advantages. Covid-19 managed to upend the few things that felt relatively predictable, like where we spent our working hours, how we collaborated with colleagues, and whether or not we bothered to put on real pants each day. Today, leaders across industries are feverishly trying to figure out what the "new normal" needs to look like, which seems to be constantly shifting under their feet.

To stay motivated as we encounter unprecedented levels of uncertainty in every aspect of our lives, we should understand that the human brain simply was not built for this."

Great! Now we find out.

Grant and Goldhamer continue: *"For most of human history, we have been hunter-gatherers, living in groups where individuals had established roles and lives. While sometimes dangerous, life was largely predictable. The brain evolved to be remarkably good at recognizing patterns and building habits, turning very complex sets of behaviors into something we can do on autopilot. (Ever drive home from work and end up in your driveway, with no memory of actually driving home? That's the kind of thing we're talking about.)*

Given that habits and recognizable patterns are kind of its "thing," the brain evolved to be uncertainty-averse. When things become less predictable — and therefore less controllable — we experience a strong state of threat. You may already know that threat leads to "fight, freeze, or flight" responses in the brain. You may not know that it also leads to decreases in motivation, focus, agility, cooperative behavior, self-control, sense of purpose and meaning, and overall well-being. In addition, threat creates significant impairments in your working memory: You can't hold as many ideas in your mind to solve problems, nor can you pull as much information from your long-term memory when you need it. Threats of uncertainty literally *make us less capable, because dealing with them is just not something our brains evolved to do."*

People of a Certain Age, we could have told these folks that the capacities of our brains and the pace, complexity, and uncertainty of modern culture are incompatible. We have been highly successful as a species in creating technologies and ways of thinking that far outstrip our ability to keep up with it all, or to think about the consequences before

having to choose between unfamiliar options, or to stop ourselves from creating what comes next.

Are we not programmed to value growth to the point of saying that the absence of growth is a negative? Do not inventors and those who capitalize on inventions to create products depend upon our proclivity to want the newest, the shiniest, the one promising the most?

Does anyone seriously believe anybody can stop this rat race?

Grant and Goldhamer don't leave the reader hanging. *"The good news is that, from decades of studying human brains and human behavior, we know quite a bit about how to take the experience of threat from something overwhelming to something manageable. Whether you're trying to keep yourself motivated and engaged, or you're a leader trying to help those in your care, here are three strategies based in science that can keep the brain in a good place."*

They then list the strategies and provide a short explanation for each. First, they advise, "set expectations with realistic optimism." Then "lift to bigger-picture thinking." Finally, "embrace candor." Their list is good advice even if one's brain is not overwhelmed.

Might there not be, though, a flaw or two? For example, it used to be realistic that people in this democracy could expect that political parties would compete on the basis of policy differences and that political leaders, recognizing that welcoming a variety of points of view into the policy- making process would, in the end, result in policies that enjoyed broad support among the people. People of opposing points of view respected each other because everybody recognized that nobody had a corner on Truth.

Additionally, that view of democracy reflected a "bigger-picture thought" that, whatever the differences might be between people of opposing policy positions, those participating in the arena of policy-making did so out of a shared vision of "*e pluribus unum*," out of many, one. Whatever happened to the sentiment "I don't agree with your point of view, but I will defend you right to express it?"

As to candor, folks have difficulty these days agreeing about what is truth.

I could wish for a different pace to modern life and a political scene that features coming together rather than tearing apart. I could wish that humankind took more time to assess the ramifications of whatever the latest technology might be. I could wish that there was actually a chance for there to be peace on earth for all.

I don't have to wish about putting all of that uncertainty on hold and finding a sanctuary to soothe my soul. I can go into the woods, listen to the birds, stare at the clouds in the company of a person I love who loves me, too.

Our brains are quite well-equipped for all that.

Click here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com