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Spark – Exercise and the Brain – John J. Ratey, MD

Posted on January 27, 2012 by Murray Hopkins

Spark – The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain – John J. Ratey, MD with Eric Hagerman, Little, Brown and Company, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-316-11350-2

The idea that exercise is good for our brain is not new. What is great about this book is that the author takes a range of issues and brings the latest brain research to each of them. He covers learning, stress, anxiety, depression, attention deficit (and he makes a good case for it being renamed to attention variation), hormonal changes and aging. Finally, he brings it all together into a chapter called “The Regimen” – the “what do we do with all this knowledge” section.

Interestingly, I found myself skipping many of the pages, realising that a more detailed understanding of the particular brain function was not going to add to my motivation to get more exercise. That said, I notice that I am now more motivated to regain my fitness and have not missed daily exercise since reading this book. I just need to pay attention to my motivation to wire my brain so that my daily exercise becomes habit. So far, so good!

There is an interview with John Ratey about this book here:

<http://brainsciencpodcast.wordpress.com/2008/03/21/brain-science-podcast-33-exercise-and-the-brain/>

Murray

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2 THOUGHTS ON “SPARK – EXERCISE AND THE BRAIN – JOHN J. RATEY, MD”



Michael Miller

on June 13, 2012 at 2:19 pm said:

Thanks Murray. Sound like a very interesting approach. Unfortunately, I think it will probably take a lot more than a well written and informed book to motivate ‘this’ body...!

Question for you though, now you’re so aware: What comes first do you think... the body engaging in exercise to stimulate the brain... or exercising the brain to stimulate and motivate the body to engage in a fitness regime...?

My problem seems to be... whenever I get the urge to exercise... I just lay down till the urge passes! 😊



Murray Hopkins
on June 18, 2012 at 2:58 pm said:

Thanks for your comment Mike. From what I understand each of those two approaches supports the other. So, as you say, where does a person interrupt the cycle in order to create a new pathway?

Chapter 10 of the book is entitled "The Regimen: building your brain" which has some useful info but does not, in my mind, address the issue of **motivation** as well as it could.

So... "You are not your Brain – the four step solution" (Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding) is interesting when thinking about changing habits. Using a combination cognitive behaviour approaches combined with neuroplasticity exercises (which can be done from the comfort of your couch 😊) the authors outline a way to drop old habits and acquire new ones. I will be reviewing this book at some stage as part of some research I am doing about motivation and habit.

In the meantime, the four steps are:

- A. Relabel (recognise that the thought pattern is just a brain message as opposed to who you are as a person),
- B. Reframe (change your perception of the importance of the old message),
- C. Refocus (direct your attention toward an activity or mental process that is more productive),
- D. Revalue (think of the old message as a thought that has little value – something to dismiss rather than to focus on).

While the 4 steps are a bit "cute", the point of all that is that our brains like habitual behaviour because it is energy efficient (I am talking about your cognitive function here). If we want new behaviours it helps if we can make the thought processes that support that behaviour into a habit so that the behaviour also becomes, if not a "habit", at least easy for us to get motivated about! And, we can train our brains to erase the old habit and create a new one. We tend to get more of the behaviours we focus on – "well worn" thinking tends to lead to "well worn" behaviour. In that vein, "The road not taken" (Robert Frost) is one of my favourite poems which inspires me every time I read it.

More info about "You are not your Brain" is available at <http://www.youarenotyourbrain.com>

Thanks again for your question Mike and I hope this helps in some way.

Murray (the grey).