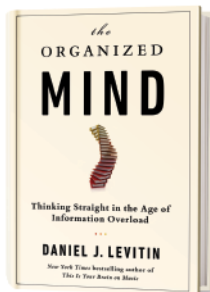


BRAIN DRAIN

**The Organized Mind**

by Daniel J. Levitin. Penguin, 2014 (\$27.95)



The subtitle of *The Organized Mind* is “Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload.” If you are hoping this lengthy book (512 pages) will help you do that, think again.

Instead of helping you focus, Levitin, a professor of psychology and music at McGill University, makes your head spin by rambling unevenly and inexplicably over the entire range of topics you would find in almost any introductory psychology text. He even includes the mandatory passages on why correlation does not imply causation.

This is where the book truly disappoints. Rather than simply giving us straight talk about how disorganized our thoughts and lives are (but we knew that) and how we can do better (tell us, please!), Levitin insists on informing us repeatedly and in detail about how various regions or pathways in the brain are “involved in” the various cognitive and behavioral phenomena he surveys. He really means that increased neural activity in these areas of the brain is *correlated* with certain behavioral and cognitive phenomena, which actually means only that such activity tends to occur *at about the same time* as the behavioral and cognitive phenomena. That is not saying much, which is why Levitin keeps implying more with that vague phrase, “involved in.”

University of Pennsylvania law professor Stephen Morse has dubbed this practice the “brain overclaim syndrome”—the pathological tendency to fool people into thinking you have a profound understanding of something by pointing to brain studies. It goes without saying that any distinctive thing we do—raising an arm, thinking of sheep or shouting, “Hooray!”—must be accompanied by some corresponding neural activity, but that does not *explain* the activity.

On the practical side, the book contains a dozen or so tips to help you get organized, but you have to work hard to find them, and there are none you have not heard before: stay focused, go to bed the same time every night, stay mentally active, avoid multitasking, divide complex tasks into “chunks,” write things down

(especially on index cards), do not procrastinate, exercise regularly and, of course, *prioritize*.

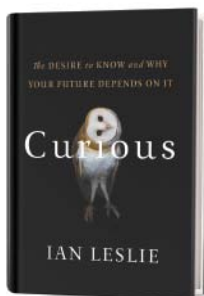
Although these are sound tips, Levitin’s lengthy expositions and neuroscientific rationales do not ring any more true than the justifications your parents or grandparents gave you when they offered similar advice, and some of them have been around since the days of Samuel Smiles’s popular book, *Self-Help*, which was published the same year Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*.

If you want to get your head organized, you are better off with leaner, meaner books, such as David Allen’s practical and focused best seller, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (from which Levitin borrows openly), Ori and Rom Brafman’s playful primer, *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior*, or Gerd Gigerenzer’s latest tour de force on clear thinking, *Risk Savvy: How to Make Good Decisions*. —Robert Epstein

THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

**Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It**

by Ian Leslie. Basic Books, 2014 (\$26.99)



What is required for a fulfilling life? First, the basics: food, shelter and, because we are social animals, companionship. If we are lucky, maybe we procreate and experience the selflessness of parenthood. What else?

In his new book, writer and adman Leslie focuses on curiosity, the drive to explore and understand, which he believes is an essential but often overlooked criterion for a rewarding life. In recent years we have heard a lot about what is required for success—grit, perseverance and focus, among other traits. Leslie asserts that being curious will incidentally engender these other basic qualities and more.

Leslie begins his exploration by defining three types of curiosity: diversive curiosity, best exemplified by the meandering exploration of the toddler; epistemic curiosity, the drive to understand how things work; and empathic curiosity, the desire to know what other people are thinking and feeling. He then gives us a tour of the science of curiosity. Curious babies make bet-

ter adolescent students; parents can foster curiosity by asking their children questions; and infants can sense when they are interacting with an “idiot.” For instance, when children receive useless information from adults, their drive to know more wilts.

Like any other skill, curiosity requires cultivation, which, Leslie argues, is happening less and less. Technologies—such as computers and the search engine Google—would seem to open the world to exploration. Yet by giving users exactly what they want, these innovations end up limiting curiosity. In fact, some experts think we live during a period of “great stagnation”—a relative lack of innovation and invention. Technological advances may be paradoxically stifling inquisitiveness and creativity.

Toward the middle, the book arrives at what feels like the point Leslie has been itching to make: there is no getting around the grunt work of acquiring true understanding. He uses chess as an example. Players become masters not because they have learned any universal equation but because they have memorized hundreds of games. Those internalized narratives serve as a reference library, a simulator in which to “play out” the many possible outcomes of a game. The more comprehensive that internal database is, the more capable the player can be.

In other words, old-fashioned memorization is the real basis for skill, creativity and mastery. Because new knowledge sticks to preexisting knowledge, the more you know, the more readily you will learn new things. This point may seem tangential to curiosity. But Leslie contends that if people follow their drive to understand, they will incidentally absorb immense amounts of information and acquire the large memory banks that allow for creativity and expertise. As Leslie puts it, “Skills come from struggle.”

Here the book mounts a defense of an old ideal: the well-rounded individual with a basic education. Leslie agitates for the importance of breadth while encouraging enough depth for people to excel at something. Curiosity is key—it is what drives and shapes our intellect.

Leslie’s book is engaging, moving fluidly from one idea to the next. He provides a refreshingly commonsensical voice in the ongoing argument over how to best mold human minds. Readers may come away with a renewed appreciation for their own drive to know more because curiosity often emerges as an urge that has no immediate payoff—the deceptively simple, open-ended question, Why?

—Moises Velasquez-Manoff