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The Science of Visualization: Maximizing Your Brain's Potential During The Recession

The recession is frightening and overwhelming for many of us. Jobs are scarce. Housing is a mess. And the difficulty of making money threatens our comfort and leaves us feeling anxious and stressed. At times like these, we may hear advice columnists tell us to "visualize success" or to "imagine our greatest possibilities". While this is inspiring, is there actually a science behind this?

The brief answer to this question is: yes. Although visualization was regarded as "new age hype" for many years, research has shown that there is a strong scientific basis for how and why visualization works. It is now a well-known fact that we stimulate the same brain regions when we visualize an action and when we actually perform that same action. For example, when you visualize lifting your right hand, it stimulates the same part of the brain that is activated when you actually lift your right hand. This shared area of brain activation when we imagine an action and perform it has been demonstrated extensively in the scientific literature. A striking example of how visualization increases brain activation is seen in stroke.

When a person has a stroke due to a blood clot in a brain artery, blood cannot reach the tissue that the artery once fed with oxygen and nutrients, and that tissue dies. This tissue death then spreads to the surrounding area that does not receive the blood any more. However, if a person with this stroke imagines moving the affected arm or leg, brain blood flow to the affected area increases and the surrounding brain tissue is saved. Imagining moving a limb, even after it has been paralyzed after a stroke, increases brain blood flow enough to diminish the amount of tissue death. This is a very clear indicator of the power of visualization.

In fact, athletes have known about this power for a long time. Expert athletes use imagery and visualization to run their races in their goal times. Studies have shown that these athletes first imagine running the race in the goal time in as much detail as possible and are then able to execute it after practicing visualizing this. One study showed that "...visualizations under **hypnosis** enabled nationally ranked Stanford male gymnasts to execute for the first time several complex tricks that they had been working on for over a year. The gymnasts were able to eliminate timing errors in the tricks, to increase flexibility, and, possibly, to concentrate strength..." Another study showed that youth soccer players increased their confidence in playing when they visualized their moves. Visualization has also been shown to improve high jumpers clearing the bar.

Tell your brain your plan in a thousand words, and it gets bored mid-way and wants to go to sleep. But draw it a picture, and it will respond with much deeper interest and attention. While

this is all well and good, how can you apply this science to maximize your brain's potential during the recession? Here are some suggestions to get you started:

1. *"...It is now a well-known fact that we stimulate the same brain regions when we visualize something and when we actually do it..."* If, during the recession, you have no idea how to act, start by imagining what you want. What you want will not come immediately, but imagining is a way of getting the process started quickly. For example, if you want to start a home-based baking business, start by imagining being in the kitchen surrounded by cakes and cookies that you are taking out of the oven. Draw a sketch of this, and then draw sketches that come before and after this. The more clearly and repetitively you outline this, the more likely it will be that you will succeed.

2. *"...if a person with this stroke imagines moving the affected arm or leg, brain blood flow to the affected area increases and the surrounding brain tissue is saved..."* If you have had a setback, don't give up. Keep the blood flowing to the brain area that will execute your action by focusing your visualization on what you want. During the recession, people often focus on their fears. All this will do is increase blood flow to the brain regions that will stop your actions. Remember, a failure is not a final statement that you will not succeed. It is information that your vision has to be changed, refined or repeated.

3. *"...visualizations under **hypnosis** enabled nationally ranked Stanford male gymnasts to execute for the first time several complex tricks that they had been working on for over a year..."*

Hypnosis here works because it decreases anxiety and increases focus. When you start your visualization, strive to construct the image with your mind free of worries even if you have to sculpt out an "artificial space" to do this. When you visualize while worrying, it is like painting with a shaky brush. Calmness increases the creativity and authenticity of your "brushstrokes".

4. *"...youth soccer players increased their confidence in playing when they visualized their moves..."* If you find that the recession has eroded your confidence, use visualization of your goals to help increase your confidence. Practice makes perfect. Repeat these visualizations every day. As you imagine your goal and process more clearly, your confidence will increase enough to execute on your desired goal.

These are a few principles of visualization that can help maximize your brain's capacity as you plan for growth during the recession. Remember: visualization is not just some hokey way of getting to your goals. The principles are grounded in science and with all the recession chaos going on, it is important to carve out a space to use the palette of your mind to paint the pictures that you desire. When you do this, your brain will act in accordance with your visions.