

Lose Your SMARTS?

How to get them back in a MATTER OF SECONDS



Municipal World and Juice Inc. partnered to conduct a survey called “*Are You Smarter?*” The simple question was, “Are you smarter around some people than you are around others?” The results (as we shared in the April issue) showed that one in every three municipal workers feel that they are smarter around some people than they are around others. If you’re one of the people who finds it difficult to access your smarts when you’re around certain individuals, this article will shed some light on how that happens (and what you can do about it when it does).

How You Lose Your Smarts

Your rational brain is a powerful computer. It can process about six bits of data at a time. For example, say you’re in an important meeting and you really need it to go well. You could be processing:

1. What happened the last time you met
2. The concerns being surfaced
3. What you want out of this meeting
4. What’s in it for your team if this meeting goes well
5. The noise of somebody’s phone buzzing on the table
6. The butterflies in your stomach as you launch your presentation

Your brain takes these six bits of data and sequences them in different ways. Each sequence creates an option and a possibility for action.

How many possibilities can you generate if you have six bits of intel to sequence in any way you wish? Six? 36? 120? The answer is actually 720. (The math is six factorial: $6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 720$.)

720 possibilities. 720 different ways of approaching this situation. That’s a broad set of choices.

But, what if your emotional brain perceives a threat in the midst of the conversation? The *Are You Smarter* survey revealed some key reasons why people lose their smarts. Most of them are relational:

1. I feel outranked
2. I feel judged
3. I don’t feel acknowledged
4. The topic isn’t engaging
5. I don’t feel people are interested in what I have to say

So, let’s take the last one – people aren’t interested in what you have to say. Imagine yourself presenting and someone rolls her eyes and begins looking at her phone. This simple act threatens to deprive your sense of worth. This releases a cocktail of stress hormones that have one simple task: take the complexity out of the situation so you can make a lightning-fast decision that guarantees your safety.

These stress chemicals flush out bits of data they deem to be extraneous to your survival. Future-based thoughts? Don’t need them. Complex thoughts?

Not necessary. Nuanced thoughts? Dump them.

And, what happens when one bit of data is flushed out of your rational brain? How many possibilities will you be left with? Five factorial ($5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 120$). You just lost 600 possibilities! If you lack self-awareness, and you fail to implement a strategy to get your higher-order thinking back, another bit of data is flushed out, and you’re now left with 24 possibilities. You have lost 96 percent of the possibilities you had access to only moments before.

Getting Your Smarts Back

It is possible to get so triggered that you lose all but two bits of data. From 720 down to two possibilities. That is radical brain shrinkage. No wonder some of us lose our smarts.

Creative, nuanced, higher-order thinking is now gone. Binary thinking is



BRADY WILSON has a vision: organizations that pulsate with innovative energy. As the Founder of Juice Inc., Brady functions as a human energy architect, working with leaders to build the conditions in which innovation, value creation, and unforgettable customer experiences can flourish. He helps leaders step into life’s grimmest tensions, inspiring them to create a sustained approach to positive change – and better business results.

all you're capable of: now or never, all or nothing, right or wrong, you're either with me or against me, on the bus or off the bus!

This can be serious. It is impossible to be innovative in this state. It's impossible to be socially skillful.

But, there's a way to get back into the game in a matter of seconds. Here are three tips you can practice the next time you start to lose your smarts.

1. Tap into gratitude

Remember those stress chemicals that constrict your intelligence? Psychologists say that focusing on your "gratitude anchor," even for three to four seconds, releases a cascade of potent, feel-good hormones (dopamine and serotonin) that flush out the stress chemicals and give you back your smarts.

What's a gratitude anchor? Several years ago, I received a phone call from my son that he had survived a brutal car accident. I was filled with gratitude and appreciation. When I begin to lose my

marbles, I simply tap into my gratitude anchor by dialing up the sights, sounds, and emotions that I was experiencing when I received that phone call.

Within five to seven seconds, dopamine floods my brain and I'm back in the game – able to respond intelligently and make smart decisions.

2. Name your state

David Rock, in his book *Your Brain at Work* says that when you are experiencing significant internal tension and anxiety, you can reduce your stress load by up to 50 percent by noticing and naming your state.

My friend was about to step into a highly-emotional conversation and she was afraid she would start to cry and lose her smarts. She opened up the conversation by saying, "I need to talk to you about something that's very important to me – so important that I'll probably start to cry. That doesn't mean I need the conversation to stop. It doesn't mean I need a Kleenex box. If I cry, it's just because this is so important to me."

Did she start to cry? No – when you name your state, you reduce the stress load and give yourself access to your social smarts.

3. Take three deep breaths

When you are triggered, your breath becomes fast and shallow. When you reverse your breathing and make it slow and deep (from the diaphragm), you send a signal to your limbic system (the emotional centre of your brain) that you are no longer in threat.

You're basically hacking into the system and saying, "We're not in danger here – let the higher-order thinking return."

Smarter You

It would be nice if you worked in an environment where people never pulled rank on you, judged you, or ignored you. It is not going to happen. But, you can be smarter in any situation by becoming aware of when you're losing your smarts and employing the simple skills of tapping into gratitude, naming your state, and taking three deep breaths. **MW**



New funding now available to help Canadian municipalities reduce GHGs and prepare for climate change.

Examples of initiatives the program supports:

- The assessment of the vulnerability to flooding of buildings in a neighbourhood.
- Ways to reduce GHG emissions from waste collection trucks.
- Plans to encourage residents to use less polluting forms of transportation.
- The impact of a municipal policy change, such as a no-idling policy.
- And many more...

Apply today: fcm.ca/climatefunding