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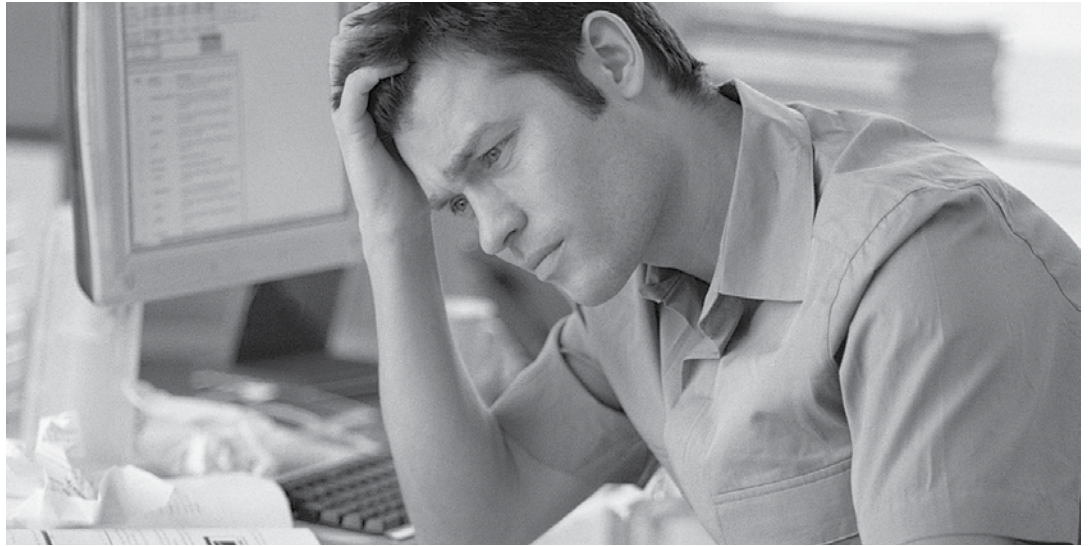
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How to Reduce Screw-ups

by Doreen Stern



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It's the top of the eighth inning, in a home game between the Chicago Cubs and their rivals, the Minnesota Twins. Cubs outfielder Milton Bradley has his hands cupped toward the sky to catch a routine fly ball.

Thump! The ball lands securely in Bradley's glove and he generously tosses it into the stands. Then he poses for pictures.

Only thing is that Bradley erroneously thinks he has just ended the inning, when in reality, there was only ONE out. As a result of Bradley's blunder, the Twins score a run and eventually win the game.

Do you ever make foolish mistakes like the one Bradley made that cool, sunny day in June at Wrigley Field (6/12/09)? Maybe not as extreme, but do you ever miss a highway exit because you're talking on the phone or thinking about something else? Have you ever missed a due date when you had it clearly circled on your calendar? Or have you left your office (or home) without the file you need for an important meeting?

Mea culpa. I do these things more than I'd like to admit. In fact, just yesterday I sewed a button on the

inside of a boiled wool jacket, instead of on the front of it. What can account for these types of screw-ups? And how can we reduce them?

I call it "spacing out." On its own, your brain goes into "screen saver" mode: it stops focusing and begins to daydream. Neuroscientists call it the "default mode network" (DMN), and say it's one of your busiest neurological systems.

The ability to concentrate is one of your most important skills. Think of Tiger Woods: one of the reasons he is the number one golfer in the world is that he is usually able to tune out extraneous thoughts and hit the ball with same precision with which he hit it in practice sessions..

Focus is like a muscle: you can build up your concentration by doing multiple reps with light weights. What do I mean?

You can help your brain learn to focus by:

1. writing down your priorities
2. selecting one small part of ONE of your priorities
3. setting a timer for 17 minutes
4. focusing on that small part for 17 minutes, and

5. celebrating your success, by pumping your fist in the air and shouting “YES!” (Praise stimulates the hormone dopamine, linked to joy.)

“Why 17 minutes?” you will surely ask.

If you’re like most Americans, you’ll be increasing your concentration by a **whopping 50 percent**. (Did you know the average American spends only 11 minutes on any task before being interrupted or interrupting themselves?)

Also, you’ll be tricking your brain into focusing, because 17 minutes seems so innocuous, your brain says, “Sure, I can do that.”

Finally, your brain loves novelty: it becomes intrigued because ‘17’ is a prime number.

Where can you find a timer? You have a cell phone, don’t you? Even the most rudimentary phones have an alarm (usually under ‘settings’ and ‘tools’). At home, you can set the timer on your kitchen stove.

What’s in it for you? Minute by minute, you’ll be increasing your muscle tone: becoming more like Tiger Woods, who usually makes his putts; rather than like Milton Bradley, who prematurely thought the inning was over and helped the other team win.

Most of all, you’ll develop the focus and concentration to achieve your deeply held dreams. ●

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