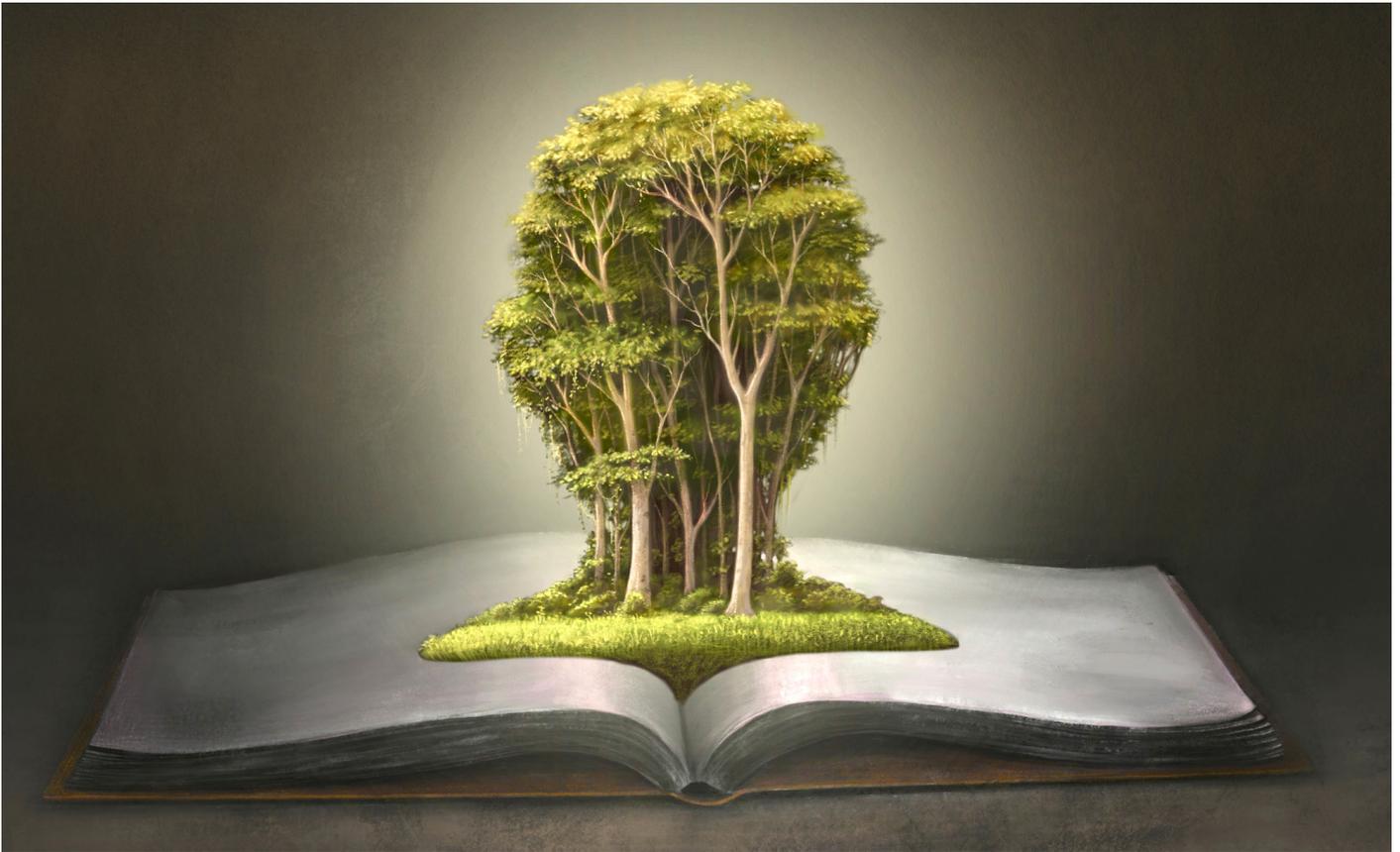


Active Awareness: The Essence of Resilience

Active awareness implies we are the author of our experiences, explains Jason Liem



Do you remember the game Tetris? I think many of us got caught up in the absorbing and addictive video game created by Soviet software engineer Alexey Pajitnov in 1984. Since then, you can find the game in different versions and on many platforms. When we spend much time and attention playing Tetris, we succumb to the *Tetris effect*: we begin to think, dream and see mental images of Tetris.

According to Wikipedia, “People who have played Tetris for a prolonged amount of time can find themselves thinking about ways different shapes in the real world can fit together, such as the boxes on a supermarket shelf or the buildings on the street. They may see coloured images of pieces falling into place on an invisible layout at the edges of their visual fields or when they close their eyes. They may see such coloured, moving images when they are falling asleep...”

Training Your Brain

Let’s shift to a completely different phenomenon, which has to do with tax auditors. This profession spends 8 to 10 hours a day, on average, looking for errors. What happens when they get promoted to managing people? In a vast majority of cases, they can only see the mistakes and errors of their team members. They find it difficult to see when their team does well. Their brains are wired to catch mistakes so that the first thing they see is the problem.

If we have trained our brains to see all the fires that need extinguishing, the brain will draw our attention to them. If you are a presidential bodyguard, you must be hyper-vigilant to sketchy-looking characters. This exact mechanism also plays out if you are a pessimist or an optimist. One

will see obstacles, and the other will see opportunities.

You can train your brain to have a positive Tetris effect, whereby your brain starts to create a new pattern for how you look at the world instead of seeing all the fires you need to put out.

The Reticular Activating System

The reticular activating system (RAS) is a structure that starts above our spinal cord; it’s about two inches long and the width of a pencil.

Except for our sense of smell, all the other senses connect to the RAS. The RAS sits in our brain and senses and filters what sensory information gets through and what doesn’t. In other words, it acts as a bridge



that connects the subconscious part of our brain with the conscious part of our brain.

At any given time, only a certain amount of information is helpful to your brain. For instance, if there's a predator about to attack us, that's the only information our brain needs to drive us to action – RUN! The RAS disregards irrelevant information like the colour of the surrounding flowers or the type of birdsong we hear.

The RAS only allows the sensory information relevant to our situation to get through – in this case, our survival. At the same time, it also actively blocks any other information.

The RAS and Behaviour

The first few times anyone gets into a car to learn to drive, it can be a nerve-racking experience – sweaty palms, a rush of excitement. But once driving becomes a well-worn habit, we no longer have to think about this skill. Instead, the skill of driving has become automated.

Once a skill has become a habit, any information around it is not as pertinent as when we were first learning to master that skill. In the case of driving, the RAS will actively block information connected with the automated driving skill. Instead, it will prioritise other details. For example, if the brake lights of the car ahead of us suddenly flashed red, our RAS would filter this information to our attention so we could react in time by hitting the brakes.

Let's say you visit Japan and rent a car. Driving in Japan will be a different experience than how you are used to driving at home. You won't be able to read the road signs if you don't understand Japanese. Most likely, you will be used to different rules of the road.

Driving in Japan will feel very similar to how you felt the first time you ever drove. The reason is your RAS does not have any information to know what to filter, so it has to let everything through, stressing you out like before.

An Example of the RAS at Work

An excellent study that illustrates how the RAS works looked at couples with newborn babies who lived near airports.

The study found that both parents would sleep right through a plane taking off nearby, which was extremely loud – yet the mother would wake up if the baby stirred in the next room, which comparatively made a lot less noise than a thundering plane.

The mother operates on the thought that the welfare of her child is significantly more important than the sounds of a plane taking off. This thought programs the RAS to block out the sounds of a roaring jet engine but to be hypersensitive to the sounds of a stirring child in the next room.

Interestingly, the father often didn't wake up for a crying baby. So, the researchers took the mother away for a few days, and guess what: Dad suddenly started waking up when the baby cried. Why? Because before, the information wasn't necessary to him; the mother was there to tend to the child. But now that Mom has gone, it's Dad's job, so the information is essential, and the RAS lets it through.

Using the RAS to Change Behaviour and Reach Goals

Daniel Kahneman, the author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, succinctly wrote: 'Nothing in life is as important as you think it is when you think about it.'

So far, we have established that only essential and relevant sensory information gets past our RAS, and what is defined as critical information is entirely specific to the individual. We can use this fundamental understanding to our advantage.

We can consciously decide what is important to us, and in turn, our RAS will draw our attention to any information that corroborates our interests.

I remember when my wife and I had our first child, Lukas. Everything associated with my baby boy became essential to me. So every time I walked into the grocery store, I started to see diapers, whereas I was utterly oblivious to them before my son was born. Likewise, when I walked down the street, I started to see baby strollers everywhere as well as the occasional pacifier accidentally discarded on a sidewalk.

I didn't see baby-related things before because it wasn't relevant to my narrative, but once my son became part of that

narrative, anything and everything that I connected as meaningful to my son was brought to my attention by my RAS.

We can experiment with our RAS with simple objectives. For example, the next time you go for a walk or run, give yourself a goal to be aware of things that would typically go under your radar – perhaps counting the number of church spires, yellow cars, dog walkers, mailboxes, or fire hydrants.

It does not matter what you choose. The list is endless. The goal is to consciously choose what you want to be aware of and program your RAS to filter for that variable.

When It Counts

Practicing this simple skill costs us nothing when we are out and about. I think of it more as an investment that has returns.

Practicing anything makes us more skilled, whether it's bouncing a basketball, playing an instrument, or speaking a new language. For example, actively choosing to spot a particular object makes us proficient at doing it. If we do it enough times, it becomes a habit.

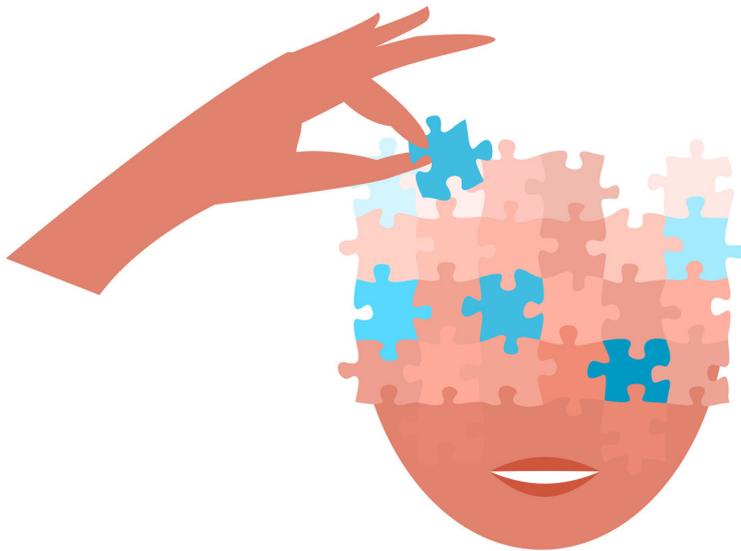
It is a curious exercise to do when you are out for a walk to see things you would not usually register. However, the actual return on investment of this skill is when we are not in a good place mentally or emotionally. Our minds tend to default to negative thinking and cumbersome emotions during these states.

The practice of using active awareness regarding what we want the RAS to bring to our attention acts as a secure rope that we can use to pull ourselves out of the sucking quagmire of rumination and overthinking.

Active Awareness Is the Essence of Resilience

We are knocked off our feet by an unhelpful state of mind, and we feel the pull to sink deeper into that state. But we have trained for this. So we stop the slippery slope and actively replace the RAS filter with one that serves us.

In Benjamin Hardy's book, *Personality Isn't Permanent*, he suggests several tools we can use to engage our attention. I've included those that I actively use myself that I find work remarkably well.



The 3/24

Think of three new things you are grateful for in the last 24 hours. The critical point here is the word *new*. Our brains get better at it by actively searching for novel and positive experiences each day. This active awareness strengthens these neural networks, and over a short period, we become more adept at noticing the positives that are already latent in the environment.

The Doubler

Think of one positive experience you have had over the last 24 hours, and then write down every detail in bullet form about that one experience. That list may include what you were thinking, saying, doing, where you were, and what was going on. Here is the salient point: The brain can't distinguish between visualisation and authentic experience. So the most effective method is to write down the details of the incident.

When you journal about a positive experience, your brain doubles it for you.

If we continuously do this for 21 days, our brain creates a habit of automatically connecting the dots for us. Our RAS begins to bring this information automatically to our attention. This habit transforms how the brain and body work.

Active Awareness

Active awareness is the essence of resilience. Where we choose to invest our attention is what we have flagged as important. When something is important to us, it means we have assigned value to it, and we have given it meaning. This meaning defines the search parameters of the RAS, which in turn creates the lens of how we perceive the world around us. It determines what we pay attention to and how we either engage or disengage with the world.

Psychologists found that when people view themselves as depressed, they don't notice or pay attention to the moments when they are feeling good throughout a given day.

Additionally, when we view ourselves as depressed, the only memories that readily come to mind align with our current viewpoints. Our entire past becomes coloured by our present identity. What once may have been good experiences are filtered by your current narrative.

What happens when we encounter stress and struggle? Stress is the great litmus test of how we are using the skill of active awareness. Are we embracing the struggle, or are we disengaging from it? What is our narrative around the source of the stress? What are the labels we are sticking to the situation and ourselves?

Resilience is about changing how we perceive stress – embracing the struggle. As we've explored in one of my previous articles, [Learning: Embracing the Struggle](#), the struggle is a signpost indicating that we should head in the direction of learning, growth, and development.

Stress can strengthen us, but whether it fortifies us or not depends on the meaning we give to it. Active awareness implies we are the author of our experience. We confront our reality intentionally, not reactively. We are the ones who intentionally assign meaning to our experience. We are the ones formulating the story.

Conclusion

The Reticular Activating System is a tiny portion of the brain, but it has enormous implications based on how we use it. Use the skill of active awareness so that it works for you and not against you. As with all things, we have the freedom and the choice to ascribe whatever meaning we would like. The question is, do we do it reactively or intentionally?

Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal

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