

KILROY CAFÉ

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FUNDAMENTALS OF MENTAL NUTRITION

By GLENN CAMPBELL

When considering what to take into your body, there is “real food” and there is “junk food”. Junk food consists of the tastes you crave but little else: sugar, fat, salt, carbohydrates, caffeine. Real food has complexity and substance and primarily serves your future health, not your impulsive tastes. If you care about your body, you’ll eat real food, not junk.

The same principle applies to your mind: If you care about it, you’ll feed it real, substantial input, not empty junk.

Unfortunately, junk input is what our culture mostly offers us: junk TV, junk video games, junk books, news, music and web content. Most of this sensory input doesn’t advance our lives in any way, but we willingly ingest it because it tickles our nervous system in a certain way, just like junk food does.

One danger of too much junk food is obesity, partly because the junk is so available and appealing, and partly because it is so calorically dense and easy to digest that it goes straight to our waist. Likewise, when we ingest too much junk stimulation, we promote mental obesity. The brain doesn’t become physically fat but it becomes more passive, chaotic and intellectually undisciplined.

When you have a stimulating mental experience, you need time to adequately digest it, to derive all the available nutrition from it. What just happened? Why did it happen? What does it teach me? You need time to think about the experience or most of its lessons are lost.

That’s the thing most lacking in the modern world: thinking time. Because we are surrounded by junk input, easily available and actively peddled to us, our tendency is to ingest one entertainment

after another, with little time between them for processing. Highly stimulating products are force-fed into our brain where they clutter up our mind-space. You don’t learn much from these experiences; you merely stockpile them.

It’s like binge eating. Most people wouldn’t eat a whole carton of ice cream at a single sitting, but many will routinely watch 4-6 hours of television in one go. That’s lost time that can’t be used for one’s own mental processes. If you string together enough of those daily input binges, eventually your life will be over, consumed by consumption.

Those 4-6 hours usually include some intense emotional traumas: murders, threats of violence, interpersonal conflicts of every kind. Because there’s no time to process them, these intense pseudo-experiences collect in the brain like half-eaten meals, crowding out real experiences and diluting our emotional response to them.

Mental stimulation can be as addictive as any drug. You know you have an addiction when it’s not the pleasure of the drug that keeps you using it but the anxiety you feel when you withdraw from it. Can you comfortably sit in a room with a television without the compulsion to turn it on? Can you drive a car without turning on the radio? Can you sit and think for an extended period without “boredom” or anxiety driving you to stimulation? If not, you’re an addict.

With any addiction, there is always a cost. Input addicts don’t usually rob convenience stores to support their habit, but they are still sad people. Input addiction is marked by passivity, shallowness of feeling and a short attention span. Addicts may be emotionally moved by what happens to them, but just

like what they see on the screen, the feeling is fleeting, and they are unlikely to address it in any meaningful way.

If you have one intensely emotional real-world experience in the course of a week, you can deal with it. If you add a hundred intense pseudo-experiences, this has to degrade your response to the real experience. Instead of a measured, thoughtful response to the real conflict, the addict’s response is more likely to be impulsive, stereotypical and ineffective, mainly because he hasn’t had enough time to think things through.

Mental bandwidth is a precious resource. You only get so much of it in a lifetime. If you value your own mind, you have to take care what you feed it. Above all, you have to limit the quantity of your input to what you can reasonably digest.

Even if the input isn’t “junk”, you still have to control its quantity and pacing. There may be a lot of high-quality movies, songs and TV shows available, but that’s not reason enough to string them together in a binge. You wouldn’t go into a fine restaurant and order everything on the menu. One high-quality meal a day is enough, and if the experience is really extraordinary maybe you should go even longer.

A healthy diet of mental input is one carefully-selected, high-quality sensory experience followed by a long empty period of digestion. This empty space is probably the most critical time for growth and learning. If you don’t have time for it or can’t tolerate emptiness, then you’re not living a full life. The input is controlling you and stealing everything you have.

—G.C.

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