

**NEIL PAVITT**



# **BRAINHACK**

**TIPS AND TRICKS  
TO UNLEASH YOUR BRAIN'S  
FULL POTENTIAL**



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“*Brainhack* keeps the reader abreast with all the latest theories in neurology as well as telling some good stories about how the brain behaves. In 45 instructive ‘brainhacks’, Pavitt reveals how every one of us can make more of our brains. As a ‘creativity professional’ myself, I found tips and hints in this book that were new to me.”



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# Brainhack

Tips and tricks to unleash your brain's full potential

Neil Pavitt



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*For Kalya and Harry*

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“There are billions of neurons in our brains, but what are neurons? Just cells. The brain has no knowledge until connections are made between neurons. All that we know, all that we are, comes from the way our neurons are connected.”

Tim Berners-Lee

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# INTRODUCTION

Are you ready to become a hacker?

Probably the first thought that comes to most people's minds when they hear the term “hacker”, is of someone who seeks and exploits flaws in a computer system or network.

In a way, that's what this book aims to help you to do. It's just that the network you're trying to find a flaw in, is your own brain.

Amazingly 95% of your brain's day-to-day activity is unconscious. One hundred billion neurons, one hundred trillion connections and we're only in control of a tiny 5% of it.

The forty-five brainhacks in this book aren't going to suddenly give you control over huge swathes of your unconscious. That would be a nightmare. It's unconscious for a reason; the last thing you want, is to constantly have to think about putting one foot in front of the other every time you go for a walk.

But what these brainhacks will do, is open a window onto some of the activities we do unconsciously and reveal some of the biases our conscious mind has. The aim of this is to help you become more productive, more creative and help you see more clearly why you do what you do.

The purpose of the book is not to give you deep insights into how the brain works, but to give you practical tips and techniques that you can actually benefit from.

All the brainhacks in this book can be read independently, so if you do want to dip in and out, that's fine. However, I have tried to give them an order, so they work better if you read them chronologically.

The first two sections cover general ways to make your brain work better for you, as well as how to use your time more wisely and be more productive. The last three are about how to be more focused in your thinking, how to solve problems better and create more innovative ideas.

One of the most important things to remember is how flexible the brain is. You really can change how you think and act. There aren't analytic people, creative people, focused thinkers and dreamers. These are qualities a person might have, but they're not set in stone.

Our brains actually physically change shape depending on how we use them. It's called neuroplasticity.

The most famous example of this is with London taxi drivers. They have to spend years learning the streets of London before they get their badge. The effect of this is that the area in the brain that deals with spatial awareness, the hippocampus, is larger in London taxi drivers. However, once they retire, their hippocampus returns to its normal size.

Now think of people with dyslexia. They might have learning difficulties, but they certainly don't have achieving difficulties.

Einstein, Beethoven, Steve Jobs, J.F. Kennedy, Leonardo Da Vinci, Agatha Christie, Walt Disney, Picasso, Mozart, Jamie Oliver, Cath Kidston, Steven Spielberg, Jennifer Aniston, Richard Branson and Winston Churchill are/were all dyslexics. Also people with dyslexia are also four times more likely than the rest of the population to become self-made millionaires.

Dyslexics' minds have to adapt to get over their difficulties with language, by learning to become

more adept at thinking visually and seeing the bigger picture.

Santiago Ramón y Cajal, one of the founders of neuroscience said, “Any man could, if he were so inclined, be the sculptor of his own brain.”



And that's what I aim to do with these brainhacks. Give you the tools to sculpt your brain, to help you to unleash its full potential.

And it really is about sculpting. At two years of age, we have the most synapses (the connectors between neurons) that we'll ever have. By the time we've reached seventy, that number is likely to have halved. In between then, in the same way a gardener prunes a shrub, our brains are shaped by how we use them.

I really hope you find these brainhacks interesting and useful, and hopefully they'll lead to you doing some neural topiary of your own.

“In the same way a gardener prunes a shrub, how we use our brain shapes it.”

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# **PART 1**

## **Thinking Smarter**

**General ways to make your brain work better for you**

# 1

## Make a Done List

“What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals.”

*Zig Ziglar*

Before you read this, I want you to leaf through your work diary.

Is there anything inspiring in there? Were you impressed by how much you've achieved?

I know when I look through old work diaries, all I find are lists of meetings and to-do lists.

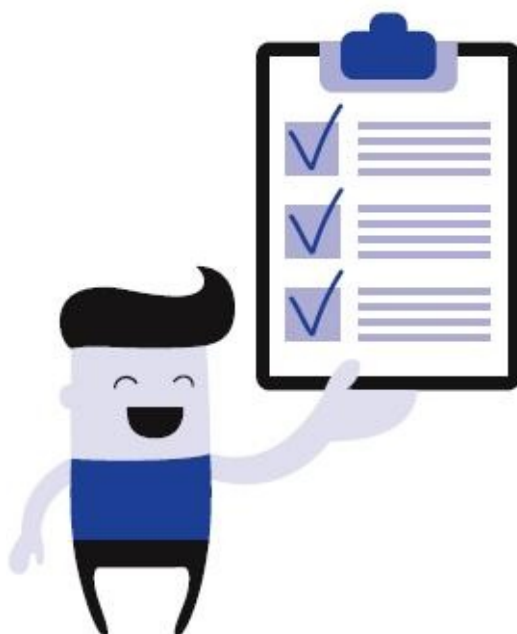
Even on your phone or laptop, there are endless productivity apps enticing you in to make to-do lists in new and different ways.

The trouble with to-do lists, is I don't think they make us any more productive. I don't think they excite and stimulate our minds to want to get things done.

Usually we don't finish them anyway, which immediately has a negative effect.

Now I'm not saying we should do away with to-do lists. We all need reminders of what we've got to do. What I'm saying is, they serve a useful purpose of reminding us of things we need to do, but they're not actually going to make us more productive.

What you need is a done list. Seeing what you've actually achieved will spur you on. Of course, you may look back and think how little you have achieved, but hopefully this will also spur you on even more.



One of the dangers of to-do lists is we think we're being productive because we're ticking things off a list. But how many of those things you're ticking off are things you truly value? The benefit of a done list, is you only put things on it that are of value to you.

So how do you decide what is of value and is worthy of putting on your list? Well, for starters you

don't want to put everything on it, for example, “Called Debra in accounts” or “Had meeting with marketing”, otherwise it just becomes a completed to-do list.

A good rule of thumb, is only put things on it that at the end of the year you'd look back at and be proud of.

One of the big differences of a done list, as opposed to a to-do list, is the positive effect it has on your brain.

A to-do list gets the things you have to do out of your head and onto paper. It unclutters your brain. The trouble is, how often do you complete the list? I find I do half of it and then the rest gets transferred to the next day's list.

A long to-do list means: “we've got a lot to do” – it doesn't mean we do a lot.

Unconsciously it changes from a to-do list into a “what you haven't done list” and creates more stress and anxiety.

“To-do lists are about goals, a done list is about achievements.”

A done list of things you have achieved creates positive associations and creates new connections in your brain making you feel more positive about yourself.

Of course the danger is to think that you feel you can only put big achievements on there, but this couldn't be further from the truth. If this is the year that you decide to run a marathon, don't just make an entry on the actual day you ran a marathon, put in an entry for how long you ran on each day you trained leading up to it.

## Don't Break the Chain

What's important is that you have achievable goals that you stick to. If you make your targets too hard, you either won't achieve them and feel you've failed, or you'll put them off for a day and then another day and before you know it, you've given up on the task completely.

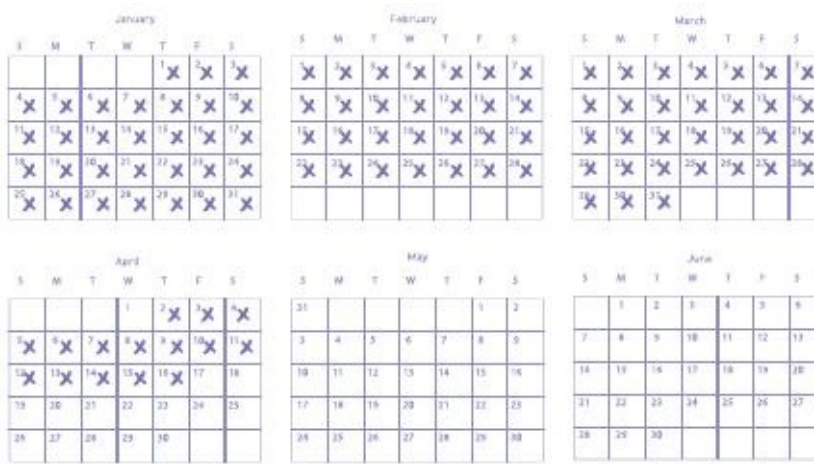
## Just try to do a little bit every day

When comic hopeful Brad Isaac asked Jerry Seinfeld<sup>1</sup> if he had any advice he replied that the way to be a better comic was to create better jokes and the way to create better jokes was to write every day. How he made sure he kept to this was a done list in the form of a wall calendar.

He got a big calendar that had a whole year on it, and hung it on the wall next to his desk. Every day he completed his task of writing he'd put a big red X over that day.

“After a few days you'll have a chain. Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain,” said Seinfeld, emphasizing “Don't break the chain.”





If you're building a house, you can stand back at the end of each day and admire how much you've built that day. But the trouble with a lot of our tasks on a day-to-day basis is that there's no physical proof of what we've done. That's the great thing with a done list, as in the example of Seinfeld's calendar, you can stand back and be proud of what you've achieved.

The thing with a done list is it can be about anything. What's important is that it's something of value to you. It could be steps towards starting your own business, it could be about how much weight you've lost, how much time you've spent reading a book; if you're some high flying businessman or woman it could be about how much quality time you managed to spend with your family. Like I say, can be about anything, but it has to be something that you value.

What I'd recommend is having a done list calendar like Jerry Seinfeld for the one task you want to push yourself to work on everyday. But as well as this I'd recommend you start a done list diary.

Don't just get some cheap office diary, get a nice diary like a Moleskine; something you'll treasure. After all, it holds your achievements for the year, so it should be something a little bit special. Try to review your day's achievements and make your entry in your done list diary at the same time every day.

The more you can make a habit of it, the more likely you are to keep to it. The more of a habit you make of it, the more you start to create more engrained pathways in the brain to make it harder to stop. Seinfeld's motto "Don't break the chain" has the obvious visual reminder of a calendar on the wall, but at the same time it is creating an unconscious habit.

They say "history will be the judge". Now your history will be there for you to judge.

The more you can make a habit of it, the more likely you are to keep to it.

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## 2

# Change Your Memories

“Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.”

*Marcel Proust*

Most people would like to have a better memory, but you'll already find lots of tips and techniques online to help you with that. What this hack is about is giving you better memories.

By that, I don't mean giving you the tools to help you remember better. It's about making the memories you have, better.

Memories are so subjective. Two people can remember the same event completely differently. If we all remembered an event in exactly the same way, there would certainly be far fewer disagreements. We truly believe how we remember an event is how it happened.

The longer ago it was, the more chance there is for your unconscious to embellish it. Here's a perfect example: I remember when I was four, seeing a blue tin of salt in our kitchen at home. On the front of the tin was an illustration of a boy throwing salt on a bird. I asked my mother about it and she said if you threw salt on a bird, it would help you catch it.

“It's about making the memories you have, better.”

My memory is of me sitting underneath the hedge in our garden, with a handful of salt, waiting patiently for a bird to come along so that I could throw the salt over it. In my memory, my mother is watching me from the kitchen window while she does the dishes. I spoke to her about the incident, and it's true she was watching me from the window, but she wasn't doing the dishes. She couldn't have, the sink was on the other side of the kitchen.

But it was so much part of my memory. Then I thought about it some more and I realized in my memory of it, I see a view of my mum looking out of the window from inside the kitchen, which also wouldn't have been possible for me to see as I was in the garden. The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had added this image to my memory; it was as if my memory was a film, and I had edited a shot into that film.

Of course, whether my mother was washing dishes or not doesn't really have any bearing on the story but not remembering something entirely accurately can be a very harmful thing.

In America over three hundred people have been proved to have served time for crimes they didn't commit and three-quarters of them were the result of faulty memories of witnesses.

The psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, from the University of California at Irvine, embarked upon what has turned into a decades-long examination of the ways in which misleading information can insinuate itself into one's memory.

In her most famous study, she gave two dozen subjects a journal filled with details of three events from their childhoods. To make memories as accurate and compelling as possible, Loftus enlisted family members to assemble the information. She then added a fourth, completely fictitious experience that described how, at the age of five, each child had been lost in a mall and was finally

rescued by an elderly stranger. Loftus seeded the false memories with plausible information, such as the name of the mall each subject would have visited. When she interviewed the subjects later, a quarter of them recalled having been lost in the mall, and some did so in remarkable detail.

“I was crying and I remember that day . . . I thought I'd never see my family again”, one participant said.

“Memory”, says Loftus, “works a little bit like a Wikipedia page. You can go in there and change it, but so can other people.”

“The fact our memories can and do change can be a good thing.”

But the fact our memories can and do change can be a good thing. And that's what this hack is about, making bad memories not so bad and good ones better.

The trouble is we have a natural bias to look for the negative in a situation. This stems back to our built-in survival instinct. It makes sense really. Once you've touched a boiling hot kettle, you don't want to do it again.

Imagine you've just written a post online and you get 20 comments. Even if 19 are really positive and only one is negative, our natural tendency is to focus on the negative one. It's why so many actors don't read reviews, because even if most of the reviews are great, it's that one negative comment that they'll keep going over in their head.

In the same way, negative memories will eat away at us. Of course, you can't get rid of memories, but how you think about them can go some way from turning a negative memory into, at the very least, a neutral memory.

Memories aren't set in stone: every time we call up a memory it changes slightly. When you remember something, your brain is “rewiring” the connections between the neurons. Literally changing the structure of your brain.

When you recall a memory you are recreating, changing, and re-memorizing. The memory is subject to change every time you remember it.

The event you remember is never going to get totally rewritten. If, for instance, you have a memory of standing in front of the whole school and forgetting what you were going to say, the event won't change; but the emotions attached to that memory can.

Daniela Schiller, who directs the laboratory for affective neuroscience at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, was working on an experiment to help people lose their fear without the use of drugs.

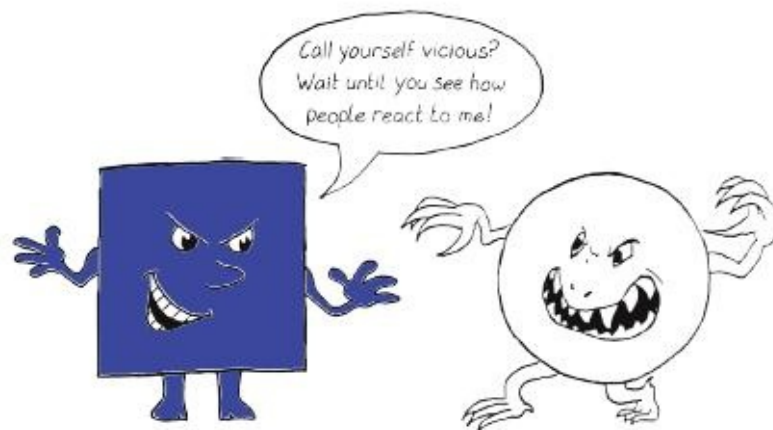
Up until that point, memory reconsolidation had been blocked only by either drugs or electric shocks. Dr Schiller wondered if it would be possible to reactivate a traumatic memory in humans and then block the fears associated with it.

“When you recall a memory you are recreating, changing, and re-memorizing. The memory is subject to change every time you remember it.”

She trained sixty-five people to have a fear of blue squares, by giving them a mild electric shock every

time they were shown one.

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The next day, just the sight of the square alone was enough to revive their fearful reactions. Schiller then divided the subjects into three groups. By presenting the squares many more times, with no shock, she attempted to teach them to overcome their fear. It's called extinction training. The results were dramatic: people who saw the squares within ten minutes of having their memories revived forgot their fear completely. However, the others who were not shown the squares again until hours later, remained frightened.

Strong negative memories can create strong fears and affect your attitudes and behaviour. For instance, the example of forgetting what you were going to say in front of everyone at school could create strong fears of public speaking later on in your life.

By actively thinking about the memory and trying to associate a different emotion with it, you'll reduce the negative emotion associated with it and so reduce the fear it creates.

In the example of the school speech, you could try to associate it with positive memories of the occasion, like how you laughed about the whole thing later with your friends. Try to think of a positive experience you've had of speaking in front of a group of people and associate that happier emotional memory with the school speech.

Often when we share our fears it can lessen the power they have over us. Sharing them is often easier with someone who has been through similar experiences. This shows why recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous are so successful.

Sometimes it only takes a small extra connection to the past to help the memories flow. For example bilingual Russian immigrants in America could recall more autobiographical details of their early life when they were asked questions about it in Russian rather than in English.

Every memory we retain depends upon a chain of chemical interactions that connect millions of neurons to one another. Those neurons never touch; instead, they communicate through tiny gaps, or synapses, that surround each of them.

When we learn something, chemicals in the brain strengthen the synapses that connect the neurons. Long-term memories, built from new proteins, change those synaptic networks constantly. So inevitably, some grow weaker and others, as they absorb new information, grow more powerful.

It's not the 100 billion neurons in your head that are changing all the time; it's the connections between them – the neural pathways. Imagine these as real pathways across a field.

If it's a negative neural pathway every time you walk it, it's like you are wearing away the grass and creating a path that it is harder and harder to get away from. Making an effort to create positive

imagery helps you step off the path and create a new positive neural pathway.

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## Accentuate the Positive

Now let's look at the other side of the coin, positive memories. In Britain we're not very good at accepting praise and we certainly don't feel we should wallow in it. That would be egotistical and narcissistic. But that is exactly what you should do.

The reason for spending time focusing on praise is that we need time for it to embed in our long-term memories. Then, when something happens to knock our confidence, we have positive memories about our ability to give us a boost again.

Until memories are fixed, they are fragile and easily destroyed. I know I'm terrible about remembering the names of people I've just met. I get distracted and then the name's gone.

It actually takes a few hours for new experiences to complete the biochemical and electrical process that transform them from short-term to long-term memories.

This doesn't mean you have to think about something for a couple of hours to turn it into a memory, but just focus on it for a little while so you feel confident it's joining the line for processing.

Stay with that feeling of pride in a job well done and give yourself a metaphorical pat on the back.

You can't always control what others think of you, but you do have some control over what you think of yourself.

“You can't always control what others think of you, but you do have some control over what you think of yourself.”



---

# 3

## Be Kinder, Be Happier

“You can accomplish by kindness what you cannot by force.”

*Publilius Syrus*

Once we have the basic necessities of food and shelter and being healthy, the next thing we want is to be happy.

Whether it's spending more time with family and friends, becoming rich, having a holiday, going shopping, losing weight, going for a walk in the countryside: we do all these things because we want to be happy. Of course, different people will have different opinions about which of these things will really make you happy; but we do these things because we want to be happy.

But there is an instant way to be happier, one that will also benefit others. And that is to be kind.

In a study conducted by Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, psychology professor at University of California, Riverside, students were assigned to do five random acts of kindness per week for a period of six weeks. At the end of the study, the students' levels of happiness had increased by 41.66%.

Every thought we have and every action we take creates new connections in the brain. While, for instance, going shopping might make you feel happy for a while, it also creates the desire to do more shopping. Being kind creates a happiness that has a more long-lasting effect (and it's cheaper).

“Every thought we have and every action we take creates new connections in the brain.”

By being kind you are creating a more positive outlook, which is far more likely to make you happier.

Dr Lyubomirsky found that when describing their previous life experiences, self-nominated happy people retrospectively evaluated their experiences as more pleasant at both the time of occurrence and when recalling them. Unhappy people, however, evaluated their past life events relatively unfavourably at both time points. But what was interesting was that objective judges did not rate the events described by happy people as inherently more positive than those described by unhappy people. This suggests that happy and unhappy people experience similar events but interpret them differently.

“Happy and unhappy people experience similar events but interpret them differently.”

But being kind won't just make you happier; it can make you healthier as well. Acts of kindness are often accompanied by emotional warmth, which produces the hormone, oxytocin. Oxytocin causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide in blood vessels, which expands the blood vessels. This in turn lowers blood pressure and therefore protects the heart. Oxytocin also reduces levels of free radicals and inflammation in the cardiovascular system. Another way it helps prevent heart disease.

In some cases it can also be good for the kidneys as well. A report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* noted that a 28-year-old man donated his kidney to a stranger in need, inspiring ten kidney donations from other donors across the US. The phrase “pay it forward” has perhaps become a bit of cliché, but kindness really can create a ripple effect. Just think about a time when someone you didn't

know did something kind and try to remember how that made you feel.

Kindness really can have a powerful effect on melting away negative emotions. A great example of this is a story regarding Nelson Mandela. After 27 years in prison, he could still show kindness to one of his oppressors who was violently opposed to everything he was trying to do. At one point just before the birth of a free South Africa, Nelson Mandela entered into secret negotiations with an Afrikaner general who had been in charge of death squads. He was a man critical to the peace process because he led a large, well-armed Afrikaner resistance group. They met in Mandela's house; the general was anticipating tense negotiations across a conference table. Instead, Mandela led him to the warm, homey living room, sat beside him on a comfy couch, and spoke to him in Afrikaans. And after that, any resistance just melted away.

“Kindness really can have a powerful effect on melting away negative emotions.”

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## 4 Reward Upfront

“Loss is nothing else but change, and change is nature's delight.”

*Marcus Aurelius*

It's been found that people value something more once they own it.

If you give someone a bonus upfront and tell them that they'll lose it if they don't reach a specific target, they're far more likely to reach that target.

A study showed that students gained as much as a 10-percentile increase in their scores compared to students with similar backgrounds if their teacher received a bonus at the beginning of the year. The condition was that the teachers would lose the bonus if their students didn't reach a set target.

But there was found to be no gain for students when teachers were offered the bonus at the end of the school year.

It's been called “the endowment effect”, but I think a better name for it is “the bird in the hand syndrome”.

I remember when I was in advertising and went on a factory visit whilst working on the Mars brand. I learnt two important lessons. Firstly that too much chocolate in the hand, namely mine, made me sick and put me off chocolate for weeks. Secondly, all the Mars employees got a bonus if they clocked in before 8.30 a.m.

But rather than seeing it as a bonus for getting in early, they perceived it as their pay getting docked if they got in after 8.30 a.m.

There have been many experiments that prove this “bird in the hand syndrome”. One found that students were surprisingly reluctant to trade a coffee mug they had been given for a bar of chocolate. This happened even though they did not prefer coffee mugs to chocolate when given a straight choice between the two.

It can't just be explained away as emotional attachment either. It seems it's hardwired into us. It even affects those who buy and sell for a living.

According to Pete Lunn, an economist at the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin, professional market traders are often reluctant to sell investments they already hold, even though they could trade them for assets they would prefer to invest in, if starting from scratch.

This “bird in the hand syndrome” can be looked at in another way: as loss aversion.

It's been found that we have a tendency to take risks when the outcome is presented as a loss, but avoid the same risks when an outcome is presented as a gain. This happens even when the objective outcome is the same.

Understanding this can have a big effect on how you communicate.

Here are some examples:

- It's much more powerful to say “Save 25%” as opposed to “Pay only 75%”.



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