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BOOKSHELF

'Smarter Tomorrow' Review: Better Brains

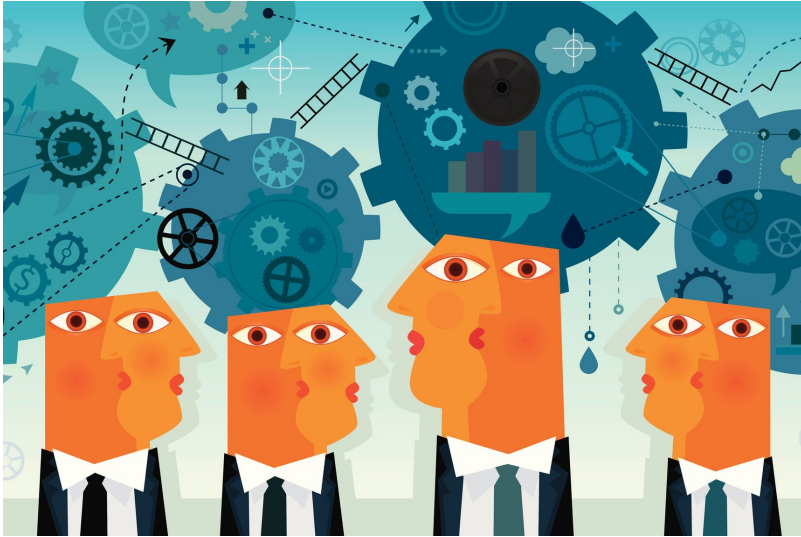
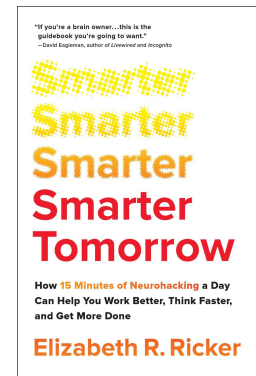


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By Matthew Hutson

Working at home has led to widescale experimentation in productivity. Many workers, no longer tied to central offices, are trying new schedules, locations, routines and work-life arrangements. But this has been a haphazard process, nothing like a controlled scientific study. Those interested in adding rigor to their self-improvement journeys have no better place to turn than “Smarter Tomorrow: How 15 Minutes of Neurohacking a Day Can Help You Work Better, Think Faster, and Get More Done,” by the science educator and advocate Elizabeth Ricker. (Neurohacking, to put it simply, is finding shortcuts to a better-functioning brain).

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At the outset, Ms. Ricker contrasts her project with traditional self-help, in which one copies an authority's example and doesn't measure the results. Instead, she offers what she calls "The Neurohacker's Creed": Don't assume the same thing works for everyone, pick "hacks" and evaluations carefully, and find a partner so you can help each other. There's also "the neurohacker's ladder," F-S-T-R: Focus on your goals, select an experiment, train and reflect on the outcome and next steps.

Similar organizing structures permeate her upbeat book, which reads like a combination of a science book (including both fun findings and neuroanatomical terms), a workbook (presenting goals and takeaways in each chapter, and a section for experiment recipes), a memoir (detailing her own self-help sojourn) and an encouraging email from a smart friend (full of exclamations points and apologies for puns).

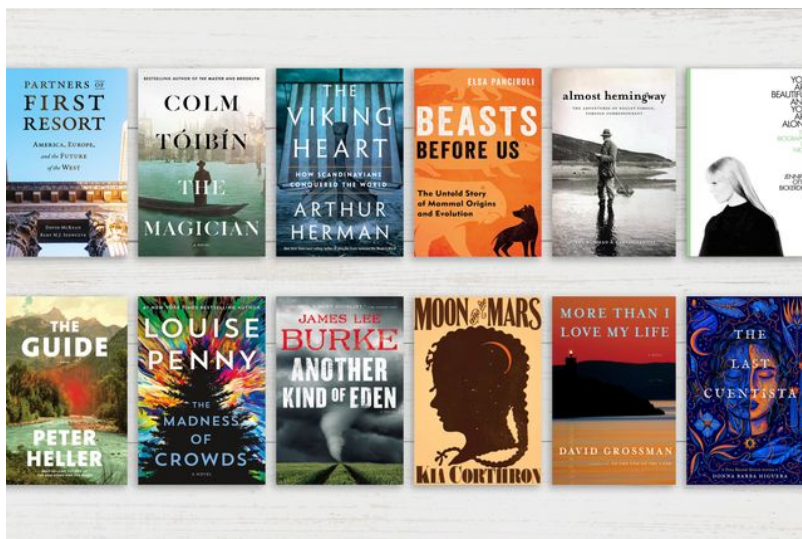


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“Smarter” can mean lots of things. Ms. Ricker interprets the term ecumenically, tackling four broad categories of improvement. First, there’s “the new IQ,” by which she means executive functioning, a combination of working memory (juggling things in your head), inhibition (resisting temptation) and mental flexibility (quickly shifting focus or synthesizing ideas). Second, “the new EQ,” or emotional self-regulation—the ability to monitor, assess and modify your feelings. Third, memory and learning, whether for events, facts or skills. Fourth, creativity. Each can be assessed with simple tasks online or in the book, and the author also offers surveys with which to track two more holistic outcomes: the ability to complete to-do lists and life satisfaction.

After looking into dozens of candidate interventions, Ms. Ricker elaborates on seven types of hacks: exercise, light exposure, neurofeedback (monitoring one’s brain waves), computer games, pills (mostly herbs), running a small amount of electricity through your brain and placebos. (These can work even when you know they’re placebos, at least if you know placebos work even when you know they’re placebos).

A typical experiment goes like this: On each day, take a creativity test, like listing new uses for an everyday object. Then pick a colored marble from a bag to randomly assign yourself 10 minutes of walking or high-intensity exercise. Take the test again. After many days, average the creativity improvements from each type of exercise and compare.



WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK »

Ms. Ricker’s resume is undeniably impressive, despite her occasional self-deprecation (she had trouble reading early in school): Exeter, MIT, Harvard, the Junior Olympics in squash. What impressed me most, however, was her dedication to neurohacking protocol and documentation. She includes multi-item worksheets for tracking to-do-list progress—yearly, quarterly, weekly and daily (tracking being one more thing to add to the daily to-do list). Further, the author recommends attempting each self-hack every day for at least a month or two. I suspect only a small cadre of readers will properly complete even one course of treatment.

Personally, I’m happy to read a published study showing something works on average across a few hundred people, then use it on myself (relying if nothing else on the placebo effect). The most useful four pages of the book, for most readers, may be the box labeled “Suggestions for Health and Lifestyle Bottlenecks”—problem areas to address before even bothering with the other interventions. Specifically, it contains advice on improving sleep, hydration, breathing, nutrition, fitness, safety, social connection and meaning in life.

The book also affords less immediate lessons. First, “Smarter Tomorrow” provides a concrete and relatable primer on the scientific method, showing how the self-help sausage should be made, and with luck it might prompt readers to ask more questions about received advice.

Second, it contains a clear-eyed (and apolitical) take on neurodiversity, the simple and obvious notion that everyone is different, and that different doesn’t necessarily mean better or worse. Beyond basing the book on self-experimentation and describing many kinds of “smarter,” Ms. Ricker notes that some brain boosts involve tradeoffs. One study,

for instance, found that electrically stimulating different parts of the brain enhanced learning rate while inhibiting fast access to that knowledge, and vice versa. She also encourages readers to think carefully about their self-improvement goals. You may target apparent disadvantages, but “before jumping to ‘correct’ them,” she writes, “I urge you to consider what positive role they may be playing—possibly even secretly!” She suggests, for example, that ADHD may be helpful to ER physicians.

One chapter points to the future of neurohacking, touching on gene editing, brain implants and artificially intelligent decision assistants. “To me,” Ms. Ricker writes, “the most exciting area under development is cognitive data,” using behavior trackers and machine-learning algorithms to predict under which circumstances you will and won’t perform well. If we can figure out how to satisfy the (admittedly extremely complicated) privacy concerns, people might license personal data to one another and “fuel a new economic system for neurohackers.”

Some companies, as they track employee behavior from afar by snooping on their screens, evidently hope to neurohack the workforce by fiat. Many workers find the intrusion off-putting, but a recent study revealed a more digestible alternative: Collect the behavior and performance data but put it in the hands of the worker, not the boss. Whether your data comes from your employer or your own lab notebook, more information about your habits and performance can help you up your game. For those now working remotely a great deal more than they ever expected, objective data like this could be a way to build a case for a new workstyle.

Mr. Hutson is the author of “The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking: How Irrational Beliefs Keep Us Happy, Healthy, and Sane.”

Appeared in the August 24, 2021, print edition as ‘Better Brains.’

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