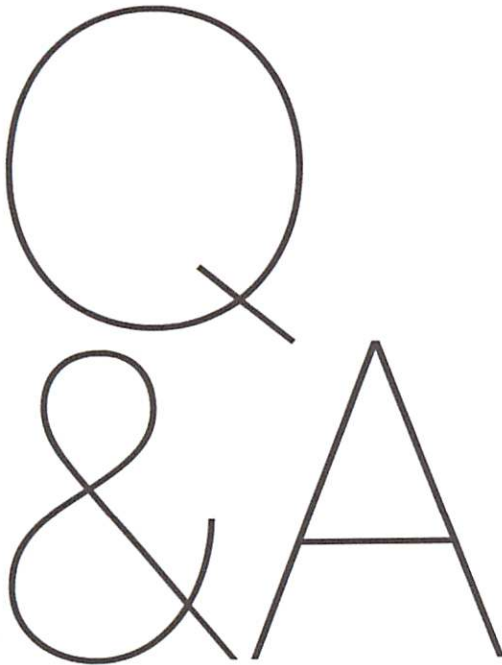


Questions for:  
**Margaret Moore**

---



A leading executive wellness coach and author describes **how to thrive amidst the frenzy.**

Interview by **Karen Christensen**

**Technology and information overload have led to a 'distraction epidemic' that rivals the obesity epidemic in its pervasiveness. Please describe the situation.**

Most of us are chronically over-scheduled, surrounded by stimuli and highly reactive to our many devices – all of which overwhelms the 'radar' in our brains that detects and sorts all of these inputs. The prefrontal cortex – the front of the brain – is in charge of managing incoming stimuli and dealing with distractions, keeping us 'on task' and making good choices. It is described as 'the CEO' of the brain – the domain responsible for 'executive function'. When the prefrontal cortex is overloaded, it is very difficult to remain calm and to focus on the task at hand. As a result, many of us are struggling to manage and regulate ourselves.

**One of the first questions you ask people is, "What percentage of your work day feels disorganized or chaotic?" What are they telling you?**

Virtually everyone I've spoken to feels overwhelmed at some point, and this just wasn't the case 20 or 30 years ago. We've gotten to a place where we wear our busyness as a 'badge of honour' – we *want* to be the kind of person who is in high demand. Add to that the stresses of the recent recession – which has translated into a need to get even more done with less. For all of these reasons, I believe we've reached a peak in human history in terms of frenzied and chaotic minds. I am finding that many people are yearning to calm their minds even more than they are yearning for better physical health.

**On the flip side, what does an *organized* mind look like?**

An organized mind is a thriving mind. Most of the time it is calm, positive, energetic, well-nourished, rested and focused. People with organized minds are able to tame frenzy and steer around distractions by scheduling regular 'brain breaks', bringing a 'clean' brain to their most important projects. They are cognitively agile and able to shift perspectives in order to be creative. Their organized minds lead them to connect the dots, and as a result they enjoy greater creativity, productivity and have more energy and pleasure, both at work and at home.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR TAMING THE FRENZY

Look at a photo that makes you smile.  
Take a few deep breaths.  
Think of something that makes you grateful.  
Send someone a note of appreciation for what he or she brings to your life.  
Read a comic strip.  
Go outside and breathe in some fresh air.  
Do a yoga pose.  
Water a few plants.  
Text your partner and tell them that you love them.  
Take the dog for a short walk.  
Remember a pleasant memory.  
Get a colleague a coffee.  
Listen to a favourite piece of music.  
The possibilities are endless.

---

### 'Frenzy' is an emotional state brought on by both external and internal sources. What does internal frenzy look like?

Internal frenzy is the frenzy we create for ourselves, and it is driven in part by our response to the thoughts and feelings generated by all the outside frenzy. Unfortunately, for many of us this isn't an occasional or fleeting state: it has become a sort of cloud that follows us around for most of our waking hours. The broadest category of internal frenzy would probably be life's stressors, which occur when the demands in front of us are above and beyond our capacity to deal with them. Of course, there is 'good stress', too: think of all the good things that you achieve under the right dose of stress – the right job, a wonderful home; those things didn't happen without pressure or frenzy.

Research shows that up to a certain level, stress is good for the prefrontal cortex: it provides us with a challenge, which is engaging and motivating. But there is a fine line between the 'right dose' and too much stress. At a certain point, you cross the line of what you can deal with productively. Each of us has our own boundary between good stress that drives higher performance, and bad stress that is depleting. That boundary varies over time, and we have greater capacity to harvest the positive impact of stress when we are fit, well-nourished and rested.

The fact is, whenever you stretch beyond your capacity, the prefrontal cortex is impaired. In brain scans, neuroscientists can now see the 'lights' that are on in an engaged brain, and there are literally fewer lights (i.e. reduced brain activity) when the prefrontal cortex is dealing with a high dose of negative emotion. When this happens, you can't learn properly, you have trouble remembering things, and you aren't creative. You also aren't strategic and can't see the big picture – you're sort of only 'half present'.

### What types of situations lead to internal frenzy?

You may have chosen a life path that is increasing your frenzy: the wrong career, the wrong job, the wrong marriage or the wrong social network. These are not easy areas to address, but even deciding that you will address them by proactively taking one small step at a time will provide hope that things will improve. Having said that, internal frenzy is most often caused by minor events, such as being irritated or impatient, chronically bothered by someone's behaviour or other external events like traffic jams. Negative emotions come in all shapes and sizes; it doesn't really matter what their source is, they all intrude on the brain's ability to function.

A point to note here is that negative emotions play an important role in getting our attention and requesting action, so we should not try to suppress them. They are teachers; they tell us that 'something's wrong' and they ask us to search for a solution. Whenever the demands in your life are greater than your capacity to deal with them, you are being called upon to develop your capacity for resilience. Hence, it's not about dismissing negative emotions, it's about being able to set them aside when it's time to focus, so that you can use your 'attentional software' to be organized and productive.

### Research indicates that positive emotions are the active ingredients in resilience. Please explain how this works.

University of North Carolina Professor **Barbara Fredrickson** has done groundbreaking work on the biological role of positive emotions. In her research, she found that the main thing that distinguishes someone who feels good about her life and someone who doesn't is their level of resilience. Life satisfaction is mostly *not* about making lots of money or owning a mansion; it's about feeling confident that you can



handle life's challenges and that you can bounce back from the adverse events that are a natural part of being human.

Prof. Frederickson set out to discover 'what drives what' when it comes to resilience, positivity, and life satisfaction: if you're satisfied with your life, does that make you resilient? Or if you're resilient, does that make you more positive? Which is the chicken and which is the egg? What she discovered is that what drives resilience is our level of positive emotion. We all have plenty of 'negatives' in our lives, but it turns out that we need the right dose of positives in order to be able to manage negative emotions. Prof. Fredrickson and another scientist, **Marcial Losada**, found that the 'tipping point' for resilience is three positive emotions to every one negative emotion, over time.

#### What are some of your prescriptions for 'taming the frenzy'?

People with organized minds take care of their minds in a wide variety of ways. The quickest path to taming frenzy is to move your body: go for a walk, go to the gym, take a yoga class or, if you don't have time for that, just do a vigorous physical activity for a short period. Even five minutes of stretching, skipping down a hallway or climbing a few flights of stairs can reduce frenzy. Research shows exercise makes the prefrontal cortex work better and counterbalances the physical damage of stress.

Next on the list is sleep, because our brains need time to recharge. A third way to tame the frenzy is through cultivating positive emotions, which are like butterflies – they don't stick around, in contrast to the 'Velcro quality' of negative emotions, so you actually have to harvest and amplify them. The best way to get the most 'juice' out of positive emotions is to share them with someone you care about. That's when you also get the biggest health benefits from them, and as a result, relationships and positivity kind of go together.

Another key concept for moving towards an organized mind is *mindfulness*. The basic idea is to unhook your mind from all the automatic stuff going on in your brain – the frenzy, the chaos, the murkiness. Meditation is one way to achieve this. The goal is to create a little space between your mind and your negative thoughts and emotions, by pro-actively being in the present and noticing them, instead of being sucked in and getting lost in them. Being mindful creates spaces where 'bubbles of positivity' can rise to your attention. You see this all the time with kids; they're bubbling over with positive emotions much of the time, in the absence of the negative emotional baggage that collects over a lifespan.

Another strategy that helps one move towards an organized mind is good nutrition. The brain uses up 20 per cent of our food energy, so if you provide it with a steady level of blood glucose, it will have enough energy to stay focused and positive. You have to pay attention to what you're feeding your brain if you want it to run on 'high-octane fuel' – you can't just load up on simple carbs like sugar and white flour and expect it to function well. When you get the right combination of protein, healthy fats and carbs, your brain is awake and alive. This really matters in the afternoon, when energy starts to fade. The difference between having a piece of fish, rice, and veggies for lunch or a burger and fries or a slice of pizza is colossal.

#### For readers who want to achieve a more organized mind, what is the first step?

I suggest that people act like scientists and experiment with different approaches, to see what works best for them. Try getting just a bit more exercise – standing up from your computer and stretching, or walking up a few flights of stairs. When you do this, take your mind's attention out of your brain and into your body; concentrate on your breathing. This will disconnect you from the mental chaos. Another approach is to listen to a beautiful piece of music, or have a conversation with someone you care about, or do something nice for someone: go get a bowl of blueberries for your colleague or spend a few minutes saying thank you to someone.

Don't be afraid to experiment, because it might be a combination of things that work best for you. Maybe you need to do regular exercise and design your meals to achieve the right mental energy to thrive during the day. Also, the brain is always changing and making new connections, so your needs might evolve over time.

The bottom line is that *you are in charge*, and you have a choice: you can choose to work on being more calm and less frenzied; you can choose to bounce back when you have a bad moment, a bad day – or even a bad year. We all have the ability to use our minds to better control our brains. **R**

---

**Margaret Moore** is the founder and CEO of Wellcoaches Corporation and co-director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School. She is the co-author, with Harvard Professor of Psychiatry Paul Hammerness, of *Organize Your Mind, Organize Your Life: Train Your Brain to Get More Done in Less Time* (Harlequin, 2012).