

## Introduction

There are two major health trends happening in the United States — and in fact around many parts of the world — that should be highly concerning to both leaders and societies.

The first is the aging and rapidly increasing obesity in the Baby Boomer generation. This is the generation of retirees, almost retirees, and the eldest portion of today's workforce. Why is this a concern? Because this generation is entering a period when increasing dementia will be seen, both as a result of fairly inactive retirement living and the negative impact on brain and cardiovascular health resulting from excessive weight and poor dietary habits.

Partially for these reasons, current estimates predict that some 76 million people around the world, including over 10 million in the United States, will be struggling with dementia a decade from now. This will be an increase of over 60% from today's levels. By 2030, treating Alzheimer's disease, other forms of dementia, and stroke will be a \$1 trillion industry.

Unlike physical health, people rarely consider or think about what they could or should be doing for the health of their brains. This is sad because Alzheimer's related brain changes start as early as our 30s and 40s. This is why it is not just Baby Boomers who are at risk. Frightfully, according to estimates by the American Heart Association and the American Stroke Association, 60% of Americans will develop a brain disease in their lifetime.

Fortunately, there is an increasing amount of scientific research suggesting we can improve the health of our brains no matter what age we are. The best time to start a brain improvement plan? Now. The sooner you start the sooner you can make your brain stronger and protect it for the long term.

The other troubling trend is produced by Generation X (those born in the years 1965 through 1979) and Millennials (those born in the years 1980 through 2000) to habitually engage in multitasking and to live lives that are tethered to mobile devices and constantly susceptible to electronic notifications. All of these beeps, buzzes, and electronic chimes are activating unconscious stress signals in their bodies. This long-term accumulation of such constant stress is wearing down their brains, with long-term consequences for brain health and future hypertension readings.

No wonder Generation X (the bulk of day's workforce, frontline leaders, and senior leaders) has been identified by the American Psychological Association as the most stressed generation in the United States.

In addition, their multitasking habits are creating brains that are losing the ability to concentrate and focus. Unfortunately, losing these abilities is a precursor to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. The research is clear: multitasking diminishes productivity, elevates brain fatigue, and increases stress. Yet this has become the main operational mode for many.

These are alarming trends — for companies, organizations, and societies.

Fortunately, they are also reversible trends. But only if the leaders in companies, organizations, governments, and societies take the proper steps — first with themselves and then with their peers, employees, spouses, children, neighbors, and communities.

Another worrying trend — one with growing daily impact — is the increase in the number of Baby Boomers who are having to be caregivers to elderly parents and spouses crippled by dementia. As one who helped his own father cope with short-term memory loss and a gradual decline in cognitive abilities for the last four-plus years of his life, I can attest that this is a difficult task for which most of us have not been trained.

As lifespans lengthen, adult children in their 60s and 70s are increasingly caring for frail, older parents. An analysis from the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College found that 10% of adults ages 60 to 69 whose parents are alive serve as parental caregivers, as do 12% of adults age 70 and older.

The financial and emotional difficulties of these situations will undoubtedly increase for years to come. If you do not want to be a burden to your own children, you must start making some critical lifestyle changes now. After all, brain health is a lifetime pursuit, not something to be pushed off until your elderly years.

My research into Alzheimer's disease began when I started to assist my father. After his passing my research intensified, mostly for selfish reasons (I certainly do not wish to live my final years in cognitive decline). As I conducted my research, I was thrilled to learn of new neuroscientific studies showing that neuroplasticity – the ability to grow neuronal connectivity across the brain – can continue well into our 70s. I was one of those who believed our brains stopped growing new cells in our mid-twenties.

Likewise, I was astonished to read report after report showing direct links between mindfulness and meditation with the thickening of brain regions, increases in cognitive capabilities, and reductions in the areas of the brain that trigger stress hormones and emotional outbursts.

And most important, I was ecstatic to read about new scientific research showing that mindfulness, meditation, and better dietary habits could slow and even postpone the debilitating effects of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Additionally, as I started to learn how stress and poor dietary habits lead to bad decisions, poor thinking, and undesirable outcomes, I began to see brain health as not just a personal health issue, but also a professional, work-related issue not being addressed by companies or organizations.

When I started to link recent scientific research into brain health with my own work in leadership development, it became painfully obvious that leaders are not fully aware of how stress triggers poor decisions. More important, leaders have not been trained in how to become cognizant of when stress is triggering them toward poor decision making. It was also obvious that very few leaders are aware of the many benefits that mindfulness practices will bring to their decision-making processes and thinking capabilities.

Everyone knows about the benefits of aerobic exercise and proper nutrition on cardiovascular and overall health. Yet so few people are aware of how exercise, nutrition, and mindfulness can positively impact short-term and long-term brain health.

And while such benefits may be intuitively clear, they are not enough to motivate action and spur behavioral change. At least not with the dozens of leaders I spoke with. The common responses I got were “sounds great” and “most interesting.” Unfortunately, factual information on brain health alone was not going to spark action.

However, once I started illustrating how reducing stress and increasing brain health would lead to better decisions, improved thinking and analytical capabilities, and more desirable outcomes, I had their full attention.

And that is what I hope to do with you, dear reader. Grab your full attention. Show you the facts about how exercise and diet impact your brain. Share with you some of the latest neuroscientific research on how mindfulness and meditation practices actually help you grow new brain neurons and increase cellular connectivity across your brain.

Perhaps most important, I also want to help you find ways to prevent emotions from hijacking your rational, cognitive resources, thus enabling you to make better decisions, think more rationally, and reduce emotional meltdowns and outbursts.

And that is the reason for the order of decisions, thinking, and outcomes in this book’s title. The more linear approach would have been to call this book *Better Thinking. Better Decisions. Better Outcomes*. After all, thinking leads to decisions and these in turn lead to outcomes.

But I purposely changed this order to *Better Decisions. Better Thinking. Better Outcomes*. This is because the first decision people need to make is to become mindful, in order to facilitate a better thinking process. The current linear mode of thinking >> decisions >> outcomes is being impacted by stress, overtaxed brains, information overload, etc. So the first step to better thinking — and better outcomes — is to make the decision not to get emotionally hijacked by your overloaded brain, in order to move into a rational thinking mode.

There is also a larger goal inherent in this book. We live in a highly divisive, argumentative, agitated, and spring-loaded world. Workplace stress is at an all-time high, as is workplace violence and fear. Incidents of rage, verbal abuse, and physical confrontations are increasing at all levels of society, from elementary schools through to boardrooms and community associations and right on through to our national political discourse.

I believe stress and our overloaded brains are two of the underlying causes creating so much conflict, tension, and drama at the human interaction level, both in the workplace and in non-work related interactions. As a result, the tendency is to react to situations, events, and people abruptly and emotionally. As a society, and as human beings, we need to create a new predisposition to pause and then respond instead of react. Remember, our emergency personnel are called First Responders, not First Reactors. If they reacted, instead of responding, in emergency situations the results would be dreadful.

It is not that we have forgotten how to be kind, humane, and just. It simply seems that such attributes are too often considered weaknesses, or easily subdued in favor of clashing, confrontation, rudeness, and a non-collaborative approach to interpersonal interactions.

What kind of world are we creating and leaving for our children and grandchildren?

It is time that individually and collectively we start working harder to change the divisive mindsets, aggressive attitudes, and bad behaviors that are percolating through our communities, schools, and workplaces. We all need to do a better job of responding — rationally, empathetically, and compassionately — to situations, events, and people. Doing so produces better outcomes and fewer regrets, in both our professional and personal lives.

So I hope this book stirs new habits in helping you to cognitively respond, instead of emotionally react, to situations and other people. I hope it arouses a desire to not only find greater peace and solitude in your life, but to also spread these messages and benefits

to others. And I hope it generates an eagerness in you to bring the concepts and ideas of this book formally into your own organization, business unit, or work team, either through the workshops my associates and I deliver or through your own enthusiastic practices and behaviors.

Together we can make your organizations less stressful, more engaging, more productive, and happier places to work. Now, wouldn't that be a wonderful outcome for you and your fellow colleagues and team members?

Lastly, there is a third goal for this book and our associated programs on moving from a *mind full* to a mindful leader and person. And that is to cascade the information in this book wide and far so we can collectively reduce those troubling and worrying statistics on Alzheimer's disease and dementia shown above.

By helping ourselves, and one another, take the proper steps to enhance brain health, we can reduce the financial costs to society — and the brutal emotional costs to families — of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

There is no excuse for allowing a 60% increase in the number of people suffering from dementia. This is preventable, but the right actions need to be taken now — by you, your family members, your work colleagues, and everyone else. I am counting on you to help spread this message. And so are your loved ones, family members, co-workers, and friends.

If you would like to be part of our global information dissemination team, please contact me. We are creating Certified Trainer Programs and Mindful Leaders MasterMind groups to provide on-going support, materials, and tools for those who truly want to apply the information and techniques in this book within their organizations and communities.

In the meantime, please enjoy this book and reflect on the many lessons it has to offer. The techniques described will help you make better decisions and improve your thinking prowess. They will also result in you becoming a less stressed and far healthier person.

And that, I am sure you would agree, are definitely four better outcomes that will definitely benefit you immediately, and for years to come.

Best wishes for continued success.

Steven Howard  
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