

From My Toolbox: The Reticular Activating System

Sharpening My Focus



OVERVIEW

The human brain has a formation in the central cortex, the Reticular Activating System (RAS), that filters all the information that is bombarding our senses. It only lets through information that is important to us right now. If it let everything through, we could not cope with the chaos! We can put the RAS to work for us, by setting clear, concise goals, so that the necessary information gets through to us when we need it.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, I will understand:

- I need to know what I am looking for.
- by setting out what is of value to me, I can expand my awareness of the resources that are available to me.
- I must take accountability for my own future.

I am in control of my own future.

LouTice

KEY CONCEPTS

Accountable/Accountability: Responsible; answerable for an outcome.

Reticular Activating System (RAS): A network of neurons in the brainstem involved in consciousness, regulation of breathing; the transmission of sensory stimuli to higher brain centers; a primary alert to awareness network that may function differently in varying degrees of consciousness.

Threat: Words or actions that frighten or imperil.

Value(s): Quality of worth, merit; custom or ideal that people desire as an end or means in and of itself; something of excellence or importance.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What do I intend to get out of my education, as a whole?
2. What do I intend to get out of each individual class?
3. These are examples of where my RAS has lead me to what I needed:
4. Where in my personal life have I given up accountability to another?

EXERCISE: Stuck in Traffic

Have you ever been stuck in traffic on a freeway or turnpike?

Suppose you are on a crowded expressway on your way to meet with your boss and your most important client at noon to close a big deal. It's 10:45 AM, and you're one hour away from the restaurant meeting place. It's raining and the sky is dark.

All of a sudden, the traffic gridlocks.

There's been an accident. Up ahead, a tanker lies on its side across three lanes. From the ruptured tank, oil gushes all over the pavement.

In the middle lane where you are, you're surrounded by idling cars and trucks. There's a divider wall on the left and the shoulder on the right is crammed with emergency vehicles.

Would you make it to your appointment?

Now we'll alter the scenario somewhat.

What if I told you that, at that meeting, your boss had a cashier's check for one million dollars, in your name, provided you arrive in time for the meeting? The check will be torn up at noon, so you have one hour and 15 minutes to get there. Can you do it?

Can you? How might you do it?

The point of all this is that when a desired goal is of sufficient personal value, the resources and action required to reach that goal tend to show up.

EXERCISE: Building a Network

From the list in the left column, take some common obstacles to successfully completing your education. Turn them into resources to manage future obstacles. Allow your RAS to see solutions!

Potential obstacles during my education.	Who do I intend to meet?	Why is it worth my effort to meet them?	What do I need to know about them?	How can they become a resource for any potential obstacles?
Transportation				
Sick child				
Difficulty with course content				
Technical difficulties				
Cash-flow problems				
Lack of family support				

EXERCISE: RAS Activity

From List 1, choose one event it would be important for your RAS to find for you. Make it significant to find by the next session of this class. Allow your RAS to find it for you.

- Catch your child(ren) saying “Please” and “Thank you”
- Hear a classmate affirming an answer you give
- Read a job posting in your field
- Hear an instructor affirming a classmate
- Find someone vital to add to your network

From List 2, have fun with your RAS and prove that it works by selecting one of the following. Make it significant to find by the next session of this class. Don’t actively search for it, but allow your RAS to find it.

- Green pickup truck
- Black and white cow
- Parking place on a busy street or a busy mall parking lot
- Your favorite coffee shop in an unfamiliar part of town
- Billboard promoting a performer you like

Circle your choices.

Where did you see them? _____

When (date and time) did you see them? _____

What were the conditions? _____

SUMMARY: Fundamentals

Earlier we talked about how our Conscious mind acts as The Great Perceptor, soaking up all the information that is bombarding our senses 24/7/365. The Conscious mind is always on duty.

Now, if we had to pay attention to every little piece of information coming in, it would be chaos. We couldn't move, speak, think clearly, sleep or function at all! What we need is some kind of filter system, to keep the sensory overload down to a bare minimum.

Luckily, our brains provide this service with an actual net-like grouping of cells, at the base of the brain, in the Central Cortex. We call it the Reticular Activating System, or RAS for short. It acts like a good executive secretary, keeping out the interruptions to a CEO's day.

Now, how does the RAS know what information to let through and what information to keep out? Well, we decide what is important – you and I. And what is important? Anything that is of Value or a Threat, right now.

It's like the example of a mother asleep at night, with a small baby nearby. The mother could sleep through trucks rumbling down the road, airplanes flying directly overhead, and never wake up. But if that baby makes the slightest cry, snap! She's awake. You see, it isn't the volume of the sound that wakes her up. It is the importance of her baby's cry. It is tremendously valuable information, because her baby might need the mother.

Lou Tice used to tell the story of a sheriff in a small mid-west town, where it was typical for one of the local bars to have fights. Now, bar fights are pretty noisy affairs, but the simple sound of a shell being loaded into the chamber of a shotgun was enough to stop any fight. Why? Because the next sound that would be heard would be the gun going off, and nobody wanted to be in the way of a shotgun shell!

Value and Threat – that's what gets through our RAS. And who decides what is valuable and what is a threat? You do.

A fun thing to try, if you're looking for a parking spot in a busy part of town, is tell yourself exactly where you want to park. Watch: as you drive down the street, your Reticular Activating System is looking for information. It sees heads in cars two blocks away. It sees people approaching cars. It sees red lights flashing. Those aren't parking spots. Those are clues that lead you to your goal. You set your mind for what's important to you, and now you're scanning. But instead of looking for parking spots, I want you to look for opportunity, for education or information, or for jobs. You can even look for a spouse. That would be all right. You need to be clear, in your mind, what you're looking for, or anything will do. And you don't want just anything.

On the way home today, try this: When you're driving home, tell yourself you want to see every green car with license plates that have a 4 and an H on the plate. You can be going 60 miles an hour, and "There's one, there's one, there's one!" That's how smart you are. And then you take that skill and go after what you want in your life.

This is extremely helpful information, because we can put our RAS to work for us every time we set a new goal. Remember how we talked about the Creative Subconscious opens up our Awareness? The RAS is what we use to increase our awareness of information we need. We use the RAS to bust scotomas that are holding us back.

By setting goals, we are declaring a new priority for our minds to focus on, and our RAS is so good that it immediately begins the search for the information we need.

SUMMARY: Application

The RAS, the Reticular Activating System, inside you and me is our filter system. It lets in threats and it lets in value. So let's talk about the value of attending a class. This is why preparation ahead of time is so important – especially when we were kids, when the teacher asked us to read a chapter ahead of time, because they were punishing us. If we read the chapter ahead, if we looked at the questions ahead of time, if we looked at yesterday's notes (or the day before's notes) ahead of time, it engaged our brain on the priorities, the things deemed important by the teacher. So, when they came up in class, we were better focused – we are better focused – and we hear them and don't miss them.

Another element to this is resources. When we talk about resources, we mean things that we may need to solve obstacles and problems as we navigate our way through our education. When we get to know classmates, and other people around us – even other people in the building, staff and administration – they become resources. When we have a need, all of a sudden our RAS searches and finds the resources for us.

The job of the RAS is to connect the gaps between what we know, and what we need to know, in order to complete projects, and classwork, and assignments or just to get to school. If, all of a sudden, I find I have a transportation problem, because I have gotten to know people, because we have had discussions, I know that someone could actually have the solution to my transportation problem.

It's not magic. It is knowing where you want to go. When we have problems or challenges, the RAS goes to work to fill the gap.

NOTES

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....