



Stuck at home? Watch your brain at work and become a better problem-solver

Observing your own thoughts can make you more productive – and less stressed.

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I stare out my window on yet another rainy Covid-work-from-home morning, struggling to motivate myself. I've got to prepare a presentation on cognitive concepts for a leadership program. I need to explain [Recognition-Priming](#): how quickly your brain puts together stories, making sense of new situations by connecting to past experience.



Suddenly, the view isn't boring anymore. The garage door mysteriously opens and reveals a bright red car.

I think, "What a great example of my brain creating a new story! I can use this in my presentation."



I notice a raincoated figure walking toward the garage and think, "Must be the lady I saw the other day walking into the white house." I visualize her inside the door, pushing a remote garage opener button just like the one at my own door. Here's a new story that my brain will show me next time I look

outside: the garage isn't just a garage, it's part of a whole story of a home and family in the white house.

Pleased with myself, I start writing down my thoughts so I can use this example for my presentation.

Reconstructing my thoughts on paper and looking out my window again, I feel a surge of chagrin. My story is wrong. A solid fence separates the white house's yard and the garage. There's no way the resident could get right to her car.

I lean over and see a cream-colored house to the right that my window frame had blocked before. Because it was invisible while my brain laid down its story, the story left it out.



The garage must belong instead to the house on the right.

A silver lining bursts through the rainclouds in my brain: a great example of another cognitive concept, [Reframing](#). A limited frame of reference makes you jump to conclusions without enough data. If you expand your frame and take the time to collect more data, you draw better conclusions. Another story for my presentation! Self-esteem floods back.

The next morning I watch the same scene, and have the presence of mind to capture it on camera. Even more pleased with myself, I sit down to type up the story. Chagrin resurges. The garage remote control might be hand-held. The driver might just rent the garage and live anywhere.

I sigh. Yet another demonstration of another cognitive process: overnight problem processing. For complex problems, people find better solutions if they come back to the problem after a night's sleep.

So how can I solve the problem of where the driver lives? Direct data is always best: asking the mysterious driver in person. But until Covid-19 is over - and until I can concoct a story that doesn't sound like I'm stalking my neighbor - I'll have to learn to be patient with myself.

Ruefully, I come to the fundamental lesson: observing your own thoughts, staying open to alternate explanations, and loosening your attachment to your own ideas make you better at problem-solving – and less stressed to boot.

Want to learn more? Contact me at mkummer@kummerconsulting.com