

A COGNITIVE PLAYBOOK
from
THE BARBER SHOP

Is AI Making You *sToOpID?*



**Warning Signs That AI May Be Doing Too Much of Your Thinking –
and Seven Ways to Take Your Mind Back**

By Jim Barber

**There's no doubt, AI is the future.
But will it be a good future?**

That's up to you!

**Update
required!**

Don't you just hate when that happens? You've got a favorite piece of technology – a smartphone, a tablet, or maybe a nifty little software app. It does what it's supposed to do. You're comfortable with it. Technology-wise, life is good.

And then you get the alert: **Update Required!**

It's frustrating. Your techie toy functions just the way it's supposed to. It does what you want. There's nothing wrong with it. So why should you update it?

Simple. Because you know that if you don't update, it won't work well in the future. It may not happen tomorrow or next week or next month – but sometime, you'll notice that your favorite digital marvel just isn't working as well as it used to.

It's becoming obsolete.

You need to update it.

I've got some bad news for you.

You need to update.

Yes, you!

Now, don't be alarmed – all of you doesn't need updating. Only a small part. I'm talking about the 3-pound organ happily nestled between your ears.

That's right, you need to update your brain.

Fortunately, we're not talking about a hardware upgrade, à la *Young Frankenstein*. Your brain itself works just as well as it ever did, and it doesn't need replacing or upgrading. It's your *mind* that needs updating. Because...

**20th century thinking just doesn't cut it
in the 21st century!**

Why Is AI a Problem?

The reason your brain is facing obsolescence is something that you've already heard a lot about: artificial intelligence (or as it's known to its friends, A.I.).

There are several reasons why AI is causing your brain to need an update.

One big reason is that AI has made being – or staying – employed much more challenging. When you're competing for a job, whether it's against another human being or AI itself, your own mental skills are more important than ever.

**AI has not only changed all the rules.
AI has upped the thinking game.**

But when I say that you need to update your thinking, I don't mean that you need to out-think AI in every way. Let's face it, you can't. When it comes to things AI is good at – logical analysis, data analysis, pattern recognition, and so on – it's an unfair competition.

AI can perform many logical, mathematical, and analytical tasks at astonishing speed – and often far better than we can. (Of course, it can still make mistakes, sometimes with impressive overconfidence. That's another reason why you need to keep your thinking sharp.)

But the good news for us humans is that AI isn't good at everything.

Whatever we ultimately decide to call AI creativity, it isn't human imagination. AI doesn't experience a hunch, a gut feeling, curiosity, wonder, or desire the way we do.

So you need to update your thinking just to reliably partner with AI, especially in business.

But wait, there's more...

There's an impressive Latin way of saying this, but let's skip the showing-off and use the version everyone understands:

“If you don't use it, you lose it.”

That phrase is frequently applied to physical activities, like riding a bicycle or doing the macarena. But it's applicable to mental activities as well.

If you don't exercise a mental skill, your ability to use it can grow weaker.

It's common sense. **The more often you routinely outsource a mental activity, the less often you exercise it – and skills that aren't exercised can weaken.**

The danger isn't using AI.

**The danger is cognitive outsourcing
without cognitive exercise.**

A Very Human Example

Now the problem of *quod non exercetur, amittitur* is not new with AI. When I was in school (you know, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth), I used to be able to do long division without difficulty.

But I've been using calculators for years, and although I can still divide 227,934 by 5,427 without using an electronic tool, it would take me an embarrassingly long time. And I wouldn't bet a lot of money on the accuracy of my answer either.

Similarly, I used to be a pretty good speller. If you asked me to spell "vacuum," there was a pretty good chance that I could figure it out without consulting a dictionary. In the second grade, I actually won the "Best Speller" award in a schoolwide spelling bee!

But not today. Now whenever I need to spell a word, I simply take a stab at it and let my spellchecker bring me home.

Neither the decline of my ability to perform long division nor my difficulty spelling "onomatopoeia" has seriously impacted my life. But here's the thing...

if my decision-making skills were impacted, or my ability to analyze data was impaired, or my proficiency at summarizing was diminished... now *those* would be serious problems.

What's the Question?

Which brings us to the BIG question:

Is AI making us stoopid?

I've done a lot of research on that, and the answer is a positively, definitely, and unqualified...

Probably not.

I say "*probably* not" because artificial intelligence hasn't been around long enough for us to determine whether long-term usage causes physical changes in the brain.

But even if AI is not causing physical changes in the brain, we are beginning to accumulate evidence that the way we use AI can affect how much we think, how much we learn, and how much we remember.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- A University of Pennsylvania study involving nearly 1,000 high school students found that those using a conventional AI assistant performed better while using it, *but scored 17% worse on subsequent tests without AI*. An AI tutor designed to encourage independent thinking largely avoided this problem.
- A randomized study of 120 university students found that those who studied with ChatGPT remembered significantly less 45 days later than students using traditional methods: 57.5% versus 68.5% on a surprise test.
- An Anthropic experiment involving 52 software engineers found that participants using AI assistance scored approximately 50% on a follow-up knowledge test, compared with 67% for those working without AI. How they used AI made an important difference.
- A Microsoft Research/Carnegie Mellon study of 319 knowledge workers found that greater confidence in AI was associated with less self-reported critical-thinking effort. The researchers also found that AI changed the kinds of critical thinking people performed.

What Do We Do with That?

If something is causing you harm, the obvious answer is to avoid it. That's true of such dire dangers as poisonous spiders and snakes, grocery items long past their expiration dates (yuck), and relentless telephone solicitors (double yuck!).

But the answer here is not to avoid AI. That's ignoring the issue, not solving it.

What you need to do is improve your own thinking.

We need to partner with AI, bringing our own uniquely human qualities to the table.

To thrive in a future that's impacted by AI, we've got to strengthen the full range of human cognitive abilities – especially the ones we've neglected.

What's the Solution?

So that's the danger: the more thinking we routinely hand over to AI, the less exercise we're giving our own minds. But what can you do about it?

Here are seven ways you can still use AI without allowing it to negatively affect your thinking ability.

Seven Ways to Take Your Mind Back

1

Don't Outsource the Easy Stuff.

Avoid using AI for trivial tasks that don't take much time or mental effort. It's like using a calculator to multiply 2 times 3. If you can do something in only a minute or two, it's better for you to do it than to ask AI to do it for you. It exercises your brain!

2

Draft First, Prompt Second.

When you do use AI, try to do the activity yourself first. Then ask AI to do it and compare the results. Put your raw thoughts, outlines, or creative ideas on a blank page before asking AI to expand or polish them.

3

Exercise Your Mind Every Day.

Schedule time in your day for cognitive exercise. Just as you hopefully schedule time to jog, go to the gym, or do some form of physical exercise, do the same thing for your brain. Make sure you get some cognitive exercise every day. The Barber Shop's Thinking Gym is a good place to strengthen your mental muscles.

4

Struggle Before You Summon AI.

When you've got a hard problem to solve or a complex article to read, try the activity yourself for a few minutes instead of immediately asking AI for its summary or solution. Even if you're unsuccessful, you haven't failed. You've exercised your brain.

5

Challenge the Machine.

Do not accept AI text or code at face value. Challenge yourself to find specific errors or logical gaps in what AI generates. If nothing else, you'll give your brain valuable exercise. And who knows? You might even catch AI in an error!

6

Pick Up a Pen.

Keyboards are convenient, but when practical, write or sketch by hand. Handwriting engages the brain differently from typing and can improve attention and memory for some kinds of learning.

7

Keep Knowledge in Your Head.

Even though AI may know more facts about a subject than you do, that's no excuse to outsource your own understanding. Actively learn and remember the core concepts relevant to your field rather than treating AI as an external hard drive.

Here's the bottom line....

Your goal isn't to use less AI.

**Your goal is to use your mind more,
and to use more of your mind.**

What Now?

This Playbook describes the danger that everyone now faces. But what can you do about the danger?

At The Barber Shop, we explore the solution: cognitive fitness – how to strengthen imagination, intuition, critical thinking, curiosity, perception, and the other **human abilities that become more valuable as AI gets better.**

We put cognitive fitness into practice through Cognitive Playbooks like this one, activities in The Thinking Gym, conversations with other curious thinkers, and plenty more to come.

Cognitive dependence is the problem.

Cognitive fitness is the solution.

**The Barber Shop is where
people go to learn more.**

So Who Wrote This Playbook?

I'm Jim Barber, and I approve of this message.

It's not surprising that I'd approve of it, because I wrote it. Now I'll admit, AI was a tremendous help to me in polishing this Playbook. As I said earlier, I'm a lousy speller, and my grammar sometimes leaves something to be desired. But I created this Playbook, and AI improved it – which is exactly what I've been saying all along....

**Use your own intelligence first,
then partner with artificial intelligence
to produce something even better!**

So, who am I? For more than forty years, I've helped people adapt to changing technology. Today I'm exploring the other side of that equation: **how we make sure our minds remain sharp as the technology becomes even smarter.**

And for the *next* 40 years (if the medical system cooperates) I'm going to help people improve their cognitive fitness. And I'm doing it through my little website called...



The Barber Shop
(thebarbershop.com)

Despite the name, you won't find anything about hair styling at The Barber Shop. But you *will* find resources to help you keep your mental faculties as sharp as possible.

Come to The Barber Shop and imagine how cognitively sharp you can be!

**Then pull up a chair.
The conversation is just getting started.**



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