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Two specific issues linked to cognitive depletion that you should be aware of is that ego depletion both alters our perceptions of the past and enhances our susceptibility to suggestion. Research in the Netherlands [Otgaar et al] has shown that people with depleted executive function skills experience difficulties in their memory accuracy and are at risk of developing memories for details or events that were not experienced - false memories. Even more important are the indications that suggestibility increases, leaving one or more party vulnerable to the words and actions of the other.

Exerting self-control depletes the glucose level in the brain. Research has found that reduced glucose and poor glucose tolerance are tied to lower performance in tests of self-control, particularly in difficult new situations. Self-control can also be compared to stress. The brain is supplied with glucose during periods of stress to be used for energy. This conversion of glucose to energy is a coping mechanism for stress. The brain's need for glucose rises during the mental process for self-control.

Right now might it be a good time for a nice dessert?

It is bad enough that we tend to mix up details and forget things on good days. A study published recently in the Journal of Neuroscience looked at how we retrieve memories and revealed some interesting data.

It was always thought that retrieval was good for memory - the more you remember something, the longer you'll remember it. Researchers at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine, discovered that each time you retrieve a memory you forget or add a small thing to it, and the next time you recall the information, you'll remember what you remembered - with the small deletion or addition - not the original memory.

In other words, the more you recall an event, the more distorted your memory of that event might be. The combination of cognitive depletion and changeable memory makes the collaborative process that much more interesting.

There is little that we can do to alleviate the changeable memory, although it might be a good idea to ask your clients to thoroughly document their recollections right at the beginning of the process. That would provide you with a good starting point. But there are some things we can do to minimize the risks of cognitive depletion. First would be to limit your sessions to 90 minutes or two hours on the outside. I realize that this is a standard that you generally try to keep, but I also realize that, when the end is near, it is not impossible for one or both sides to decide to keep going. However, the risks can be great.

This brings me back to the initial question of "How can I be a better listener?" It is not fair to provide one-size fits all answers because listening is very individual. The basic concepts are broad but the implementation has to be based on one's physical, cognitive and psychological condition. Perhaps before we provide quick, pat answers, we should be asking questions such as: "Are you having trouble listening in social or work situations? Can you control the environment? Can you hear people speaking but have difficulty understanding what's being said? Have you had your hearing acuity checked? Were you listening in a high stress situation such as an interview, interrogatory, or emergency situation? Were you very tired when you were having difficulty listening?"

With answers to these and other questions, we can put together an answer that better fits the individual and can surely produce a better listener.