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How Playing Poker Re-Wires Your Brain ... for the Better

24 March 2017 By [Lee Davy](#)Share: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [f](#) Like 8

Imagine if your child came home one day and said 'I'm quitting school to play poker.'

What would you say?

The *self-help* book parents would hug them, wish them all the best and swallow the vomit.

The rest would kick them out and tell them not to come back until they've learned that the only successful people in the world are surgeons, concert pianists, and coke dealers.



It's a card game, man. It's not *real life*. You can't make a living playing poker.

But what is *happening* to that brain of yours when you play this game so many times you see aces, kings and queens in your sleep?

Are you getting smarter? Is your brain chemistry being permanently altered? I don't know. I'm not a doctor. But **Stephen Simpson** is.

Out of Africa & Into Poker

The last thing on **Dr. Stephen Simpson's** mind when elbow deep in blood, providing medical care in war-torn Angola and Nigeria, [was the game of poker](#). But that's where he ended up after a neck injury forced a change of career.

In a bid to escape the office Simpson started working with the renowned British hypnotist, **Paul McKenna**, and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) Godfather, **Richard Bandler**.



Story checks out for Moorman.

Then by complete accident he began working in the poker industry after **Liv Boeree** reached out for some help with her mental game. Boeree then recommended Simpson to **Chris Moorman**.

The pair began working together and, within a month, [Moorman won the World Poker Tour \(WPT\) LA Poker Classic](#).

I know. It was pure luck, right? Nothing to do with Dr Simpson at all.

"At the time I met Stephen and agreed to work with him," said [888Poker Ambassador and the best online MTT player on the planet, Chris Moorman](#), "I was in such a bad place mentally that I was probably -EV in a tournament such as the LAPC Main Event.

"It wasn't that I'd forgotten how to play great poker as such but more that the minute anything went wrong or I'd make a small mistake in a tournament I was unable to recover mentally and

regroup.

"Obviously in a six-day tournament there is no possible way you can play mistake-free poker so it was essential to be able to reset my mindset throughout.

"Live poker is a different beast to online in that you have so much time to think while playing and previously I was finding myself unable to clear my thoughts from previous hands.

"Stephen gave me the tools to do this and was able to get me in the 'zone' so much more often than I could previously. He gave me the tools to get out of my head so that I could 100% focus on playing my A game thus maximizing my chances of doing well in the tournament."

Since those heady days Simpson has worked with several top pros, including PokerStars Team Pro **Igor Kurganov**, and his experiences have been crunched down into his first book on the subject: **Poker Genius: The Mind Secret of Champions**.

So let us have it, Dr. Simpson. Are [poker players getting smarter each time they sit down to play a game of poker](#)? Can the parents of poker-crazed teenagers take a chill pill?

Poker, Myelin and Neuroplasticity

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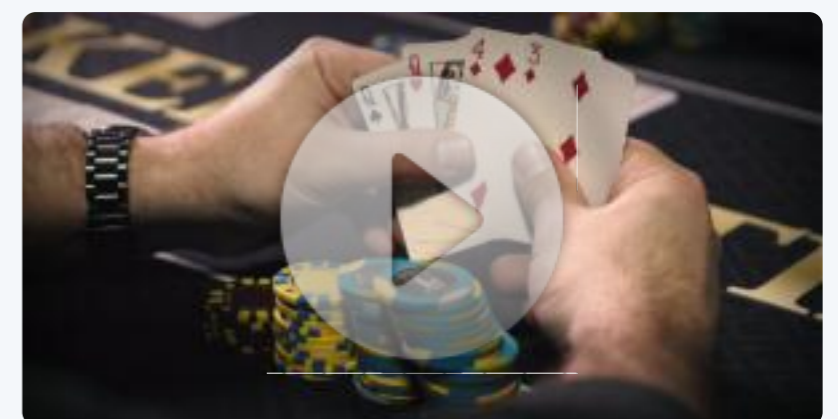
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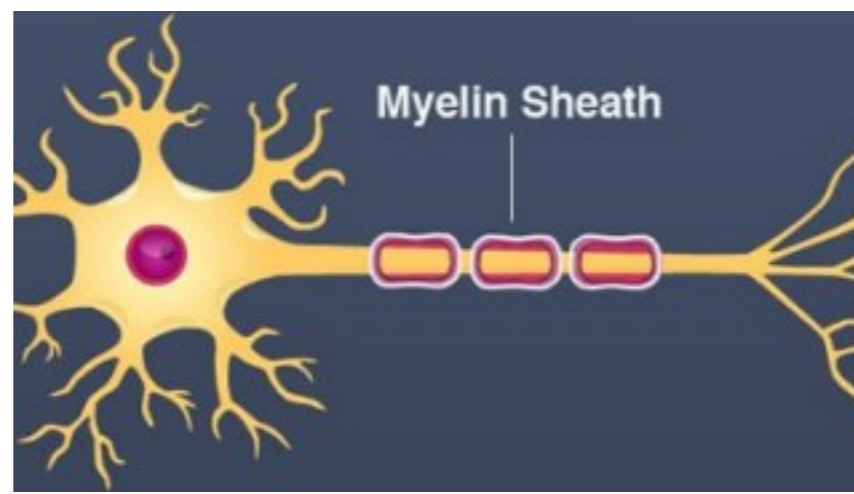
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"When we perform any activity consistently new neural pathways are created," says Dr. Simpson. "The nerve fibres are surrounded by a myelin sheath.



"This protects and nourishes the nerve cell. The more often impulses are transmitted through this network, the thicker the myelin sheath becomes. This is called myelination.

"A good analogy is a copper wire. The thicker it is the faster it will conduct electricity, and so it is with a myelin sheath."



So the more we play poker, the more myelin we create. But what good does that do?

"When we spend a lot of time using a small number of neural pathways," Simpson says, "brain cells have the ability to transform from performing one function to another.



"Extra brain cells are recruited to these pathways from other functional areas."

Ok, so the brain is not fixed from birth. It can change dependent on our knowledge and understanding of information and experiences. And we call this process **neuroplasticity**.

So how do poker players benefit from this? I asked Dr Simpson to describe some of the skills and expertise he sees in his clients on a regular basis.

"The poker players who come to see me work very hard at their game," said Dr Simpson. "They are very highly committed and I worry sometimes they may devote so much time to poker that they risk not having much time left over for the other areas of their life.

"They also have high levels of focus and concentration, and this is tested to the limit during the long hours of competition play. Also, by necessity, they have learned to deal with serial failure and the dreaded tilt. As you know, they have only a 15% chance of making any money in a live event.

"The very best players have learned how to control their emotions. They avoid the big emotional swings from elation to despair that can occur during a single hand.

"The ideal mindset would be emotion-neutral which is probably impossible. However, the closer you can reach this state of mind the more able you will be to access your mental and physical resources when required.

"They also develop their intuition skills to a high-level. Intuition by definition is intangible. The harder you work to try and find it the more elusive it becomes."

"I Use EV and GTO in Everything I Do"

So how do these skills then translate into everyday life? I reached out to two exceptional talents to gauge opinion.

"Poker has helped improve my overall decision making substantially," says **RunItOnce** founder, **Phil Galfond**, "which impacts nearly every aspect of my life.

"Learning to look at average outcomes (EV) and to avoid results-oriented thinking should be prerequisites for adulthood. While you can learn these concepts without playing a hand of poker, I believe that no other method is as effective."

A bold statement. Can anyone back that up?



No better way than poker, says Phil.

"I try to use EV and GTO in everything I do," says former PocketFives World #1 and **partypoker**

"For example, if I've been to London for the day and I can take a train or taxi home, and the taxi is 3x more expensive, the normal muggle would think the train was +EV.

"But in reality the taxi, where I can write an article/catch up on emails/watch a training video, to me is clearly the GTO option. People in the world completely undervalue their time."

Boundary is Narrow

But is there a downside to all of this poker? Dr. Simpson noted that "I worry sometimes they may devote so much time to poker."

World Poker Tour (WPT) Champions Club member, **Chanracy Khun**, illustrates Dr Simpson's point.

"There is a downside to playing so much poker," says Khun. "I think most of the [online guys who multi-table a lot](#) develop some kind of ADD that we didn't have before playing, making it hard to focus on a single task without getting bored.

"Most of my peers and I have a hard time focusing on a single/redundant task, like staying focused in a live tournament, without checking our phone; getting organized with our time, being able not to lose stuff, etc."

I asked Dr Simpson what he thought of Khun's comments:

"If we are deeply committed to a single activity which we enjoy it can become obsessive or even compulsive," he says. "When this activity carries a reward this reinforces the behaviour, so creating a vicious circle.

"So [playing on multiple tables increases the number of pleasurable reinforcing hits](#), therefore strengthening the compulsion. Playing on one table at a time will consequently never be as stimulating as multi-tabling for the obsessive player.

"The boundary between compulsion and addiction is a narrow one and all players should be aware of the risks. Once poker becomes an addictive behaviour it makes little difference whether it is rewarding or not.

"The behaviour will still continue in the face of mounting losses and the serious personal consequences that can result."

Reach Out to Others

So, what I am learning here is [there are some tremendous benefits from playing poker](#) as the more we play, the more myelin is produced around our nerve cells.

This is a good thing because it allows our learning to accelerate until we eventually master it.

The myelination process created by poker also quickens our responsiveness and skills sets in all the ways that Dr Simpson finds in his clients, and in 'everyday life' as Phil Galfond and Patrick Leonard demonstrates.

But we need to be careful because there is a fine line between the necessity of mastery and the fall into addiction and compulsive behaviour as recognized by Khun and his peers.

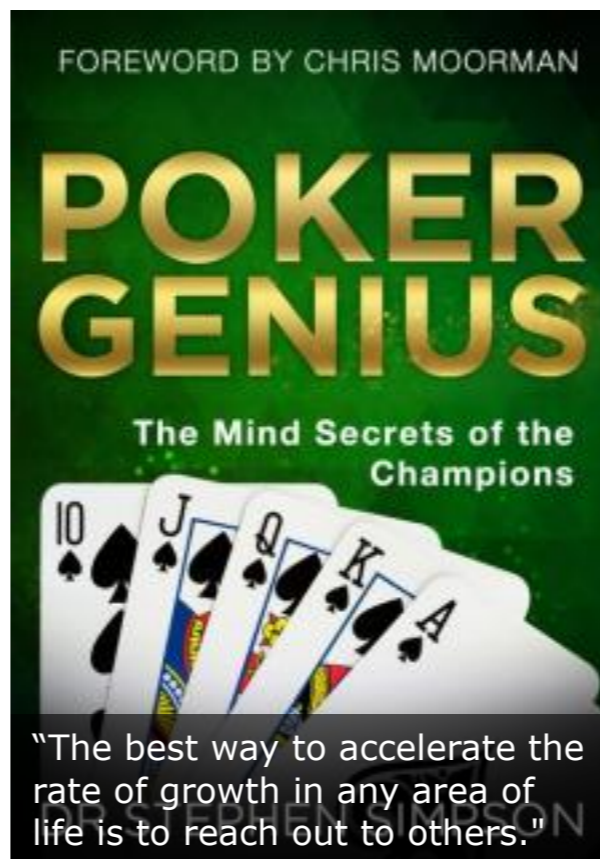
So, if you are a recreational poker player reading this, what should you take away from it? I give the final word to Dr Simpson.

"The best way to accelerate the rate of growth in any area of life is to reach out to others. This is why elite performers have coaches, and why coaches themselves also have coaches. It takes so much longer to learn from your own mistakes."

If you want to increase your myelin, find a wing and climb under it. If you are going to pack it all in to travel the world playing poker, make sure you have a cracking coach.

Like Phil Galfond, Patrick Leonard or Dr. Stephen Simpson.

Click [here](#) to buy a copy of Dr Stephen Simpson's new book Poker Genius.



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