“Complexity,” the Alloways insist, “is the archenemy of achievement.” To give the working memory “a smart way” to achieve goals, they recommend that goals should be “whittled down to a few words, such as Sales Manager.” They advise older adults not to retire, because it is “inevitable” that those who stop working, stop thinking: “The sooner you retire, the sooner you will struggle to put two and two together, the sooner your keys will end up in the ice cube tray, and the sooner you will put yourself at risk for dementia.”

The book loses its focus, moreover, when the Alloways sketch out their “Wutopia,” where city streets, airports, work spaces, schools, and homes are laid out with working memory in mind, and take readers on a journey to “the dawn of working memory,” to track structural changes in the prehistoric brain (and assert that the lives of our Stone Age ancestors, which may have included “industrial-scale fishing,” “weren’t so different” from those depicted in the 1960s TV show, The Flintstones). And, I feel compelled to add, the Alloways do not enhance their credibility when they spend five pages in their book making claims for the benefits of the computer-based program they developed to enhance the spatial and mathematical skills, mental processing, and ability to focus of children and teenagers – and offering a free trial of the product their company sells.

The Working Memory Advantage is at its best—and its best is very good—when the Alloways provide exercises to stretch working memory. They counsel parents to limit the TV time of their kids (and eliminate it for children under two); resist entreaties to read the same story over and over and, instead, read new stories and ask questions about them; and teach...
Youth in their own right, tips for coaches have more general applications as well. While drilling athletes in a particular activity, they advise the coach to shout out its name, “Jump” or “Sprint.” When the movement has been internalized, they suggest telling them to switch to a different movement, like a “pushup,” when they hear the instruction to “Jump,” thus forcing the athletes to “use working memory to inhibit a trained response.” When teaching a new skill, the Alloways advise coaches to allocate more time to “warm-up” to “pre-fatigue players” so that they will temporarily lock down the working memory, making it “easier for the cerebellum to absorb the feeling of the athletic movements.”

If you have ever gotten lost while driving, gotten directions from a passerby (“go the second stop sign, take a left, continue for four blocks, make a right, and you’ll see a sign for Route 287”), and failed to keep all of them in your head, you know how important a robust working memory is. Tracy and Ross Alloway make a compelling case that working memory can be strengthened through “small but crucial tweaks in your daily habits.” It’s a lesson worth remembering.