

The metaphor "rat race" may soon have a more literal meaning. This is because scientists have been teaching rats to drive a tiny, purpose-built car around a laboratory. Neuroscientist Dr Kelly Lambert from the University of Richmond in the USA has been working with the car-driving rodents since 2019. Speaking to the online news agency "The Conversation," she explained that the creatures not only learned to rev the engines of their miniature vehicles, they seemed to "get a kick out of it". She said: "Unexpectedly, we found that the rats had an intense motivation for their driving training, often jumping into the car and revving the 'lever engine' before their vehicles hit the road."

Lambert's study was to explore the relationship between rats and their environments. She wanted to find out how their cognition developed, and how they processed new skills. In her tests, she placed one group of lab rats in a space that contained many toys and companions. The other test rodents were put in an area with no toys and fewer friends. Dr Lambert trained the rats to correlate driving with a sweet cereal reward. Those in the more enriched environment learned to drive faster. Dr Lambert concluded her research findings supported the idea that complex environments enhanced neuroplasticity. This is the brain's ability to form and reorganize connections in response to learning.

What do you know about these rodents? What do you want to know?

	What We Know	What We Want to Know
Rats		
Squirrels		
Beavers		
Guinea Pigs		
Capybara		
Porcupines		

Paragraph 1

1	metaphor	a.	A small animal like a mouse, rat, or squirrel that has strong, sharp teeth for biting.
2	rat race	b.	To start a journey or leave a place.
3	literal	c.	A way of describing something by saying it is something else to show how they are similar.
4	rodent	d.	Taking words in their most basic meaning, without any exaggeration or special meaning.
5	rev	e.	A situation where people work very, very hard for money, but never seem to get ahead or be happy.
6	get a kick out of	f.	To make an engine go faster, or to increase speed.
7	hit the road	g.	To enjoy something a lot or find it fun.

Paragraph 2

8	cognition	h.	A person or animal you spend time with and enjoy being with.
9	companion	i.	To have a connection or relationship with something.
10	correlate	j.	Made better or improved.
11	cereal	k.	The process of thinking, learning, and understanding things.
12	reward	l.	The brain's ability to change and grow by learning new things.
13	enhanced	m.	Something you get for doing something good or for working hard.
14	neuroplasticity	n.	A food made from grains, usually eaten with milk for breakfast.