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Time to put the all-nighter to rest: The role of recovery in performance

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Almost everyone has done it. You have a packed schedule, a series of urgent deadlines or a critical project that has to roll out flawlessly. There's just not enough time in the day to get it all done. So you find time by eliminating the non-essentials: sleep, exercise, meals and time with family and friends.

Decade by decade your overall reserves of energy drop a little. It's not that you lose the ability to rise up and push-through. It's that the hangover afterwards is worse, begins to accumulate, and lasts well into your next performance.

The research supports the notion that sheer determination alone is not a sustainable approach. When Roy Baumeister studied acts of choice he found that we have one reservoir of will and discipline, and it is depleted by any act of conscious self-regulation. For example, participants who were required to resist eating fresh baked chocolate cookies for 5 minutes before tackling an unsolvable puzzle gave up 60% sooner than those did not have to exercise willpower in advance.

RECOVER TO PERFORM

How about you? Does the grind it out approach truly bring out consistent high performance in you? Or do you notice a cumulative lingering impact: low energy, lack of creativity, susceptibility to distractions, reactivity, impatience and a more negative outlook than what is normal for you?

Performance differences that might have looked like differences in skill or choking under pressure were in fact the result of superior recovery routines.

If you are open to another approach, the solution is relatively simple. It allows veteran performers to keep pace with youngsters well past the point where others of their vintage have begun to slow down. But it requires a shift in mindset. It requires that you value and pay as much attention to recovery as you do to preparation and performance - viewing your performances as a series of sprints rather than one long marathon.



When Sport Psychologist Jim Loehr studied top ranked tennis players to understand what factors differentiated the top competitors from the rest of the pack he could detect almost no significant differences in their competitive habits during points. It was only when he began to notice what they did between points that he suddenly saw a difference. While most of them were not aware of it, the best players had each built almost exactly the same set of routines between points. These included the way they walked back to the baseline after a point; how they held their heads and shoulders; where they focused their eyes; the pattern of their breathing; and even the way they talked to themselves. These players had learned to use the time between points to maximize their recovery. Lower-ranked competitors had no recovery routines at all.

When Loehr hooked up the top players to EKG telemetry, which allowed him to monitor their heart rates, he made another startling discovery. In the sixteen to twenty seconds between points in a match, the heart rates of top competitors dropped as much as twenty beats per minute. By building highly efficient and focused recovery routines, these players had found a way to derive extraordinary energy renewal in a very short period of time. Because lesser competitors had no comparable routines between points, their heart rates often remained at high levels throughout their matches regardless of their level of fitness. The performance consequences began to show late in the match when errors resulting from physical fatigue, mental distraction and negative emotions began to pile up. Performance differences that might have looked like differences in skill or choking under pressure were in fact the result of superior recovery routines.

YOUR 8-POINT PLAN TO RECOVER AND PERFORM

Let's take a look at what an emphasis on recovery might look like in a business environment. Here are eight ideas for building some high quality recovery into your daily routine.

- 1 CHUNK** Break up your day, project or tasks into blocks of 90 minutes or less. One interesting finding by Erickson and others into expert performers was that 'experts' slept longer at night than other performers and their practice sessions never went longer than 90 minutes without a significant break. This suggests that great performers don't just work longer; they work more intensely and recover more fully.
- 2 BREATHE** Breathing is a unique activity in that touches upon both the sympathetic and parasympathic nervous systems. It is both voluntary (under our control) and automatic. Proper breathing releases tension, provides energy, calms emotions and clears the mind. The key is to do it properly, the way you did when you were born: deeply, fully, from the belly and with the exhale at least as long as the inhale. A pause to take 7 'natural' breathes takes less than a minute.
- 3 RESPOND** Your body will tell you what it needs. But many of us have gotten into the habit of tuning-out or over-riding the messages. Eat when hungry, drink when thirsty, move or stretch when feeling tight. Survival experts agree that children lost in the wilderness survive longer than adults because they take care of immediate needs. Adults are more likely to push through and build up an energy debt that creates compounding consequences. Six mini-breaks of less than three minutes sprinkled throughout your day to respond to physical requests from yourself can avoid massive payback at the end of the day. NB. "I want a chocolate covered donut" is expressing a 'want' not a 'need'.
- 4 AVOID** Try to reduce your consumption of sugar and items that quickly convert to glucose in the body, such as; bread, baked goods, rice and pasta. These items create an energy spike followed by a crash and lingering energy recession. And the impact of constantly flooding your body with insulin promotes weight gain and systemic inflammation, something linked to nearly every adult disease.

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- 5 MOVE** Brain expert Dr. John Medina points out that our 'thinking brain' developed while we, as a species, were doing a lot of walking. Thinking was meant to be an activity done while moving. Exercise zaps harmful stress chemicals, boosts problem-solving and attention and cuts our risk of dementia in half. Take the stairs. Park further away. Take the long route to a meeting. Get a stand-up desk and do some emails while standing. Get a wireless headset and do some pacing around while you make some calls. It's not about training for triathlons. It's about incorporating more movement.
- 6 SMILE** Or if possible, laugh. Don't force it, but don't fight it either. You can take your task seriously without taking yourself seriously. Humour is not only a huge energizer, research has documented its numerous health benefits as well. Find a quick and easy way to bring a natural smile to your face. Subscribe to a daily cartoon. Read a page or two from a humorous book. Develop a network of people that make you laugh and spend a few minutes talking to them in person, over the phone or via email.
- 7 TAKE LUNCH** Tony Schwartz, founder of the Energy Project points out that in many companies we have adopted the notion of 'the working lunch'. But are we really getting more done? It doesn't have to be a full hour. Just give yourself a dedicated chunk of time when you can mentally close the door on work, relax your focus and possibly regain mental/emotional energy by doing something you really enjoy; going for a walk, reading a book or socializing with a friend.
- 8 THANK SOMEONE** Of all the emotions, the one most connected with spirituality, positive outlook and long term health is gratitude. In every religion, every culture, every discipline (i.e. yoga) there is a mechanism built-in to remind people to exercise gratitude. Create a simple daily ritual to call to mind someone who has lightened your load in some way and let them know. And be sure to let yourself know each day those things for which you are grateful.

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