

Forget Time Management – Manage Your Energy Instead

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Time. There never seems to be enough of it and nobody is making any more. Fifty years ago, people thought the professionals of today would have an easy life where everything was automated, everyone zipped around in jet cars, and the use of computers make people capable of completing the average workday in only a few hours. They looked to the future and thought how lucky working men and women would be.

Unfortunately, their visions were only partially correct. Although people are not cruising in jet cars, computers and automation *have* contributed to a more productive society. But the unexpected side effect of that more productive society has been a demand for even more results. People today are expected to work longer, harder, and faster than ever before, but the number of hours available in the day remains the same. How do people manage their energy levels so they can meet the needs of their demanding professional lives and still have something left to fuel their personal interests?

The answer may lie within the human body itself. One thing any time management course overlooks is the actual struggle people have managing their own energy. Instead of cutting out important work or life events, people can manage their energy levels through a combination of proper attention to physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs.

Think of Yourself as a Corporate Athlete

Athletes condition themselves to have their highest energy levels available when it is time to perform. Regular people might not think of themselves as athletes, but they can still borrow those performance methodologies and apply them to their own lives. The motivations for improved energy levels may be different, but the overriding principles remain the same.

People must rethink the way they exert energy throughout the day. Just as people go through different cycles as they sleep, the same is true during waking hours. Tony Schwarz, president and founder of the Energy Project in New York City, and Catherine McCarthy, senior vice president of the Energy Project, published this theory in the October 2007 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. They asserted that “energy can be systematically expanded and regularly renewed by establishing specific rituals – behaviors that are intentionally practiced and precisely scheduled, with the goal of making them unconscious and automatic as quickly as possible.”

What does this mean? People need to incorporate regular breaks into the day to allow their bodies a chance to renew energy reserves. The body will generally send signals when it is time to take a break – such as yawning or difficulty in concentrating. The average energy cycle needs a recovery phase every 90 minutes to two hours. Avoid sitting at a work station. Some ideas include going for a walk, making a trip to the company gym, visiting with co-workers about something non-work-related, stopping by the employee break room for a drink and a few minutes of reading, or even taking a brief nap.

Researchers are starting to recognize what children have known for years – there’s nothing like a good nap to help the body recharge. A study conducted by the Federal Aviation Administration’s Civil Aeromedical Institute and the US Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory had air traffic controllers working the midnight shift divide

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into test groups and exposed them to varying nap periods. Results showed that groups exposed to naps of any length performed better than those with no nap at all.

Naps ward off sleepiness during the day. They reduce feelings of stress, increase alertness, and revitalize energy levels, making employees more productive. The best time to take a nap is in the early afternoon when people begin to feel the effects of an afternoon slump. Find a dark, quiet place with a comfortable temperature and relax, but do not oversleep. Oversleeping can lead to a hangover effect with a decreased energy level.

For those who find napping unrealistic, there are other physical options for increasing energy levels. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, as well as the number of capillaries in the cerebellum and cerebral cortex, two areas of the brain crucial to intelligence. Not only can exercise make people more alert, it can actually make them smarter. People can start a successful exercise routine by wearing a pedometer to track miles walked per day (aim for 3.5 miles at a minimum), taking the stairs instead of the elevator, turning fitness into a competition with others, or by going to a gym at the same scheduled time every day to create a new, healthy habit.

Eating and drinking properly is standard advice, but no less important because of that. Eat several small meals a day to keep blood sugar stabilized. Low blood sugar levels have been linked to feelings of fatigue. Drink six to eight glasses of water a day. A well-hydrated body absorbs nutrients better, efficiently transports nutrients and oxygen into cells, stabilizes body temperature, increases metabolism, and lubricates muscles and joints. Drinking water also aids in detoxification, flushing waste products from the body and boosting the immune system. Low iron levels can cause symptoms such as fatigue, weakness, and mental fogginess, too, so having a doctor run some simple blood work is well advised.

Control Your Emotions or They Will Control You

All human beings feel emotions. Positive emotions spark energy levels, causing people to become more engaged, to feel more focused, and to perform at a higher level. Negative emotions have the opposite effect. They stimulate adrenal glands to release the stress hormone cortisol, which, when released into the bloodstream can actually damage muscle tissue.

What can people do to increase positive emotions, and in return, their energy levels? One can focus on finding something that sparks an interest or passion and pursue it whenever possible. With inspiration comes positive emotion. Angry emotions can be toxic, so control those by using anger management techniques such as controlled breathing or counting. Leave worries behind by compartmentalizing them. Set aside a time and place during the day for focusing on worries. Be optimistic. Don't automatically infer the negative. Investigate the facts before coming to a conclusion. Keep a journal to track internal triggers for positive and negative emotions so they are easier to recognize.

External factors can also change emotions. Be open-minded and less critical of others. Set a goal of complimenting someone else at least once a day. Listen to music that is relaxing and distracting. As Beethoven so eloquently stated, "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy." After music has calmed their souls, people need to focus on the relationships around them. The emotional state of personal lives directly relates to the attitudes in professional ones.

Mind Over Matter

People possess amazing minds that are capable of amazing things, but sometimes these highly advanced organs need a little redirecting to work efficiently. The human mind uses physical and emotional energy to focus on

tasks. If the mind has trouble focusing, this energy is wasted, and tasks are left unfinished. Lack of focus dissipates energy.

Several techniques can be implemented to increase mental focus. First, approach tasks one at a time. The term “multi-tasking” is a common buzzword in the corporate world, but it is misleading. The human brain is only able to focus on one task at a time. The rest is just distraction and noise. Prioritize tasks and tackle them in order of importance. Break down larger projects into smaller, more manageable pieces. Visualizing positive outcomes increases the likelihood that they will be achieved.

If distraction is an issue, employ meditation techniques whenever noise intrudes. Find places to work where the likelihood of interruptions is diminished. Give others one hundred percent attention when they need it, but create specific barriers between work and home, and maintain them. Only check email at specified times during the day. Work on low-demand tasks on Monday when your energy levels are ramping up for the week, address challenging projects mid-week when your energy levels are at their highest, and save less-intensive projects for Fridays, when your energy levels are typically beginning to wane.

The Conquering of Self

The human spirit is not about religious beliefs. Spirituality involves the mind and body connection. All humans are spiritual on some level. The spiritual influence on energy revolves around values and having a sense of purpose.

Values can motivate people to achieve their goals, add focus to the work they do, and create a determination to get things done. People must first define what is important to them. If spending time with family is high on their value list, they need to work that time into their schedule, or they will never feel complete. Perhaps the value involves helping others succeed. This person may want to become involved in a mentoring program or do volunteer work. Once values are recognized as needs, and those needs are addressed, people will find themselves less preoccupied and more energized.

Once values are defined, they can help people develop a plan for achieving their sense of purpose. If helping others is a value, practicing random acts of kindness for other can give someone a sense of purpose. If integrity is a value, working hard to do the right thing every day can give someone a sense of purpose. If a certain profession brings value, pursuing the job that one feels a real passion for can give a person a sense of purpose. Values and a sense of purpose are something people can only define for themselves, but once realized by, create an awakening of the mind and soul that lead to more energy.

None of the techniques or advice offered above will work unless the person using them is truly open to change. Use them as a guide, but realize that they can be modified to fit an individual’s lifestyle or personal situation. No twelve-step program exists that can create perfect energy boosters for everyone, but by focusing on signals given by the body and mind, the right combination of ingredients can usually be achieved.