



Energize your mind

It's Monday morning and you're facing another busy and stressful week at work. You're having trouble concentrating, you're making mistakes, you've dropped your pen at least four times, you can't make sense of the latest sales figures and you're getting nothing done. It feels like your brain is still asleep!

Your brain is not asleep, it is probably tired. Heavy workloads, long hours, and the pressure to excel can take their toll. Even working on a difficult project for several hours can dull your thought processes. Fortunately, there are ways to keep your mind energized and ready to tackle whatever work or life throws your way.

Minding your body

What we do to help our bodies perform well will also keep our brains functioning well. This includes:

- **A balanced diet.** Having a diet that includes plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats and at least two servings of fish per week, especially those rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, such as mackerel, sardines, herring, tuna, and wild salmon. Omega-3 fats promote new brain cell formation and reduce brain inflammation. If you don't like fish, try adding walnuts or hemp, chia or flax seeds. Also, try to limit highly processed foods and don't skip meals – especially breakfast. **Breakfast** kick-starts your metabolism and your brain.
- **Activity.** Finding the time to incorporate enough activity into our busy schedule can be problematic for many of us. Adults aged 18-64 years should accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity every week. No time for the gym? A brisk walk at lunch, a Saturday bike ride or gardening will do the trick.

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- **Drink plenty of water.** Dehydration decreases mental alertness and our ability to concentrate. Depending on the climate and our activity level and health, we need between nine to thirteen cups of water a day. Sounds like a lot, but consuming plenty of fruits and vegetables can provide about 20 percent of your total water intake.
- **Get enough sleep.** Lack of quality sleep slows down our thought processes, leading to reduced alertness and concentration, impaired judgement and slower reactions. Research suggests that the nerve connections that make our memories are strengthened during sleep and that the different phases of sleep play different roles in consolidating new information into memories. If your sleep is cut short or disrupted, it interferes with these cycles. Lack of sleep also causes irritability and lessens our ability to cope with stress. Adults need between seven to nine hours of uninterrupted sleep a night.

Minding your mind

There are tactics we can use that not only help keep our minds sharp but also support good mental health. Some suggestions include:

- **Build resilience.** We're less likely to feel mentally overwhelmed or exhausted when we have the ability face challenges, cope with disruptive change or catastrophe and rebound from setbacks. While some people seem to be naturally resilient thanks to a combination of temperament and upbringing, most of us have to build our resilience.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness is learning to listen to what our minds and bodies are telling us or how we're hurting ourselves with self-criticism or unhealthy behaviours. It's about "being" instead of "doing". Some people find that meditation or prayer helps them bring their minds into the present moment; others practice breathing exercises, listen to soothing music, read a book or quietly drink some tea and simply relax.
- **Be positive.** Negativity drains our energy. As much as possible, surround yourself with people who radiate positivity, support you and have similar interests.
- **Find time for fun.** During times of stress or perceived threat, our bodies release a hormone called cortisol that gives us a burst of energy and strength. However, prolonged periods of chronic stress means continued high levels of cortisol which can damage the hippocampus, the area of the brain responsible for learning and memory. It's important to give your brain time off. Pursue your hobbies, play sports, go to the movies, volunteer and spend time with family and friends. Try your best to take your annual allotted vacation time - even if that means just staying at home and enjoying family time.

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- **Take breaks.** Our minds are wired to need a break about every two hours. Ensuring you take regular breaks will help you maintain your mental focus and energy throughout the day. Studies show that taking a 10-minute walk boosts our energy levels for up to two hours!

If lifestyle changes are not helping and you continue to feel mentally or physically drained, check in with your family physician to rule out any underlying medical condition such as anemia, thyroid problems or sleep apnea. Some medications can also cause physical and mental fatigue. For more information on energizing your mind and body, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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