- Rest



'Even a five-minute break every hour improves wellbeing and performance.'

'Remember to take breaks that are actually restful. It's all too easy to eat at your desk or check emails on your phone.'

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READY, STEADY, *rest!*

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So often we wish for more hours in the day, because having more hours would mean more time spent getting things done, and it's all productivity, right? But while you probably feel you need to get your foot back down hard on that pedal to meet September head on, what if I told you what you actually need to do to enhance your productivity is to... Do absolutely nothing.

By **YASMINA FLOYER**

Nada. Zip. Zilch. At least for a little while. Feels counter-intuitive, right? How can not doing anything — actively pausing, and stepping away from our mountain of tasks — equate to an increase in productivity in completing said mountain of tasks? Surely, by spending less time on the things we would like to achieve, we will get less done? It's simple maths, surely?

It turns out, in fact, that being mindful about what we do, and how we recharge our batteries with rest, can be a game changer.

The problem is, we are used to the idea of 'powering through' task after task, keeping our heads down and plugging away, imagining rest to be an exotic, hard-to-reach destination that exists on the other side of a series of items checked off our to-do list. This positions the idea of rest as an indulgence at best and as laziness at worst, since it becomes something that we feel that we can opt out of and relegate to an undefined point in the future, rather than viewing it as core to our wellbeing, a necessary action we must take when our bodies and minds signal it is time to pause. We typically don't view rest as a necessity, which is why we need to acknowledge the consequences of ignoring it.

'Not resting can impact on us physically, ›

'When we're tired, the brain will fall into old habits and patterns, making changes or initiating new behaviours or tasks increasingly difficult.'

cognitively and emotionally,' says psychologist and author Dr Emma Hepburn. 'When our brains are tired, this can impact on more cognitively demanding tasks which require executive function, such as maintaining and shifting attention, inhibiting responses, decisions making, planning and problem solving.

'The brain will also fall into tasks or routines that are less effortful, so we may fall into old habits or patterns, and making changes or initiating new behaviours or tasks can be increasingly difficult.'

Burning the candle at both ends

When it comes to how a lack of rest impacts us emotionally, she says this can happen in several ways. 'It is stressful for your brain to keep on going without the energy it requires, so this creates more stress for your body, which in the long term impacts on you physically and how you feel emotionally.'

She points out how we can also become more irritable and less tolerant, and we may also have difficulty inhibiting our responses to emotions, so we may react in ways or say things we wouldn't normally do or say. We all know how much more difficult it is to remain patient the more tired we become, and how much harder it becomes to block negativity.

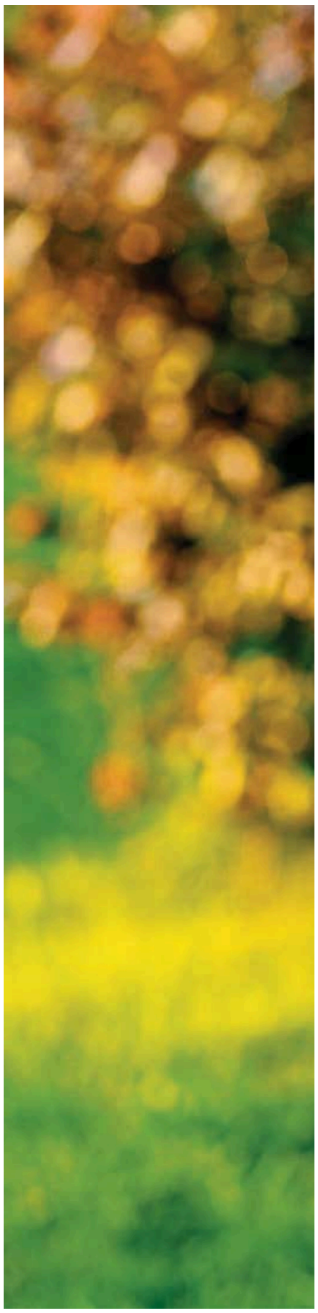
But while it can be easy to tell when we are physically tired, it can be way more difficult to spot when we are cognitively weary. The idea of burning the candle at both ends has become shorthand for sacrificing sleep in order to get things done, but, ultimately, the best way to get things done is to rest our brains, and the best way to do that is to sleep. 'It is also the time that the caretaker cells in our brain get working mopping up debris, which is why good sleep leads to improved cognitive function both short and long term, as well as improved mood,' she explains.

I used to think that persistence was the key to solving a problem, yet I have found the opposite to be true. Sometimes the very thing I need to do in order to get something done is to step away from it. How many of us to relate to having our best ideas come to us in the shower, or when we are out walking the dog? I tend to be inundated with creative ideas whenever I take a holiday. Dr Hepburn says there's good reason for this. 'During rest, your brain can consolidate what it has learned and make links between what you are doing and other information in your brain, so it can remember this better and use this information more effectively.'

So, if 'pumping the breaks' is the thing we need to maximise productivity, what small steps can we take begin to integrate rest into their lives? If you are anything like me, knowing exactly how to take a rest when a natural pause appears might be enough of a challenge, let alone knowing how to make room for the sort of rest that will sustain your output. Dr Hepburn advises us that preplanning breaks can be an effective way to start, for example deciding that you will work 40 minutes then take a ten-minute break. 'There's strong evidence that even taking just a five-minute break every hour improves wellbeing and performance.'

No more multitasking

The key thing to remember is to take breaks that are actually restful, since we all too often fall into the trap of sneaking in other tasks while supposedly taking time out, like eating lunch at our computer (guilty!) or checking emails on our phone. 'This keeps us in



'A cup of tea looking round my flowers in the garden is both restful and enjoyable.'

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switched-on mode and doesn't actually let our brain switch off,' says Dr Hepburn. 'An effective break might be getting away from your desk or taking a few minutes to do something you enjoy, going for a quick walk, or stretching, doing some yoga moves. I like a cup of tea looking round my flowers in the garden, which is both restful and enjoyable. Naps can also be effective, and so can just shutting your eyes for a few minutes. It's about doing something that helps you switch off from the tasks you are doing, is restful and recharges your energy.'

Because ultimately, why should we feel that we must complete all our tasks under a shroud of tiredness? I am realising we won't be rewarded for our effort. Nobody will come along and congratulate us for having done all these things without taking a moment to ourselves. Perhaps we will get things done, but we will also likely be closer to burnout, in which case, we won't be getting anything done for the foreseeable future!

So, next time your to-do list is long, your plate is full and you're trying to figure out the mental arithmetic of when and how you will get everything done, try factoring a decent rest into the equation. It might not seem like it at first, but it will likely help you do better, and, even more importantly, feel better. ■

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Dr Emma Hepburn

Dr Emma Hepburn is a clinical psychologist, lecturer, author and illustrator. She has over 20 years experience of working with mental health and wellbeing. Her passion is making science-based information engaging and accessible through her writing and illustration. She has written three books, most recently *A Toolkit For Your Emotions* (Quercus, £14.99).

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