- Mind and body

Are you all out of oomph?

When your get-up-and-go has got up and gone, lean in and listen to your body and mind, writes Stephanie Fitzgerald

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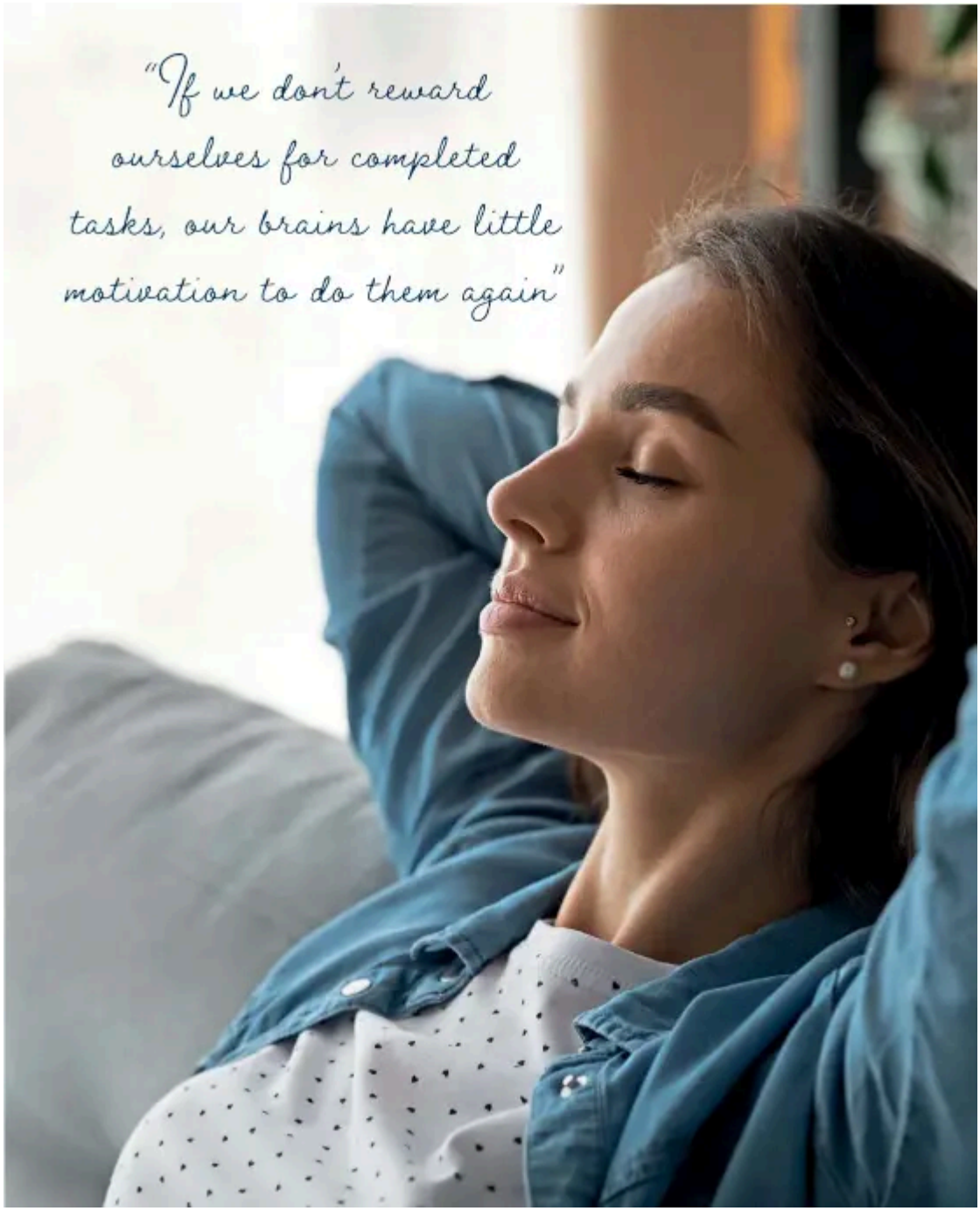
Lean in and listen to what your body is trying to tell you



We all have those days when we're out of energy. The to-do list is never ending but, seemingly, our motivation is not. There's plenty we want to do, yet somehow we can't bring ourselves to get started. Even plans that seem fun can become a bit of a bind. We're not depressed, or stressed, we're just out of oomph, and unsure how to re-start the engines.

There can be any number of reasons why we lose our pizazz and, although frustrating, we need to recognise that this enforced slow-down is actually a protective mechanism of the brain. Our bodies and minds are intensely clever and attuned to our needs, even when we aren't. When we experience a challenge, but push on through it, our brains deliberately reduce our motivation to continue, in order to force us to confront what is happening.

This cause could be a physical issue that needs addressing – fatigue from a virus that we worked through instead of resting; a vitamin deficiency caused by a diet high in convenience but low in nutrition; or just a plain old lack of sleep. When we feel unable to jump into action, our body is saying 'Pay attention to me; I need something!'

But it doesn't just apply to physical health. Our brains are designed to keep us safe at all times and, as such,

are alert to threat. If we've been pushing on with a task or a situation whilst ignoring a gut feeling that something isn't quite right, then our brains will reduce our zeal and hold off committing to action until we figure out what's wrong. When we're struggling to get going, it could be that our brain knows something is off.

Sarah Bostock, an experienced personal and professional coach, tells me that when something doesn't align with our values, we quickly lose vitality: 'Purpose and motivation connect to our ideals. If we can see the reason for our actions and how it aligns with our needs, then that brings with it a sense of drive. Our oomph is connected to how visible that sense of purpose is to us. When we dip in energy, it's often because we don't feel connected to the things that matter most to us.'

This is why, whilst it can be tempting to try to remedy our mood with action, it won't help us feel better. In fact, Bostock warns that ignoring how we feel, and driving ourselves forwards, may make us feel worse. We need to understand what has led to our lack of vivacity in order to get it back.

'It's helpful to sit with that uncomfortable feeling, as it can start to stir something in us,' advises Bostock. 'That in itself may evoke a change in direction that can help us find a renewed sense of energy.' So,

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rather than ploughing on, Bostock tells us to explore our feelings further. 'If we can sit with knowing that we don't have our mojo right now and be curious about it, rather than engage in negative self-talk, then we can understand what's underneath this feeling, which in turn will tell us what we need to do'.

The self-talk comment hits home hard. I know I am not alone in feeling frustrated and cross with myself when I cannot find my motivation. So I ask Bostock why it is that we aren't nicer to ourselves when we are already feeling low. 'There are blueprints of behaviour that we applaud,' says Bostock, 'and being low in energy is not one of these. If we don't feel we are living up to these blueprints, and constantly compare ourselves to what we feel we should be achieving, that can fuel negative self-talk. It also means we're spending what little energy we do have focusing on what we haven't done or achieved, rather than switching our focus to a more positive mindset'.

The conversation reminds me that humans are behavioural creatures, and our actions and motivations are heavily influenced by our reward systems. If we don't reward ourselves for completed tasks, then our brains have little motivation to do them again. Imagine your boss asked you to work late every night to complete a project, then didn't offer you thanks. How excited would you be to do the same again? We need to celebrate the wins along the way to ensure that we are constantly replenishing motivation. These rewards don't need to be big or expensive. Treating ourselves to a break with a cuppa, or dancing to our favourite song, can be enough to boost our brain and replenish our enthusiasm. The more we do it, the more oomph we build, giving us a store for the future.

Given that our mood and energy constantly fluctuate, then, how can we protect ourselves and notice the dips before we feel completely out of oomph? 'Discipline' was not quite the compassionate response I was expecting to this question, but Bostock describes the importance of building good habits when we are well, in order to protect us when we are feeling lower in energy. 'We want to soothe our inner critic by being our own cheerleader. Building a discipline of regular practices that support our energy, and making time for daily reflection, protects us from running out of oomph'.

If you're reading this when your energy is already low, seek out the company of others. Sometimes we feel that, unless we are on sparkling form, we shouldn't be around others in case we bring the mood down, but Bostock reminds us: 'We can get a lot of energy from others. We can have a thinking partner, who we can bounce ideas off. It doesn't mean you immediately have to do something, but talking about it can stop us feeling stagnant, helping us to feel positive about the future.'

If your oomph is so low that you are struggling to get out of bed, then spend some time today daydreaming about what you will do when you have your energy back. Reminding our brains that this is temporary – that we will have energy again, and that we will be doing more in the future – can make us feel happier and more optimistic, which in turn lifts our energy.

It's okay to be out of oomph every now and then. Trust your brain and body; they know what they are doing. Show yourself kindness and patience, and tune in to what's happening for you right now. Once you know what it is that you need, you can get excited for when you get back your get-up-and-go.