

The Role of Recovery in Performance

Time to put the all-nighter to rest. Here's an eight-point plan for incorporating high-quality recovery into your daily routine.

By Garry Watanabe

About the author

Garry Watanabe is a consultant with Performance Coaching and a session leader with Queen's Executive Development Coaching for Challenging Conversations program. Garry started his career in the competitive world of corporate law. During this time, he realized that his passion for coaching was overtaking his desire to be a lawyer. As a result, he obtained his Master's degree in Sport Psychology and sought out coaching opportunities. He spent the next 10 years as a national-level coach, first directing programs at Carleton University, then heading to Southern California to coach in the most competitive swimming environment in North America. He now focuses on applying the principles of coaching, mental fitness, and communications to a wider range of performers in his work with Performance Coaching.

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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.

Research supports the notion that sheer determination alone is not a sustainable approach. When social psychologist 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 five minutes before tackling an unsolvable puzzle gave up 60 percent sooner than those did not have to exercise willpower in advance.

What about you? Does the "grind it out" approach truly bring out in you consistent high performance? 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?

If you are open to adopting 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 to preparation and performance — viewing your performance 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 detected almost no significant differences in their habits during competitive play. It was only when he noticed 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.

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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 16 to 20 seconds between points in a match, the heart rates of top competitors dropped as much as 20 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 researchers studying 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.

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2. BREATHE

Breathing is a unique activity that touches on both the sympathetic and parasympathetic 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 seven “natural” breaths takes less than one minute.

3. RESPOND

Your body will tell you what it needs. But many of us are in 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 within yourself can avoid massive payback at the end of the day. Note: “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. The impact of constantly flooding your body with insulin promotes weight gain and systemic inflammation, linked to nearly every adult disease

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 write emails while standing. Get a wireless headset and pace while making telephone 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. Surround yourself with people who 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 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, there is a built-in mechanism to remind people to express gratitude. Create a simple daily ritual of calling to mind someone who has lightened your load in some way and let them know. And be sure to remind yourself each day of those things for which you are grateful.

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