

**Session 4: Energy**

People talk about managing their time better but what they should be talking about is managing their energy. There are 24 hours in every day, that is a finite resource that you cannot increase or decrease. Energy, however, is a more critical resource and it is within your control. Just investing time in something does not guarantee a result. I don’t know about you, but I can easily fritter away an hour or more! Investing energy is different. When I invest energy, things get done.

As demands increase, our natural response is to try to work harder and longer. But that can be self-defeating because the longer we work, the more easily we are distracted and as we get increasingly tired, our thinking slows down and deteriorates in quality.

The answer is NOT increasing the time we spend on tasks, but rather increasing our capacity for applying energy to the task. With an increase in capacity, it is possible to get more done in less time with a higher level of engagement and quality. That sounds like a better recipe for success than just putting in the hours!

We all understand that we can’t just withdraw money from our bank account. We have deposit money too or there won’t be anything to withdraw. It’s the same with your energy. You need to engage in behaviors that allow you to renew your energy. That begins with taking care of our physical needs. Junk food, a lack of exercise, eating at your desk instead of taking a break, and a lack of sleep are all going to impact the quantity and quality of the energy available for meeting your daily demands. Building rituals to address these energy depleting behaviors is an essential first step towards getting more done. Eating foods that fuel your body, exercising to strengthen your muscles, and getting enough sleep are not just nice ideas, they are critical to the process of energy renewal, but even as important as they are, they are not enough.

To truly have the energy you need to be at your peak performance, to reach your goals, to achieve those things that are important to you, you need to take brief but regular breaks throughout the day. Your body naturally cycles from a high-energy state in a physiological trough. This cycling is called ultradian rhythms and they occur every 90-120 minutes. Toward the end of each cycle, your body craves a period of recovery. You will begin feeling restless, you might yawn, notice a feeling of hunger and concentrating becomes more difficult. If you just ignore these signals and keep working, your energy reservoir wears down and the quantity and quality of your work deteriorates.

If, instead, you take intermittent short breaks, you can renew your energy and achieve more sustainable, better-quality performance. The good news is, these breaks don’t have to be very long but if you take them at regular intervals, you can sustain a high quality of energy throughout the day. Just a few minutes at a time in which you disengage from your work is all that you need. This recovery break can be as simple as getting up to talk to a colleague, listening to music, or walking up and down stairs.

Of course, using a recovery break to engage in mindful breathing would be a great option! Breaks tend to be counterintuitive to our culture that emphasizes the work ethic but, if you want to be a high achiever, or at the very least, meet the demands of your daily life with less stress, recovery breaks are essential. It’s time to rethink breaks. They shouldn’t be a luxury, but rather, we should recognize them as an essential tool for being at our best!

Do yourself a favor and set the alarm on your smart phone for 90 minutes and, starting today, give yourself the gift of 2–3-minute breaks throughout the day. Be sure to use some of these breaks for mindful breathing but mix it up and enjoy brief physical or social breaks, too. A brief video game or a few minutes on a simple task like filling your stapler and tidying your desk can make a big difference in your ability to concentrate when you return to your work.