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Re-energise: eat – sleep – move

Looks at the need and methodology to combine high quality movement, eating and sleeping into our working lives to improve engagement and productivity

We are privileged to live in exciting yet challenging times. As Jon Kabatt Zinn, the godfather of mindfulness said 'The only constant in life is change'. Many of us live in an 'always on' culture. The term 'work life merge' is more appropriate to many of us rather than 'work life balance'. Whilst this can provide us with significant opportunities, if not managed correctly our wellbeing and ability to perform may suffer both professionally and personally. In this article we look at the need and methodology to combine high quality movement, eating and sleeping into our working lives.

A 2013 *Wall Street Journal* survey found that 96% of our leaders experienced symptoms of burn out¹ while a separate survey found that 75% of Chinese workers' stress levels have risen in the previous year versus a global average of 48%². In Ireland, absenteeism is costing us 1.7 billion euros per annum³ whilst the cost of presenteeism has not been quantified. According to Paul Hemp of the *Harvard Business Review*⁴, presenteeism can be costlier than absenteeism and cut productivity by up to 33%. Mental health and stress are the most significant contributors to this problem for sedentary workers whereas musculo-skeletal challenges are a major cause for manual workers⁵.

So often the things we think are discretionary, such as eating, sleeping and exercising, get neglected and we slowly slip down the exhaustion funnel. It doesn't have to be so. Simple everyday behavioural changes can assist us as individuals deal with these challenges. Through facilitation of policies and culture shifts in organisations, we can assist our employees to adapt healthier behaviours and ensure organisations benefit through greater engagement and productivity. It starts with the most basic choices we make in everyday life: how we eat, drink, sleep and move.

Movement

Spending hours at our desks without taking regular breaks may result in 'sitting disease' which is counterproductive both physically and mentally⁶. Our bodies work in 'ultradian cycles' of 90 to 120 minutes during which we move from high energy into a physiological trough. Toward the end of each cycle, we experience restlessness, lack of focus and crave a break. However taking breaks is counterintuitive in many organisations' cultures and many of us continue to work through the trough, further depleting our energy and focus.

Yet to break frequently results in higher and more sustainable performance. It is possible to regain peak productivity in a few minutes once we disengage from work and switch off. Simple behavioural changes and small cultural shifts can achieve this. On an everyday basis the mere act of standing, walking to the water cooler to refill our bottle and a quick friendly chat with someone along the way will help us regain mental productivity.

So how can you **introduce the simple act of standing more into your daily routine**? Stand when you answer the phone? Stand when a colleague approaches? Set a discreet timer on your mobile phone to remind you to do some basic stretching exercises to alleviate back, neck and shoulder tension and minimise musculo-skeletal issues.

How can you facilitate policies to influence such behavioural change in your organisation? Consider standing or walking meetings; adjustable desks allowing employees alternate between sitting and standing; a DeskErcise routine; promoting the stairs as a free exercise machine.

Eating and drinking

What we put in our mouth directly affects our brains and our ability to be engaged and productive at work. Much new research has shown that there is a direct correlation between our brains and our gut. Eating every **three to four hours and snacking healthy in-between** controls our blood sugars, regulates insulin and cortisol production which assists manage energy and stress levels⁷. For the average person eating healthily daily means 5 to 7 portions of the brown starchy complex carbohydrates, 5 portions of fruit and vegetables, 3 portions of dairy for calcium and 2 portions of protein with lots of good fat coming from oily fish, nuts and vegetable oils. A little of each element anytime we eat facilitates good balance.

A portion size is roughly the size of a fist or the palm of your hand. Eat with your eyes: the greater the variety of colours on your plate the greater the mixture of minerals and vitamins. If in doubt about what is good and bad, go back to basics – keep it simple. Carbohydrate digestion begins in the mouth so it is best to eat whole fruit and vegetables with skin where possible. This often contains much of the nutrients. Juicing also extracts

the fibre which slows down the release of sugars and keeps us regular and feeling fuller for longer.

However, if you are time poor and juicing or the nutri-bullet is the only way to consume your daily intake then it is better to do this rather than miss out completely. Studies of over 80,000 individuals demonstrate that not only does our intake of fruit and vegetable promote health but also happiness⁸.

So how can you consume your recommended daily intake? Eat an apple on the way to work, snack on a banana and a handful of nuts mid-morning or mid-afternoon. How can you facilitate policies to influence such behavioural change in your organisation? Subsidise or even offer free fruit into your restaurant with a fruit of the month promotion; introduce Grow Your Own Rocket Pots; show employees how to make easy healthy nutritious smoothies, super soups and sizzling salads; consider a desk fruit drop.

Don't forget about hydration! Staying well hydrated by simply drinking water or herbal teas can minimise your risk of headaches, manage hunger pangs and keep you regular. Imbibe the benefits of water by instilling it into the daily routine: encourage a bottle on the desk policy; ensure water dispensers are widely distributed; put fresh fruit in water to add flavour.

Sleeping

Good quality sleep is fundamental to every element of our health. The average adult human being, depending on their age and activity level, needs between 7 to 8 hours sleep daily. Less than 3% of the population can survive healthily without this⁹ yet almost 40% of the Irish population do not achieve sufficient quality or quantity of sleep¹⁰. Losing 90 minutes of sleep may decrease productivity levels by one third¹¹!

So how can you get sufficient high quality sleep? Consider setting an alarm clock to start getting ready for bed to get there sooner and manage your wind down routine. Stop using phones, laptops or other devices at least an hour before bed (these emit a blue light which stops the production of melatonin the hormone needed for sleep). Make your room a technology free zone, sufficiently dark to induce melatonin. Use the bedroom only for sleep and relaxation. Finish your last main meal, as well as any vigorous exercise three hours before bedtime. If imbibing after this, try eating a high complex carbohydrate and low protein snack such as turkey on brown bread or natural yogurt, nuts and fruit, which promote melatonin production. Promote relaxation with drinks such as chamomile tea or lavender sprinkled on your pillow.

How can you facilitate the culture and policies of your organisation to ensure your employees return to work well rested, engaged and productive? Educate employees via sleep seminars, relaxation techniques and mindfulness courses. Consider relaxation rooms to promote power napping. When done correctly power napping restores productivity¹². Initiate smart work life merge technology policies which benefit both employees and the organisation, maximising professional and personal gain (for example, encourage employees to take a complete break during holidays and return refreshed (not checking mobile phone and e-mail!))

We owe it to ourselves, and our future health, to build our resilience by managing our physical, mental and emotional energy. It is our responsibility to both our employees and employers to facilitate the policies and behaviours to ensure we all live in a healthier, happier and more productive world.

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