

Productivity Through Self-Care

by Jeffrey Noethe

As the semester gets busier, the demands of classes, work, and family can quickly exceed the time available in a day. Unfortunately, many people approach time management by first cutting back on activities that are essential to personal health. These activities, which serve as the foundation for coping and resiliency, fall into five general areas: eating, sleeping, exercising, relaxing, and interacting. By neglecting these areas, we may seem to gain precious time for other demands, but we also drain our reserve of energy, which helps us use our time efficiently.

Eating includes any foods, beverages, or chemicals taken into the body, and we can enhance health and resiliency by being careful what we let in. It is easy to settle for fast foods, sweets, and other “junk foods”, but a more balanced diet will allow the body to function more efficiently. One area that is neglected by almost everyone is fluid intake. The body needs at least 64 ounces of water every day, just to stay hydrated. Even more is required for people who exercise or live in dry climates. Most people don't come close to this level and live in a state of constant dehydration, which affects the heart, nervous system, organs, and chemical processes of the body. Stress can also be exacerbated by caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol, which disrupt the body's natural self-regulating mechanisms.

Sleeping is often the first area to be sacrificed, but lack of sleep has the most immediate effects on performance. There is no universal rule for how much sleep is needed, but quality of sleep can be enhanced with some simple strategies. First, establish consistent sleep patterns. Sleeping and waking at random times leaves the body confused, stressed, and tired, much like the experience of jet-lag. Second, help your body fall asleep. Avoid stimulants like caffeine and nicotine in the evening, and make time for relaxation before bed. Don't wait until bedtime to process your worries and racing thoughts. If you aren't asleep in 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing or boring. Take a bath, read a textbook, drink warm milk, etc.

Exercising can also be an early victim of time management, but exercise is never a waste of time, because it relieves stress and actually increases energy. Exercise also stimulates the release of chemicals in the brain that have anti-depressant and pain-killing effects. Thus, exercise helps fight anxiety,

depression, and the build-up of emotional energy. As with sleep, there is no rule for how much exercise is needed. A personal balance must be found.

Relaxing includes any activity that releases tension, physically or emotionally, and has personal meaning. Direct forms of relaxation include things like meditation, deep breathing, Yoga, and Tai Chi. Other forms include walking, reading for pleasure, being in nature, spirituality, and creative or artistic hobbies.

Interacting includes relationships at all levels, from casual to intimate. Humans are social creatures, and we can all benefit from positive, supportive interactions, especially in rough times. Having even one person who knows our struggles can make all the difference. Research has shown that people with good support systems tend to live longer lives. They also tend to experience less stress.

The key to all of this is balance. The body can tolerate brief deficits or excesses, but it is crucial to restore the balance before mood, energy level, or health are greatly impacted. Don't ignore the early signs of stress that are revealed by changes in the five areas. In the middle of a demanding semester, the last thing you need is to struggle against your own body. So, make time for the basics, and you will actually have more energy and usable time.

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