

KEEP UP YOUR ENERGY THIS WINTER

Combat the Blahs and Give Your Winter Some Zip!

The winter of 2003 was a real highlight for me. Despite the dark and cold of the Canadian winter, I felt energized and excited. And it happened for three reasons.

The first was tennis. After an 18-month layoff from a torn Achilles tendon, I got back on the court and couldn't get the smile off my face every time I played. I love the game and the aerobic exercise was like high octane.

The second energizer was bridge. My wife and I both played in university but had let it lapse. In January of 2003 we started taking bridge lessons with a terrific teacher and a great group of people. The game had changed. There was a new bidding system and a logical approach that appealed to my orderly mind. I felt like a little kid making a new discovery. It woke up a corner of my brain that I hadn't used in years.

The third factor was writing. I was working on my third book (The Little Book of Stress Relief) and felt really alive with the excitement and anticipation of each writing day. I'd wake up with new ideas and creative thoughts to explore. The time flew by.

I learned some things that year – and I've done winter differently ever since. What were the ingredients that energized that winter for me?

1. Vigorous exercise.
2. Doing things I love to do.
3. Stimulation and challenge. My body and my mind both got regular workouts.

Bank accounts work on a simple principle: you have to put money in before you can take money out. Our bodies work the same way. We have to generate energy so it's available when we need it.

So, what gives us energy? Let's start with the basics:

1. Good Nutrition

Food is fuel for the body. Regular meals and a well-balanced diet are pretty corny concepts but they're fundamental to good health and energy. Protein, fruits and vegetables improve energy whereas carbohydrates – especially junk foods (those high in fat and sugar) – make people feel sluggish.

2. Adequate Sleep

This is how we restore our energy. It's vital to get the sleep you need to feel energized and to function at your best. Most adults need eight to nine hours a night but we get, on average, about seven. The sleep debt of 60-90 minutes builds up and leads to chronic fatigue. Go to bed early enough that you can wake up in the morning without an alarm, feeling well rested and having good daytime energy.

3. Regular Exercise

There's an interesting paradox to exercise: in the short run, vigorous exercise tires us out. But it also stimulates adrenalin, aerobic metabolism and endorphins, increasing fitness, endurance and cardiac efficiency. The result is more energy and a feeling of wellbeing.

4. Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation skills such as meditation, yoga and abdominal breathing increase energy by putting the body into a resting state. As little as 20 minutes a day of deep relaxation can restore energy – and also has a calming effect on the body.

5. Time-outs

Athletes and manual laborers take breaks to rest their muscles and refresh themselves.

Knowledge workers also need time-outs because the brain is like a muscle – It tires and needs recovery time. There are many ways to take time-outs: music, reading, relaxing, entertainment, socializing and hobbies.

We need three kinds of time-outs;

- Mini time-outs – short breaks during the day (5 minutes here, 20 minutes there)
- Midi time-outs through the week (i.e. leisure)
- Maxi time-outs through the year (vacations) where we can really get away and revitalize ourselves.

6. Quiet and Alone Time

This is especially important for introverts who find that too much stimulation (from activity or social interaction) overloads their circuits and drains them of energy. Knowing how to pace yourself, when to step back and what quiet activities work best will be very helpful.

7. Social Interaction

Getting together with friends or going to parties can be very energizing for a lot of people. This is particularly true for extroverts who often need external stimulation to raise their energy level. I spent a year in the Canadian Arctic and was struck by how much social activity there was in the winter when it was dark all the time – and how helpful that was to people.

8. Stimulation and Challenge

Watch how kids play. Once they've mastered a game they usually try to do it faster, change the rules or do something else to keep it interesting. Otherwise they get bored and move on to something else. If you want to keep up your energy, find ways to challenge yourself or engage in stimulating activities. Learn a new skill or increase the difficulty of things that you enjoy (e.g. doing harder crossword puzzles or taking on more challenging pieces of music).

9. Humor, Laughter and Play

In addition to being great stress relievers, laughter and play are wonderful ways to energize your body. They generate an "internal massage" – your heart speeds up, your breathing gets deeper to take in more oxygen, your circulation improves, all of which generates more energy. So find ways to laugh, have fun and be playful.

10. Positive Attitude

A positive frame of mind increases your level of anticipation and enthusiasm as you greet each day. It actually generates positive psychological energy, whereas negative thinking drains you.

The holiday season can be exhausting and winter can be wearing. Pace yourself this Christmas and find ways to brighten up the winter months. If you manage your energy, you'll manage your mood. Throw in a little skiing and you'll be all set!

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