RIAK.
FITNESS

BALANCE - SIMPLICITY - ACCESSIBILITY

RECOVERY STRATEGIES FOR YOUR MIND

Part 2: Sleep and giving your mind a break

The importance of sleep

If you struggle with sleep or often feel rank in the mornings, it can be incredibly stressful and affect your ability to train and your relationships with the people around you. Just as with anything else that stresses you out, half the battle can be getting a plan in place to deal with it. Sleep is stupidly important for mental and physical recovery, so the virtues of taking control speak for themselves.

If you are interested in the peculiarities of sleep and circadian rhythms, Nick Littlehales' book, 'Sleep' is a fantastic introduction and some of the below is my interpretation of the principles laid out therein.

It is curious that people often get hung up on having to get their 8 hours of sleep a night. Why?! We do not all need the same calorie intake. We do not all need to drink the same volume of fluids every day. We are all individuals and our sleep requirements are equally individual, so let us find out what works for us individually.

Circadian rhythms are the body's natural hormonal ebb and flow throughout a 24-hour day. They **love** regularity and consistency. Your circadian rhythms essentially track the sun's trajectory in the sky, so they love it when you wake up at the same time each day. Before the Industrial Revolution and the invention of electricity, people rose and retired with the sun. Evolution has not kept pace with technological developments such as the lightbulb or smartphones. Having a consistent wake-up time is a small but very key way of retaining a piece of our natural routine that permeates us even at a cellular level!

The normal British 5-day working week with a lie-in at the weekend is a social construct. It has not been designed with the body's inclinations in mind. The traditional Mediterranean lifestyle of a mid-afternoon pause arguably acknowledges the body's rhythms far more. I am not saying we should all start taking two-hour naps in the afternoon, but the mid-afternoon slump is a real thing, with a natural rise in Melatonin (the sleep hormone) levels in this post-lunch period.

Okay, so we have established that sleep is important, and it is largely dictated by hormones and the rise and fall of the sun. How do we take advantage of this knowledge? The first thing I would recommend, is setting an 'anchor time'. This will be controversial to some and one likely to provoke the most discussion with your partner if you have one.

When your wake-up time is erratic, getting up early for a meeting once or twice a week then sleeping in until 10 or 11 at the weekend, your body wonders what the F is going on as your circadian rhythms are all over the place. The feeling is a lot like jet lag and often we assume this feeling is because we have not had enough sleep. So, the weekend lie-ins get later, or we go to bed earlier than normal and the cycle repeats.

If we wake up at the same time each day (including at the weekend) however, it regularises our circadian rhythms and allows your body to get into a groove. According to Littlehales, it should be the earliest time you reasonably need to get up in a regular week. For instance, if you have to be up at 6am to get in a run before work and that is the earliest requirement each week, that is your anchor time and you should wake at that time every day. This does not mean you need to be up and firing on all cylinders every day! In fact, we want to rise gradually and take our time in the mornings. If you do not want to start your day just yet, watch a bit of TV, read a book or have a nice long breakfast and start your day in a good frame of mind rather than waking up at the latest possible opportunity and starting the day stressed to the hilt.

It takes a couple of weeks for you to fully experience the benefits and it will not prevent you from ever feeling tired again, but it does help to stabilise the peaks and troughs and, probably more important than anything else, it allows you to start taking control of your sleep. To help, you could try using a dawn simulating alarm clock like a Lumie. It is far nicer being gently nudged awake by an orange glow that brightens over the course of the 30 minutes preceding your wake-up time. You can still set a backstop noise alarm if you are worried about sleeping through, but I would wager that after a few weeks you will not need an alarm at all.

The obvious next question is when should we go to bed? This is a less simple one to address and goes back to the inappropriateness of a rigid '8-hour rule'. To summarise Littlehales' point on this one, you want to work back from your anchor time in 90-minute slots (cycles) and aim for an ideal of around 35-cycles a week (about 52.5 hours per week) rather than obsess about each individual night. This means the time you go to bed is more flexible but on a good night, should normally be about 5 of these 90-minute slots before your anchor wake-up time. So, if your anchor time is 6am, this means a bedtime of 10.30pm. Not everyone needs 5 x 90-minute slots though. You should experiment with 4 or maybe even three 90-minute slots and then increase over time to find your sweet spot.

The recovery benefits in terms of training are obvious. Waking up feeling better more often means fewer sessions missed and the accumulation of hopefully quality training volume. If we apply this back to mental health considerations, when we take control of an aspect of our life that is otherwise a concern for lack of regulation, it helps reduce feelings of anxiety. So, I urge you, take control of your sleep and you might just find time in your week to tick off those things on your 'to-do' list that have been adding to your overall stress levels.

Downtime

Having downtime in the evening is probably one of the things we all wish we had more of. Few can create more so we must therefore use it as wisely as possible. What I am going to talk about next feeds into sleep preparation and how to maximise your physical recovery. Obviously, some take their training more seriously than others and that is totally fair enough. But hopefully, the following suggestions might be of benefit to you if incorporated into your daily routine.

When you think about any of these suggestions, have in mind the conditions in which we have evolved. As the sun went down, we would gather around the fire, reduce our activity levels and our Melatonin levels would rise causing us to long for sleep:

Get outside during the day

Something that helps with regularising your internal body clock is if you get sunlight on your skin during the day. Getting outside allows your body to synchronise with what the sun is doing. Working next to a window is ideal but not always possible so take that mid-afternoon break and get outside!

Transition from light to dark 90-minutes before bedtime

This can be as simple as turning the main lights of your living room off and switching on a lamp in the corner of the room. Reducing the light stimulus will help encourage your body's natural hormonal rhythm so you are ready for bed when the time comes. If you have a Lumie lamp, put this on in the bedroom rather than the main light. Regardless, you do not want to move from a dim living room to a bright bedroom if you can help it. A dawn simulating lamp can usually be set to simulate a sunset as well, so the room will get progressively darker as you make your way into bed.

Move from warm to cool

As the sun goes down the temperature will drop by a degree or two. To simulate this in the winter, you could reduce or turn off the heating in the bedroom, so it is nice and cool for when you want to sleep. Having different thickness duvets will also help. A thicker one for winter and thinner or just the bed sheet for summer.

Dump the tech.

We are often told about the effects of blue light, but I would suggest the stimulus from receiving emails and messages when we should be powering down ourselves is more of an issue. Unless it directly leads to you getting lucky, in my opinion, you should not be on your phone in the hour or two before bed. If an email from work comes in, it can be dealt with tomorrow when you are rested and actually able to deal with it logically.

This might seem like a utopian ideal, but it can only be considered unrealistic if we refuse to accept that our bodies have not yet evolved to deal with the demands technology places on our lives.

If we each accept that we are not that important and leave the phone on the coffee table or the stand in the hallway, we can all get some more sleep!

Perform simple chores

If transitioning off the tech in the 90-minutes before bed is a challenge, do some simple and easy chores like the washing up or making your lunch for tomorrow. Something easy and practical will help you unwind and focus on the present. Anxiety is a big cause of sleepless nights and often exacerbated by an inability to leave your phone alone and disconnect from the outside world.

Ease off the fluids

You probably want to stop taking fluids onboard about 90-minutes before you go to bed to allow it to pass through your system in time. Otherwise, you might find yourself waking up in the night needing the loo!

Have a small high protein snack

If you often get hungry before bed, have yourself a little snack that contains some protein. The protein will not only help you feel satiated, but it will also help with muscle repair as you sleep. Something like fat free Greek yoghurt with a sprinkle of mixed nuts would be ideal.

Have a pen and notepad next to your bed

Ever gotten into bed and laid there wide-eyed not able to forget about something you need to do tomorrow or feeling anxious because you have so much on your plate? Keep a pen and notepad next to your bed. When you are on the verge of sleep, you are in no state to deal with problems. By having the opportunity to write them down, it allows you firstly to order your thoughts but also to put things in perspective. Write down the things you want to do **tomorrow**, and hopefully you will feel less anxious as they are now tomorrow's problems.

Taking breaks / napping

Regular breaks will make every day that little bit more bearable

When I talk to people going through a super busy time at work and I suggest the idea of taking a break mid-afternoon, I am often met with a quizzical look and something along the lines of, 'if I take a break then, it means I will have to stay later'. This statement might seem like a natural reaction and I can see the logic. The major flaw with this argument, however, is it is premised on the assumption you can keep working at a consistent rate all day long. I think even just reading that last sentence you will have already guessed I am going to suggest that is not accurate.

Ever gotten so stressed that you do not even know where to start? Ever been so rushed off your feet the adrenaline buzz has you perplexed as to why you haven't gotten your WBC title shot yet (forgive the boxing reference)? This is your brain on overload and these are exactly the sort of times you need to take a break.

Now the next argument tends to be, 'I can't just get up and leave my desk for 15-30 minutes, people will judge me'. Ever been to the loo and had a bit of trouble getting the job done? When you eventually went back to your desk had the world ended? Was there an inquisition? I would suggest not.

The point to be taken from my ramble above is that there **is** time to take a break, and here is the punchy part – even if anyone notices you have gone, they are unlikely to give a damn because they will have their own crap to worry about! The reality is that there are very very few occasions when 15-30 mins away from your desk will matter.

Now back to whether a break is going to harm your ability to go home on time. I have zero science to back this statement, but I will make the wager anyway. I am willing to bet that taking just 15 minutes to get up, walk away from your desk and go hide somewhere quiet or go for a walk will see you come back and be so much more efficient than if you worked on through. You might even leave early!

Just a little bit of fresh/polluted London air and a walk will refocus your mind on the present rather than perpetuate the cloudiness of all the anxieties you are harbouring by sitting at a desk without pause. Anxiety is fear or worry about the future in some sense. In practical terms it is worrying about whether you have time to do something or feeling overwhelmed about the number of points on your 'to-do' list. It is the absence of a full appreciation of what is happening that moment and it prevents you from focusing on the job in hand.

By taking a break and focusing on what you are doing i.e. avoiding walking into things and generally surviving, you can reset your mind, give it a quick breather and then go back to your desk ready to crush the next couple of hours.

Napping/Blocking out the bulls**t for a moment

Now napping is where I fear I might lose your attention. To many, the mere suggestion of napping during the working day is un-British and a treasonable offence. Perhaps napping is not the right word then. Perhaps we should call it 'blocking out the bulls**t for a moment'?

I know immediately you might be thinking, 'I can't take a nap! There's nowhere for me to go and if I get caught, I'll get reprimanded or maybe even sacked!'

Again, perhaps 'napping' is not the correct terminology and I should go back to Nick Littlehales' book for a cue. Napping is pretty much the same process as taking a break, it is just more considered and more structured. According to Littlehales, a full sleep cycle is 90 minutes, so if you need to catch up on sleep after a rough night, 90 minutes would be the ideal length of a mid-afternoon nap. But just 30 minutes would still definitely help and perhaps be more appropriate for the average person working in an office.

You do not need to lose consciousness. All you need to do is find somewhere quiet and calm where you can close your eyes and zone out for half an hour. You do not need to lie down, you can sit upright and focus on breathing in and out through your nose to help quieten your mind. If you struggle to bring

your mind to the job in hand, count your inhalations and exhalations in cycles of 12 i.e. in and out up to twelve and start again.

This process is about giving your brain a break rather than drifting through the different stages of a full sleep cycle. As with a 15-minute break, taking a breather from your otherwise hectic day will allow you to focus on what is happening in the here and now and away from all the crap that is happening in the office.

Next up, I will likely be told that you have nowhere to do this. As an ex-city lawyer, I can tell you that if your office has a toilet cubicle, you do. If it does not, you need a new place of work! In fact, it does not really matter where you do this. It could be in a quiet breakout room, an empty meeting room, you could go sit on a park bench if it is warm enough, it could even be a flipping cupboard! It just needs to be somewhere you are unlikely to be disturbed.

Taking breaks and 'napping' are powerful tools for keeping anxiety and stress at bay. You might not be able to do this every day but trust me, it is when you are at your most busy or your most stressed that these tools are the most effective. It essentially comes down to having the balls to admit you are not superhuman and your brain is fragile.

One thing I sometimes do with my coaching clients, is we put a mid-afternoon break in their training plan. It allows us to track any patterns and removes the need for a lecture from me as the data is there for both of us to see. An alternative would be to block out time in your work calendar each day. If your calendar is shared with others, I would not even bother lying. I would put in that it is a break. Imagine the argument if someone has an issue with you taking 15-30 minutes each day to get some air or take a breather. They lose that argument 9 times out of 10 because it is totally unreasonable to stop someone that takes their mental health seriously from taking a short break. Some of the most successful people in history had a regular afternoon nap, Winston Churchill being a famous napper.

If the above does not convince you from a mental health perspective, let us go back to my point above re all of life's stressors leaching energy from a single source. If you do not take the time to preserve energy during the day, you will have less energy to complete your training sessions. I will illustrate my point with another scenario: how hard is it to get motivated to go to a training session when you have had a manic day at work? It is tough right? It is because you are tired! So, if you care about your athletic performance, a mid-afternoon break or nap is a performance enhancer.

Coming up in this series:

Part 3: Appearance - One of the primary reasons people exercise is for aesthetic purposes. To some extent we all care how we look, but do we allow reality to keep our insecurities in check?

Part 4: Losing or maintaining bodyweight – Every man and his dog claims to have the secret. In reality, the principles of healthy weight loss are really rather simple. It takes small changes and an extended period of time…sorry!

Part 5: Time Pressure - The training and recovery killer – How do we fight back? We rethink our priorities and preconceptions of what time we have available.