



HOW CAN WE REMAIN RESILIENT IN 2021?

This year, 2021, is likely the year in which normal life slowly resumes (even though the first couple of months have been tough already). Luckily, some scientific tips may help you to take better care of yourself.

Scientists often use the energy balance metaphor: The stressors in your environment and your head drain your energy supply, while other activities replenish your energy. Continually striving to maintain a perfect balance of energy will only cause you more stress—life presents too many obstacles. The trick is to monitor your fluctuating energy levels in the long term. It's like the gas tank of a car. Some people like to see how far they can go with an empty tank, even though running on empty may cause permanent damage to the engine. Similarly, if you feel that your energy store is running out, it is important that you take time to recharge before you do any permanent damage.

Some experiences and activities give energy. Mentally detaching yourself completely from work or daily worries is essential yet challenging. Digital technology keeps people attached to their screens.¹ Without realizing it, the daily stream of negative comments on social media affects your energy levels. Research shows that the act of complaining leads to more energy loss.^{2,3}

What is the best way to recharge? Many people assume that relaxing produces energy, but a vacation or a weekend of binge-watching shows on Netflix isn't enough to get back on track. Activities that require no effort at all appear to be less effective for energy balance.⁴

ACTIVE REST

One solution is to engage in activities that require cognitive or physical effort or *active rest*. Find situations that separate you from your daily worries but that challenge you and give you the feeling that you are learning or achieving something new.

Regular outdoor exercise appears to be the best predictor of mental well-being.⁵ Environments of blue (sea, lake, river) and green (forests, mountains, nature) appear to have the most restorative effects.

Active rest works, especially when you are in control of your choices, but beware of the recovery paradox,⁶ which dictates that the time at which your energy balance most requires active recovery is the time you are the least likely to seek out those types of activities. As a result, you recover less, and you may end up in a vicious circle. Engaging in new activities requires energy, and it is therefore important to initiate them when you still have some energy.

ROUTINE

Building routines and structure is crucial to your health. If you're in the habit of exercising daily, your energy tank is less likely to run out. If it does, however, a regular habit makes it easier for you to absorb active rest.

How can you help your staff this year? Ensure through good organization and job design that your team members do not excessively deplete their energy reserves. During the current pandemic, the mental burden and the risk of exhaustion are high. To guide your team through 2021 in a healthy way, you must build in more breathing space than usual. I wish you a resilient 2021! ■

1. Responsible screen time: What is it and how can digital consumers of all ages adapt? Everfi. Updated December 21, 2020. Accessed February 3, 2021. <https://everfi.com/blog/community-engagement/responsible-screen-time/>
2. Lyall LM, Wyse CA, Graham N, et al. Association of disrupted circadian rhythmicity with mood disorders, subjective wellbeing, and cognitive function: a cross-sectional study of 91 105 participants from the UK biobank. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2019;5(6):507-514.
3. Hunt MG, Marx R, Lipson C, Young J. No more FOMO: limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression. *J Soc Clin Psychol*. 2018;37(10):751-768.
4. Hall KD, Heymsfield SB, Kemnitz JW, et al. Energy balance and its components: implications for body weight regulation. *Am J Clin Nutr*. 2012; 95(4):989-994.
5. Lawton E, Brymer E, Clough P, Denovan A. The relationship between the physical activity environment, nature relatedness, anxiety, and the psychological well-being benefits of regular exercisers. *Front Psychol*. 2017;8:1058.
6. Sonnentag S. The recovery paradox: portraying the complex interplay between job stressors, lack of recovery, and poor well-being. *Res Organ Behav*. 2018;38:169-185.

ERIK L. MERTENS, MD, FEBOPHTH | CHIEF MEDICAL EDITOR

Physician CEO, Medipolis-Antwerp Private Clinic, Antwerp, Belgium