

Managing your energy level

Do you feel tired most of the time? Do you have trouble staying focused on one task for very long? Have you lost the excitement you once had for your career and life?

Each of us is faced with the rising demands of modern life. The tasks of today require imagination, inventiveness, and the capacity to understand systems of ever-increasing complexity, whether in therapeutics or when purchasing toothpaste. When faced with such demands, we respond by working harder, which inevitably takes a toll on us physically, mentally, and emotionally. This drain on our faculties is partly due to how we use our energy. While time is a finite resource that needs to be managed, energy can be renewed and expanded.

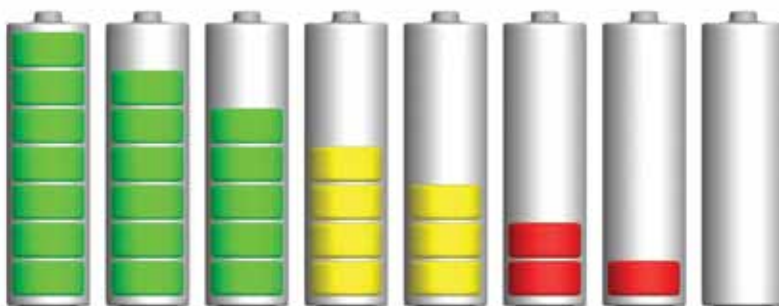
Energy, according to Schwartz,¹ is the capacity to work and live life to the fullest. Energy comes from four main areas: the body, emotions, mind, and spirit. These areas must be tuned as individual instruments that must be in harmony

with each other to ensure that the result is music, not noise. In each area, energy can be systematically expanded and regularly renewed by establishing specific rituals for balanced self-renewal. You need to be in the business of living fully and maximizing your return on investment in life, as it is the greatest asset you have,

The Success Skills column provides practical advice to help pharmacists become more effective in their professional and personal lives. Installments are contributed by and reflect the views of Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach, Mountain View, CA.

by managing and renewing your energy in all four areas.

Body. The body as physical energy is not just a passive medium; it affects and influences all other energy areas and in turn is affected by them.² Getting even a small amount of regular exercise can boost your energy, but it must be done regularly to gain the most benefit. Exercise should aim to build endurance, flexibility, and strength. If you do not use your body, it will lose its effectiveness and your physical energy will suffer. Throughout the day, periodically check your breathing: the most beneficial breathing is deep breathing, which comes from the abdomen, not the chest.¹ In stressful situations, you may find yourself



shifting to shallow chest breathing. Likewise, if you do not allow your body to rest and sleep enough, you will not function at your peak performance level.

Throughout the day, your body operates in physiological rhythms of 90–120-minute cycles, moving from a high-energy state to a physiological trough toward the end of each cycle.¹ As the day progresses, you need to renew yourself. The signs of needing renewal are physical restlessness, yawning, hunger, and difficulty concentrating. It is possible to recover your energy in as little as several minutes if it involves a ritual that allows you to disengage from work

and think about something else. Merely doing something different and changing your environment are helpful, such as getting up and moving around if you work at a computer or desk. Thinking about something else can be as simple as reading a few pages from an article or listening to your favorite music. Brief, regular breaks at specific intervals throughout the workday are the rituals that you need to establish. Taking a walk provides not only a mental and emotional break but some exercise, and you may get your best creative ideas during this time. By walking you are not actively thinking, which allows the dominant left part of the brain to give way to the right part's greater capacity to see the big picture and make imaginative leaps.²

Emotions. No matter how much you involve yourself in physical and mental activities, your primary driving force is still emotional, because you never do anything unless you “feel” like doing it. Your emotions determine the quality of your energy, which is your drive and ambition. All of us have

days when we feel like we can “conquer the world” and others where even the smallest challenge feels overwhelming. When you are able to take control of your emotions, you can improve the quality of your energy, regardless of the external pressures you are facing.

The key to taking control of your emotions is to become more aware of how you feel at various points during the workday and how these emotions affect your effectiveness. Most people perform best when they feel positive emotions. Unfortunately, without intermittent re-

Continued on page 1406

Continued from page 1404

covery, we are not physiologically capable of sustaining highly positive emotions for long periods.

A powerful ritual that fuels positive emotions is expressing appreciation to others because it forces you to think about the positive aspects of your life and work. This practice seems to be as beneficial to the giver as it is to the receiver. By expressing your appreciation of someone, you are recognizing his or her accomplishments and affirming his or her strengths. You can never express such appreciation too often as long as you are sincere. Not only does this simple act help to renew your energy, it also enhances relationships. Another way to enhance your positive emotions is to periodically make a list of the things for which you are thankful.

Cultivate your own positive emotions by learning to change the stories you tell about the events in your life. People in conflict often cast themselves in the role of victim, blaming others or external circumstances for their problems. Becoming aware of the difference between the facts in a given situation and the way we interpret these facts can help recover our emotional energy. Parikh² recommends viewing your stories through three lenses: reverse, long, and wide. With each situation, ask yourself: What would another person in this conflict say and in what ways might that be true (reverse lens)? How will I most likely view this situation in six months (long lens)? Regardless of the outcome, how can I grow and learn from this situation (wide lens)? Viewing difficult situations through these lenses helps you intentionally cultivate positive emotions. Always try to view negative situations as opportunities or challenges.

The practice of yoga and martial arts is an excellent method for enhancing emotional control and physical and mental development. Negative emotions drain your energy and strain your relationships as you become irritable and impatient or anxious and insecure. Likewise, the fight-or-flight reaction makes it

impossible to think clearly, logically, and reflectively.

It is important to learn what triggers your negative emotions by paying attention to your situations or circumstances when you are feeling negatively and try to minimize them as much as possible. An approach to minimizing negative feelings is to avoid an emotional, automatic response and take time to think about what the best response would be. Another approach is to manage the flight-or-flight reaction by taking several deep abdominal breaths and exhaling slowly for five to six seconds to induce relaxation and recovery. Managing your negative emotions is as important as enhancing your positive ones to ensure you maintain your energy level for peak performance.

Mind. Your mind tends to be the focus of your desire to maintain your energy and your ability to concentrate as a knowledge worker. In this information-overloaded society, it is tempting to multitask, but this actually undermines your concentration and productivity. A temporary shift in attention, such as stopping a task to answer an e-mail or taking a telephone call, increases the time necessary to finish the primary task you were trying to accomplish. Distractions and interruptions are very costly not only in time but in mental energy. It is far more efficient to fully focus on a task for 90–120 minutes, take a true break, and then fully focus on the next activity.¹

Mental boredom saps your energy. Boredom is akin to mental fatigue and is caused by repetition and lack of interest in fragmented tasks. Ways to prevent boredom include learning new things, having a variety of hobbies and interests, teaching, mentoring, and participating in professional organization committees. Most pharmacists feel energized after attending a professional meeting, so make it a habit to attend local, state, and national meetings. Another way to increase your mental energy is to engage in new adventures and experiences because of the novelty, excitement, and variety they provide. Merely changing your routines can also restore your energy.

Another way to mobilize mental energy is to focus on activities that have the most long-term leverage for you. Unless you intentionally schedule time for your most challenging work, you will tend not to get to it at all or rush through it at the last minute, and the work's quality may suffer. You always need your full mental energy to concentrate fully. It helps to identify the most important challenge for the next day, either the night before or before you go home, and make it your very first priority.

To maintain your mental energy, attention, and concentration, take regular breaks throughout the day and eat more regularly.¹ Answering e-mails and voice mails in batches a couple of times a day rather than every time one arrives maintains your focus and energy. If you experience interruptions or distractions, try to work somewhere else to minimize them.

Spirit. Most people do not even recognize meaning and purpose as potential sources of energy.¹ You tap into the energy of your spirit when your everyday work and activities are consistent with what you value most.² To discover your values, identify the qualities that you find most off-putting in others. This allows you to unintentionally divulge your values.

If the work you do really matters to you, you typically feel more positive energy, can focus better, and demonstrate greater perseverance. To better understand your current meaning and purpose, which may have changed over time, ask yourself about what really matters to you in the various aspects of your life and list your answers. Such questions might include: What is going on around me in my life and career? What would I really miss if I did not have it in my life? What brings me satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment? Am I personally getting all that I am working for and seeking in my life?

In the busyness of life, it is easy not to stop and ask yourself what you stand for and who you want to be. As a result, external demands dictate your actions. When attempting to discover what you

do best and enjoy most, it is important to realize that these two things are not necessarily mutually inclusive. You can get a lot of positive feedback about something you are good at but do not truly enjoy. Conversely, you can love doing something that does not come easy for you, so that achieving success requires much more energy than it makes sense to invest. To sort this out, recall at least two work experiences in the past several months during which you found yourself feeling effective, effortlessly absorbed, inspired, and fulfilled. Your enthusiasm for activities is infectious and fosters excitement and commitment in the people with whom you work. Analyze those experiences to understand precisely what energized you so positively and what specific talents you were using.

To access the energy of the human spirit, clarify your priorities; establish rituals to help you do what you do best

and what brings you the greatest satisfaction at work, consciously allocating time and energy to the areas of your life, work, family, health, and service to others that you deem most important; and exercise your core values in your daily behaviors. In devoting time and energy to what is important to you, there is often a disconnect between what you say is important and what you actually do; use rituals to close this gap. An example of such a ritual is selecting a point in your commute where you switch your thinking from work to your family and personal life. Another approach to renew your spirit and energy is immersion in great literature or great music, which can also expand your cultural awareness and paradigms.

To continue to be productive and enjoy life, pharmacists must consciously manage and renew the energy in their body, emotions, mind, and spirit.

1. Schwartz T. Manage your energy, not your time. *Harv Bus Rev.* 2007; 85:63-6, 68, 70-3,164.
2. Parikh J. *Managing yourself: management by detached involvement*: Oxford: Blackwell; 1991.

Suggested readings

- Habit 7: sharpen the saw. In: Covey SR. *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 1989.
- Gosline A. Bored? www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=bored--find-something-to-live-for (accessed 2008 May 8).

Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach
550 Ortega Avenue B123
Mountain View, CA 94040
rxsjw@yahoo.com

DOI 10.2146/ajhp070680

Originally published in *Am J Health-Syst Pharm.* 65:1404–1407, © 2008, American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, Inc. All rights reserved. Posted with permission.