Brain Hacks to Boost Motivation and Beat the Work From Home Blues



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As the number of days we're spending in lockdown – or simply still working from home (if we would rather be in the office) – continue to tick by with no clear end in sight, what for some of us was the novelty of working from home has clearly worn off and our days are starting to feel more like "rinse and repeat." When a routine begins to feel monotonous, we often feel a lack of motivation. And, when our motivation starts to wane, so, too can our productivity.

Physical Intelligence can help. Right now, literally hundreds of chemicals (hormones and neurotransmitters) are racing

through each of our bodies in our bloodstream and nervous system. Some of those chemicals have familiar names, such as cortisol, adrenalin and testosterone. Those chemicals largely dictate how we think, feel, speak and behave, yet most of us operate primarily at the mercy of those chemicals – experiencing thoughts, reactions and emotions – without realizing that we can actively manage them. Physical Intelligence is the ability to detect and strategically influence the balance of certain key chemicals so that we can achieve more, stress less and live and work more happily.

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Physical Intelligence techniques have been used for decades – many drawn from the worlds of sports and the arts – and are all underpinned by neuroscience. There are hundreds of Physical Intelligence techniques – ways of breathing, moving, thinking (e.g., visualizing) and interacting with each other – all easy to incorporate into our day to day life. There are four elements of Physical Intelligence: Strength, Flexibility, Resilience and Endurance, each important for motivation and productivity in different ways.

Strength

When we feel positive about something or someone, we are having a 'towards' response in which dopamine (our pleasure and reward chemical) rises and cortisol (our stress chemical) settles to optimal. We feel rewarded, which makes us want to engage more, do more, be more in the situation. When we feel disappointed, demoralized, lacking motivation, angry or unhappy about something, we are having an 'away' response, a primary threat response in which cortisol rises and dopamine drops. We feel unrewarded by the situation – therefore, we instinctively move away from it or resist it.

The drop in motivation that many people are experiencing as they face the uninspiring or perhaps worrisome routine of work

in lockdown is a classic “away response.” If we can recognize situations, demands and expectations for what they are – triggers of our primary threat (away) or primary reward (towards) responses, then we can be less reactive and more constructive in how we respond. If we’re working with or leading a team (or even raising children) and we know what people need in order to feel fully engaged, we can speak and behave in a way that draws people together, by creating and fostering the chemistry of a ‘towards’ response – whether we’re working together in an office or connecting via videoconference.

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In order to manage our towards and away response and create an environment that actively creates towards responses we need Strength – inner strength, confidence, resolve, the ability to stand our ground and act and think wisely and decisively without threatening others or feeling threatened, being positively assertive, independently minded, astute and highly productive, and able to increase our capacity for achievement. The following strength techniques provide a foundation for preparing yourself to recognize and respond to those towards or away responses and to create towards responses across our teams.

- Grounding Yourself: How empowered, confident, and tolerant you feel is greatly impacted by your posture. Grounded posture enables you to feel simultaneously stronger, more present, alert and more at ease. Centering reinforces the chemistry of high testosterone and low cortisol, and supports our dopamine function, enabling us to focus and coordinate our physical and mental energy to achieve and win. To ‘ground’ yourself, feel the weight of your body on the ground or in the chair – rooted rather than ‘uptight’. Continue paced breathing, release tension throughout the body; place your center of mass where you need it (move your body

forwards sideways and backward to find the optimal point); breathe down to below the navel (to your center of gravity), and focus. Repeat three times: Balance, Breathe, Focus

- Paced Breathing: Become aware of your breathing as you read this. Is it fast or slow, shallow or deep? Many people hold their breath while they are thinking, snatch breaths while writing emails, and breathe too shallowly in business meetings or while cooking supper or watching television. Life interferes with breathing in ways that were not intended, to the detriment of our cognitive function, emotional stability…and our productivity. Paced breathing enables us to power up our brains and stabilizes our emotions. It releases the chemical acetylcholine, which counteracts adrenalin and empowers us to feel mentally/emotionally stable and confident, able to handle situations with clarity, balance, and control.

- Ideally, spend 10+ minutes daily breathing diaphragmatically, with a steady count in (through the nose) and out (through the mouth) – in and out counts can be different. Explore counts comfortable for you. A study of South African bankers found that after 21 days of paced breathing, they achieved an average of 62% improvement in cognitive capacity on complex decision-making tasks, whereas poor breathing leads to procrastination and delaying important decisions. Meditation is a great way to bring paced breathing into your daily routine.

Flexibility

Lack of motivation can also be the result of diminished inspiration, especially if we’re following the same old

routine – and distracted by uncertainty and worry. To increase inspiration we need to improve our capacity for creativity and innovation, as well as the ability to think divergently (essential for creativity and innovation). These techniques are a good start:

- Physical inflexibility leads to mental inflexibility. Loosening tension in your body will help free your mind. Scan your body daily to identify and then address any areas where you are holding tension.
- Start walking, even if just around the house. Research indicates that we are 45% more likely to have an innovative idea while walking rather than seated, even if on a treadmill.
- Shifting your focus to look at something we find beautiful n art or nature also sparks creativity.
- With teams, create cultures based on trust and novelty while encouraging risk-taking. Maintain a positive mood by valuing people's contributions so that they continue to get deeply immersed in thinking together. Use Open Space and encourage people to make clear plans to implement new ideas agreed upon by the team.

Innovation is particularly important today as organizations work to implement creative solutions in response to the unique challenges and opportunities the pandemic has created.

Related: Entrepreneurs' Brains Are Wired Differently. Here's How to Use Yours Right.

Resilience

Resilience is our ability to bounce back from adversity and challenge (such as the current crisis), to remain optimistic in the face of disappointment, to develop a learning

mindset…and to build networks of support, particularly effective for increasing productivity.

- Neuroeconomist Paul Zak's research, published in *The Trust Factor*, reports that in organizations that share information broadly and intentionally build relationships, and where leaders ask for support, there is 76% more engagement, people have 106% more energy, they are 50% more productive, 29% more satisfied with their lives, have 13% fewer days sick and 40% fewer cases of burnout. He has tested oxytocin (our social bonding and trust chemical) levels in the bloodstream of thousands of employees across many industries and cultures and has shown that trust and purpose reinforce each other, creating a mechanism for high oxytocin levels over a longer period. Robust networks and finding support, both boost oxytocin, which helps build trust – and, therefore, are a key part of our happiness and a cornerstone of our resilience.

- Building and maintaining those support networks is especially important in the midst of this crisis because we are not able to spend time with each other in person, reducing our oxytocin levels. Make a concerted effort to leverage your personal and professional networks by reaching out to people across your network to offer support. If meeting via videoconference, make eye contact through the camera lens to boost oxytocin in others even from a distance.

Another key component of Resilience is relaxation and recovery. Sometimes lack of motivation and productivity are related to being overworked. If you find that you are working harder or longer hours than usual and with fewer boundaries in the midst of this crisis, make sure that you are allowing enough time for restorative activities. Life is a balancing act of effort and recovery. After pushing ourselves, we must

allocate time for recovery. Try the following:

- Write REST in blocks in your calendar throughout the week and honor those blocks of time: Retreat (stepping away from all digital devices, media, social media, etc. – giving yourself a mental break), Eat (consuming healthy food, lean protein, vegetables, fruit, limited simple carbohydrates, sugar and alcohol), Sleep (7-9 hours per night inching up the hours, as needed with naps or going to sleep a few minutes earlier each night) and Treat (healthy restorative treats: hikes, a hot bath, soothing cup of tea, playing with children, beautiful music, whatever you find restorative).

Endurance

Endurance refers to mental toughness, perseverance and planning. When working on something that requires extreme patience or a sustained effort over the long term, we need endurance. Visualize an "Endurance Tunnel." As you move through that tunnel, the walls may start to close in and the light at the end of the tunnel may dim. To keep those walls wide and strong and the light switched on, especially when the going gets tough, these techniques will help increase your motivation, and in turn, your productivity:

- Allocate the first two hours of the day to key tasks. Tackling important tasks early elevates testosterone because confronting tasks, (rather than postponing or avoiding them), gives you a sense of moving bravely into new territory. Dopamine is also boosted because you will feel the reward of achievement. Starting the morning with a clear head, when memory is sharp and you are able to quickly absorb information, also enables acetylcholine to balance adrenalin. This confidence and motivation will carry throughout the rest of your day, even if your brain is not quite as sharp as the day

progresses. Conversely, procrastination and avoidance lower dopamine levels and increase cortisol levels, perpetuating the cycle of demotivation and lack of productivity.

- Self-appreciation and encouragement for and from those around us enable us to endure the difficulties of whatever Endurance Tunnel we are in. It is important to celebrate our own successes and give and receive appreciation in order to fuel dopamine levels that allow us to focus on challenging goals. We need each other, and the support and appreciation we give and receive is an important part of being motivated.

- Motivation is improved when we are aligned with our values and core purpose, doing work that puts us in our element, and using our strengths to the fullest. Becoming more conscious of those deep motivations enhances our productivity and makes it more likely that we will persevere.

- Language plays a big part in how motivated people feel. We need to use a language of ownership v. blame in order to make critiquing a team or company performance motivational. Consider adopting this team practice… After any important event, meeting or project, one by one, have team members critique themselves first – sharing what went well and where they could improve. Then provide feedback to each other. This practice develops autonomy and relatedness, two critical factors for motivation identified by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in their 2016 book *Self-determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness*. Developing a culture where individuals can be autonomous (high dopamine and testosterone) yet strongly bonded (high oxytocin) creates the conditions for ongoing motivation and productivity.

With these Physical Intelligence techniques, you should be able to motivate yourselves and others, enhancing productivity throughout this crisis and beyond.

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