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To Strengthen Your Attention Span, Stop Overtaxing It

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The Iditarod dog sled race covers 1,100 miles of Arctic ice and takes more than a week. The standard strategy for mushers had been to run twelve hours at a stretch, then rest for twelve. Either you ran all day and rested at night, or you rested all day and ran all night.

That all changed because of Susan Butcher, a veterinarian's assistant keenly aware of the biological limits of her dogs. She trained them to run in four-to-six hour spurts, and then rest for the same length of time, racing at that rhythm both night and day. She and her dogs won the race four times.

Susan Butcher trained her dogs the same way top athletes train in most any sport: an intense workout for about four hours – and then rest. That's the best routine for the body to attain maximal performance.

Anders Ericsson, a psychologist at the University of Florida who studies top performers, has found that world-class competitors from weight lifters to pianists limit the arduous part of their practice routine to a maximum of about four hours each day. Rest is part of their training regimen, to restore their physical and mental energy. They push themselves to their max, but not past it.

This work-rest-work-rest cycle also applies to helping our brain maintain maximal focus at work (<http://hbr.org/2013/12/the-focused-leader/ar/1>). In the workplace, concentrated focus allows us to use our skills at their peak. Researchers at the University of Chicago found, for instance, that at moments when people perform at the top of their game they are completely absorbed in the task at hand, whether brain surgery or making a three-pointer in basketball.

Top performance requires full focus, and sustaining focused attention consumes energy – more technically, your brain exhausts its fuel, glucose. Without rest, our brains grow more depleted. The signs of a brain running on empty include, for instance, distractedness, irritability, fatigue, and finding yourself checking Facebook when you should be doing your work.

A reasonable response is one executives today rarely make: give yourself a break. All too often we try to “push through it.” But there is no magical energy reserve waiting for us – our performance will more likely slowly deteriorate as we push on through the day.

The decay in cognitive efficiency as we push past our reserves — well-documented in research labs — shows up in an executive's day as a mounting level of mistakes, forgetting, and momentary blankouts. As one executive put it, “When I notice that my mind has been somewhere else during a meeting, I wonder what opportunities I've been missing right here.”

Given the high expectations on executives, perhaps it's understandable some have turned to performance-enhancing drugs. One lawyer who daily takes a medication for attention deficit disorder (which he does not have) confided to his physician, "If I didn't take this, I couldn't read contracts."

But there are other ways – legal and healthy— to help beef up our attention to meet the relentless demands of an executive's busy day: meditation. From the perspective of cognitive science all meditation methods are methods to train attention. An increasingly popular method to grow the power of the brain's circuitry for attention is "mindfulness," a meditation method stripped of a religious belief system.

The neuroscience behind mindfulness hinges on the concept of "neuroplasticity." The brain changes with repeated experience as some circuits strengthen and others wither.

Attention is a mental muscle, and can be strengthened with the right practice. The basic move to enhance concentration in the mental gym: put your focus on a chosen target, like your breath. When it wanders away (and it will), notice that your mind has wandered. This requires mindfulness, the ability to observe our thoughts without getting caught up in them.

Then bring your attention back to your breath. That's the mental equivalent of a weightlifting rep. Researchers at Emory University report that this simple exercise actually strengthens connectivity in the circuits for focus.

There's also another option. Call it the Latin Solution.

I was in Barcelona recently, where at lunchtime most shops and companies shutter themselves so employees can go home, have a good meal – and, ideally, take a nap. Even a short rest at mid-day reboots the brain for the rest of the day.