

## **THREE FACTS ABOUT MIND STRESS FOR BUSY PEOPLE**

### **MIND HEALTH IS DIFFERENT FROM PHYSICAL HEALTH**

There is lots of information available about how to be physically healthy. We know that a combination of exercise, rest and good nutrition can be enough to produce physical strength and resilience. Conversely unhealthy eating and lack of exercise can lead to serious physical health issues such as obesity and diabetes as examples.

However, an alert, creative and resilient mind requires more than exercise, rest and good nutrition.

Imagine if you were to start your day after a good night's sleep with half an hour of reflective practice and even some meditation. You take some time to plan your day to include some physical activity plus maybe a catch-up with a friend or even some quality time to play with your children.

Individual focus time is prioritised on your schedule around meetings and emails to ensure that you have quality time for decision-making and productive work. You may even take a walk around the block or have a coffee with a friend when you are mentally stuck. This might be enough to stimulate an insight solution for the problem you have been stewing over for weeks. Energised by the insight, you might find it easier to focus to complete the project.

At the end of the day, you feel like you have had a productive day, so you arrive home calm, contented and ready to socialise with your family.

Contrast this with starting at your desk and opening your email inbox. You start answering the emails according to what you think is the priority and maybe easy to answer.

Suddenly you realise you have a meeting coming up that you haven't finished preparing for. You race back to your earlier notes and quickly refresh your mind. Arriving at the meeting, you know that you are not properly prepared so you feel anxious throughout the meeting which means that the meeting isn't as successful as you would have liked.

Back at your desk, stressed about the meeting, you again look at your emails and text messages etc. You think if you clear the emails and other messages, you will have completed something for the day. Later in the afternoon, you realise you have an important meeting tomorrow and you haven't prepared for it. You find that you are mentally fatigued from the email multitasking and are unable to even focus for a minute on what's required to prepare for the meeting.

Leaving the office, stressed and mentally tired, you arrive home and immediately are annoyed at something that happens in the home. This leads to an argument which upsets meal time and sleep time. Also, you are worried about the meeting the next day and the fact that you haven't prepared for it, so sleep becomes elusive. The result is likely that the next day is sure to be a repeat of today.

An alert, creative and resilient mind needs the healthy mind platter of Sleep Time, Playtime, Time-in (reflective or meditative practice), Downtime, Connecting Time (social interactions) and Focus Time.

Designing your day around these platters helps mind health which results in better productivity and social interaction.

## **DECISION FATIGUE IS REAL**

Have you ever had a conversation with a person who works physically all day about tiredness? It goes something like this.

“Gosh! I’m tired.” You state

“You can’t be tired. You’ve been sitting behind a desk all day. How can you be tired?”. Physical worker responds.

Please respond with

“Yes, that’s true. However, I’ve answered 50 emails, spoken to 5 clients, attended 3 important client meetings, fixed a team members stuff up, prepared an important client document for tomorrow’s meeting and most importantly said No to cake at morning tea. My brain is decision fatigued which means I feel tired.

In fact, I would like 15 minutes to myself so that I can clear my mind.” And you could add, “otherwise I’m going to say something inappropriate that may end up in an argument that I don’t want to have.”

Our pre-frontal cortex which is responsible for our executive functions is tiny. It is only 3 business cards thick and sits at the front of our brain behind our forehead.

It is expected to perform our executive functions every moment of the day.

- Differentiating among conflicting thoughts,
- Determining good and bad, better and best, same and different,
- Understanding the future consequences of current activities,
- Working towards our defined future goals,
- Predicting outcomes and expectations from our current actions, and
- Controlling our emotions so that we fit into our social group and don’t commit social suicide.

Decision quality decreases the more fatigued our mind becomes. For instance, judges in court have been shown to make poorer quality decisions late in the day than they do early in the day.

Designing your day around decisions to be made and keeping the Healthy Mind Platter in mind can help.

## MULTITASKING IS NOT THE SOLUTION TO A BUSY DAY

Multitasking seems like a great way to get a lot done at once. It may even give you an instant sense of accomplishment.

Perhaps in this moment, you are reading this fact sheet, keeping an eye on the messages on your phone, checking your email in another window, as well as trying to plan your day.

You may believe that you are fairly good at this balancing act. Recent research, however, has shown that the switching from one task to the next takes a serious toll on your productivity. It can be as much as a 40 percent decrease in productivity.

Switching back and forth between tasks is what multitasking requires. It may only add a few tenths of a second to your executive control process. However, if you are doing lots of switching throughout the day, it can result in mental fatigue.

Of course, it will depend on the tasks as well. A few tenths of a second when you are folding laundry and watching television at the same time may have little impact.

However, if you are in a situation where safety or productivity are important, such as driving a car in heavy traffic while trying to see a text message or change a radio station, even a few tenths of a second can prove critical.

There is also an addictive quality to multitasking because as you answer a quick email or text message our brain's reward response is ignited which gives you instant gratification. It may feel like you've accomplished a lot but is there critical thinking happening?

Focus time is essential for high-quality work and surprisingly you'll get more done in less time.

So, give up the notion of jumping back and forth between windows and devices and allocate periods of focus time into your day. Turn off notifications and resist the temptation to look at your email inbox for the allocated focus time. You will be surprised at how much you achieve in your day.

