

Hey, everyone,

Last week we talked about three strategies for boosting your productivity and getting more done. This week we're going to talk about the importance of rest and rejuvenation.

Here's what's interesting about rest. Not only is it important for its own sake, as a counterweight and balance to work and other obligations, it's also crucial for productivity.

The human mind is hardwired to need downtime, space, and unfocused time. Like play, which we talked about last week, rest is not simply a luxury. As the essayist Tim Kreider has written, "Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence, or a vice, it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body, and deprived of it we suffer a mental affliction as disfiguring as rickets."

The importance of giving our brains periodic breaks has been shown in a number of studies exploring the habits of elite athletes and musicians, the benefits of vacation, the effects of meditation and stress management, and the impact of spending time in parks, gardens, and other peaceful outdoor spaces.

What this research has revealed is that brain activity doesn't stop while we're relaxing or spacing out; instead, it engages in a number of processes that seem to restore attention and motivation, encourage creativity and productivity, retain stable memories and assimilate new information, and allow us to reach our highest levels of performance.

So whether you value a balanced life or you are simply trying to maximize your productivity and performance, you need to rest. It's that simple.

There are several ways to incorporate more rest into your life. First, I suggest scheduling periodic short breaks throughout your day. Go outside and sit in the sun for 15 minutes, take a brief walk, play with your pets or kids, or do some meditation, yoga, or tai chi. It's important to actually schedule this time into your calendar and set a reminder; otherwise you are likely to forget when you get absorbed in your work.

Second, I recommend scheduling at least one "free day" into each week where you do not work, think about work, read or listen to anything related to work, or engage in anything work-related at all. I'm going to talk more about free days in the productivity tip for this week. I take one free day a week right now but intend to increase to two in the next few months. Ultimately, my goal is to have 125 free days a year—roughly one out of every three days.

Third, take extended breaks, like three-day weekends and short trips, and longer vacations, throughout the year. Don't skip vacations thinking that you'll get more done. A lot of research suggests that the opposite is true; when people take vacations, they are actually more productive throughout the year than when they skip them. Right now I take a quarterly three- to four-day trip with my family and one or two longer seven- to ten-day trips with them each year. I also take one personal retreat each year; I'll talk about this more in this week's play tip.

When you're on these vacations, consider disconnecting entirely from email and social media and "going off the grid." I do this during both the shorter and longer trips that I take with my family each year. Not only do I relax more deeply, the time I spend with my wife and daughter is much more satisfying—for all of us.

Of course we can't talk about rest without talking about sleep. I've written and spoken at length about the importance of sleep in my book, on my blog, in the 14four program, and on my podcast, so I won't rehash that material here. But I will remind you of the mountains of research that suggest most of us need seven to nine hours of sleep a night to function properly, with eight being average. Given that one-third of Americans get fewer than six hours a night, my guess is that will include some of you.

Here's what it comes down to: getting enough sleep is the single most important way to improve your productivity. If you do nothing else from this entire course and only increase the amount you are sleeping each night by an hour, you'll still see some significant benefits.

Many of you may feel like you just don't have time to sleep enough, but that's where the other things we've been discussing in this course come into play, like delegating, automating, clarifying your priorities, reducing distractions, and learning to say no. If you really incorporate all of these suggestions, I think you'll be amazed by how much time you can free up.

In addition to getting enough sleep and scheduling periods of rest into your daily, monthly, and yearly schedule, meditation and specific stress management techniques can be a very helpful way to rejuvenate yourself.

You can't be productive if you're distracted, stressed out, or unfocused. Unfortunately, this is often the default state in our culture.

Again, I've written and spoken a lot about the benefits of meditation and stress management, so I won't go into detail here. For more information, check out the chapter in my book on stress management, the 14Four program, and **the articles in the resources section for this week**. There are also some helpful websites like coach.me and smartphone apps like Headspace that can help you to get started.

Okay, that's it for now. Time for me to go outside and sit in the sun!