WHAT KIND OF HARD DAY IS IT?

Staying mentally well starts with knowing what you need

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Ask someone how they are doing during a demanding stretch, and you will often hear the same few words.

"Busy."

"Okay."

"Exhausted."

"Good."

We use these words loosely, as though they all describe the same thing. They do not.

Feeling stressed, feeling tired and feeling nothing at all are three different states. They show up differently, they come from different places, and they need different responses. A strategy that helps one can do very little for another.

A long weekend will not settle a racing mind the night before a major presentation. A breathing exercise will not refill a tank that has been running on empty for months. And neither one will bring back a sense of meaning to someone who has been going through the motions.

Life is messy. We are wired to avoid discomfort, so we often push through without stopping to name what is actually happening.

Staying mentally well is not about feeling good all the time. It is about recognizing which state you are in and giving yourself what that state needs.

STATE #1: I AM STRESSED

Stress is not always the enemy. In the right amount, it sharpens attention and gives us the energy to rise to a challenge.

The problem is when it becomes too much: too many demands at once, something important coming up, pressure to get it right, worry about making a mistake. At that point, stress stops helping and starts standing in the way.

Stress lives in the body as much as the mind, so the fastest tools are often physical.

SEAS THE MOMENT

When stress starts to build, you do not need to wait for a better day. You can seize the moment you are in. An easy way to remember how is **SEAS**:

S – Slow down. Slow your breathing to about one breath every ten seconds. Slow your mind too, by saying a calm word to yourself, slowly: *relax*, *steady* or *let it go*.

E – Exhale longer. Focus on the out-breath and let it gradually lengthen until it is about twice as long as the in-breath. With practice, you may breathe in for three seconds and out for six.

A – Abdomen. Let your belly rise like a balloon as you inhale and fall as you exhale, keeping your chest still.

S – Soften your shoulders. Let them drop and sink a little more with each exhale.

A few rounds of SEAS can take less than a minute, at your desk, before a difficult conversation or between meetings.

Breathing is not the only option. Movement, time outdoors, a walk-and-talk with a colleague, calming music, mindfulness practice, connecting with someone you trust and reducing your news and media intake can all lower the load.

DON'T LEAVE IT UP TO CHANCE

The moments when we most need these tools are often the moments we are least likely to reach for them. Stress narrows our thinking. So, make the plan before you need it.

Build a routine. When an anti-stress action is already part of your day, you spend less energy deciding whether to do it.

Plan. Look at the weeks or days or moments you know will be heavy and decide in advance where you will fit in recovery.

Ask for help. Who could you recruit so you can take a break? Making plans with others makes them more likely to happen.

Remember that little moments matter. Small things add up. A two-minute pause between meetings counts.

Just because you can push through does not mean you have to.

STATE #2: I AM TIRED

Think about the last time you had a stretch of time off.

Did you see it as a chance to enjoy the people and things you love? Or did you see it mainly as a chance to recover?

If you regularly find yourself counting down to vacation just so you can recover, it may be a sign that your tank is being drained faster than it is being refilled.

Think of the fuel gauge in your car. If you let it run all the way to empty, you cannot even get to the gas station. You must fill up before you run out.

Most of us know what our bodies need when we are physically depleted: sleep, food, movement, recovery. We are often less clear about what refills us mentally, and we tend to wait until we are empty before we try.

REST IS NOT ONE THING

One reason rest does not always work is that we try to fix every kind of tiredness with the same solution. A night of sleep will not help much if what you are actually depleted in is connection, creativity or meaning.

Before you reach for your usual fix, pause and ask: *What kind of tired am I?* Once you understand what you are actually depleted in, you can choose the kind of rest that will refill you, rather than the one that is simply most familiar.

Physician Saundra Dalton-Smith describes seven kinds of rest:

1. **Physical rest.** Sleep, as well as gentler activities such as stretching or slowing down your body.
2. **Mental rest.** Quieting a mind that keeps running, even after work ends.
3. **Sensory rest.** Stepping away from screens, notifications, noise and bright light.
4. **Creative rest.** Being inspired by nature, art or anything that sparks awe and fresh thinking.
5. **Emotional rest.** Having space to be honest about how you are doing, rather than always holding it together.
6. **Social rest.** Spending time with people who restore you, not just people who need something from you.
7. **Spiritual rest.** Feeling connected to something larger, such as a sense of purpose, belonging or contribution.

WHAT FILLS YOUR TANK?

What refills one person drains another. For some, it is time in nature, walking the dog or a long run. For others, it is reading for pleasure, learning something new, time with friends, music, art or a project that has nothing to do with work.

The key is to know yourself.

What are your early signs that your tank is getting low? Which kind of rest have you been missing? What is one thing that reliably fills you back up, and how could you build it in before you need it?

STATE #3: I FEEL NOTHING

Sometimes it is not quite stress and not quite exhaustion.

You are getting things done. You show up, answer the emails and attend the meetings. But something is missing. Your motivation is dulled, your focus drifts, and the things that used to matter feel muted.

Sociologist Corey Keyes calls this languishing, and organizational psychologist Adam Grant describes it as the neglected middle child of mental health. It sits between depression at one end and flourishing at the other. It is not a mental illness, but it is not mental health either.

Flourishing is the peak of wellbeing: a strong sense of meaning, mastery and mattering to others. Languishing is the feeling of muddling through, going through the motions without quite feeling anything.

It is easy to miss in yourself, because nothing is obviously wrong. It often shows up after a long stretch of pushing through, when we have spent so much energy getting the job done that we have stopped noticing how we feel about any of it.

MOVE TOWARD WHAT YOU WANT TO FEEL

When you are languishing, waiting to feel better rarely works. The way back usually starts with paying attention to your emotions again, including the uncomfortable ones.

Psychologist Susan David calls this emotional agility: the ability to be with our thoughts, emotions and stories in a way that is curious and compassionate, rather than avoiding them or getting hooked by them. As she puts it, discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.

Naming what you feel is a good place to start. Brené Brown's *Atlas of the Heart* is a helpful resource for finding more precise language for what is going on inside.

Then ask yourself two questions:

What feeling or emotion have I not had enough of lately? Maybe it is joy, excitement, pride, curiosity, calm or connection.

What can I do to create opportunities to feel more of it?

You cannot control every feeling. But when you plan for the experiences that bring certain emotions within reach, you have more say over how your days actually feel.

FOR LEADERS: YOUR TEAM IS IN DIFFERENT PLACES

On any given day, one person on your team may be stressed, another may be running on fumes, and a third may be quietly going through the motions. A fourth may be doing genuinely well.

The same is true after a major change, a restructure or a long push to a deadline. Research on how communities respond to disaster (Zunin and Myers) describes a familiar pattern: an early surge of energy as people pull together, followed by a dip as fatigue and disillusionment set in, and then a slower period of rebuilding. Teams move through similar phases after a major disruption. People do not all move through them at the same pace, and they often move back and forth.

That has a few implications for leaders:

Don't assume one response fits everyone. A team social may lift someone who is languishing and drain someone who needs quiet rest. Offer options.

Allow people to be where they are. Someone who is still struggling with a change is not necessarily resisting it.

Model it yourself. When leaders talk openly about planning their own recovery, it gives others permission to do the same.

Make room for lightness. Shared laughter, especially about our own flaws and efforts, reminds people they are not alone. Trying to appear perfect tends to isolate us. Being human connects us.

A SIMPLE CHECK-IN

This week, ask yourself:

Which state have I been in most lately: stressed, tired or flat?

What is my earliest sign that I am moving into that state?

What is one tool I will use the next time stress starts to build?

Which kind of rest have I been missing?

What feeling do I want more of, and what is one thing I can do to create it?

THE TAKEAWAY

If you are stressed, SEAS the moment, and build anti-stress actions into your week before you need them.

If you are tired, know what fills your tank and refill it regularly, so it never runs empty.

If you feel nothing, identify what you want to feel and create opportunities to get there.

Staying mentally well is not about avoiding hard days. It is about knowing what kind of hard day you are having and responding to it with what it actually needs.

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