

Excerpts from Peak Performance: Elevate Your Game, Avoid Burnout and Thrive with the New Science of Success

By Brad Stulberg & Steve Magness

1 – The Secret to Sustainable Success

Stress + rest = growth. This equation holds true regardless of what you are trying to grow.

PERIODIZATION

In the world of exercise science, this cycle of stress and rest is often referred to as periodization. The cycle looks like this:

1. Isolate the muscle or capability you want to grow
2. Stress it
3. Rest and recover, allowing for adaptation to occur
4. Repeat – this time stressing the muscle or capability a bit more than you did the last time

World class athletes are masters at this cycle. On a micro level, their training alternatives between hard days (e.g. intervals until the brink of muscle failure and total exhaustion) and easy days (e.g. jogging at a pedestrian pace).

INTELLECTUAL AND CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced chick-sent-mi-hi), PhD, pioneer in the field of positive psychology discovered this process of stress + rest = growth holds true for creative and intellectual development.

This approach not only prevents burnout and cognitive fatigue, but it also fosters breakthrough ideas and discoveries.

1. Immersion: total engagement in their work with deep, unremitting focus
2. Incubation: a period of rest and recovery when they are not at all thinking about their work
3. Insight: the occurrence of “aha” or “eureka” moments – the emergence of new ideas and growth in their thinking

MIND AS MUSCLE

Those who are forced to flex their mental muscle – be it resist temptation, solve a hard puzzle, or make tough decisions – performed worse on a subsequent task that also required mental energy as compared to participants in a control group who had an easy first task.

Performance Practices

- Fatigue on one task spills over in the next, even if the two are completely unrelated
- Only take on a few challenges at once or you will run out of mental energy
- Tweak your environment to support your goals. Our surroundings impact our behavior especially when we are fatigued.

If you are interested in really improving your performance, I would suggest incorporating the rhythm of stress and recovery into all aspects of your life.

2 – Rethinking Stress

Stress can be positive, triggering desirable adaptations in the body; or stress can be negative, causing grave damage and harm. The effects of stress depend almost entirely on the dose. And when applied in the right dose, stress does more than stimulate physiological adaptations. It stimulates psychological ones, too.

SKILLS COME FROM STRUGGLE

Studies show that the most effective tutoring systems delay instruction until students reached the point of failure. Growth comes at the point of resistance.

It's only when you step outside your comfort zone that you grow. Being uncomfortable is the path to personal development and growth.

Rather than simply answering a specific question, it is beneficial to be challenged and even to fail. Failure provides an opportunity to analyze a problem from different angles, and to hone the transferrable skill of problem-solving itself.

SYSTEM 2 LEARNING

- System 1 thinking operates automatically and quickly. It is often driven by instinct and intuition. System 1 thinking is our default mode of thinking because it requires less energy.
- System 2 thinking is more thoughtful and analytical and addresses effortful mental activities. It's only when we activate System 2, by really working hard and struggling to figure something out that true learning happens.

The best learning occurs when we really have to work for it. Just like struggling to eke out one last repetition in the weight room is a great method for growing the body, struggling to the point of failure and only then receiving assistance is a great recipe for growing the mind.

If you want to continuously improve in whatever it is that you do, you've got to view stress as something positive, even desirable.

JUST-MANAGEABLE CHALLENGES

Just-manageable challenges manifest when you take on something that makes you feel a bit out of control but not quite anxious or overly aroused. When the task is a bit beyond your skills you're in the zone.

The little voice inside your head saying, "I can't possibly do this," is actually a sign that you're on the right track. Seek out just-manageable challenges, i.e., activities that take you out of your comfort zone and force you to push at the point of resistance for growth.

Performance Practices

- Stress stimulates growth. Growth comes at the point of resistance.
- Developing a new capability requires effort: Skills come from struggle.
- When you struggle, System 2 is activated, and true development is underway.
- Fail productively: Only seek out support after you've allowed yourself to struggle.
- Actively seek out challenges that just barely exceed your ability.

3 – Stress Yourself

Experience and expertise do not necessarily go hand in hand. If not experience, then what is it that makes someone an expert? It is the amount deliberate practice they put in that sets top performers apart from others. Practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.

PERFECT PRACTICE

So what exactly makes perfect practice?

- Top performers actively seek out just-manageable challenges, setting goals for practice sessions that just barely exceed their current capabilities.
- What really differentiates deliberate practice is deep concentration. Their bodies and minds are 100 percent there. They are fully engaged in the moment.

Performance Practices

Apply the components of perfect practice each time you set out to do meaningful work.

- Define a purpose and concrete objectives for each work session.
- Ask yourself: What do I want to learn or get done?
- Focus and concentrate deeply, even if doing so isn't always enjoyable.
- Single-task: do only one thing at a time.
- Remember quality triumphs quantity
- Divide your work into chunks of 50 to 90 minutes with 7 to 20 minute recovery breaks in between.
- In situations when you feel the sensation of stress, remind yourself this is your body's natural way of preparing for a challenge.

- Challenge yourself to view stress productively, and even welcome it. You'll not only perform better, you'll also improve your health.

4 – The Paradox of Rest

THE ART OF MINDFUL MEDITATION

Mindfulness is about being completely present in the moment, fully aware of yourself and your surroundings. When you meditate, you are strengthening your mindful muscle. It's a simple practice:

- Sit in a comfortable position, ideally in a quiet place.
- Breathe deeply for a few breaths, in and out through your nose.
- Allow your breath to settle back into its natural rhythm and focus on only the sensation of breathing, noticing the rise and fall of your abdomen with each breath; if thought arise, notice them, but then direct your focus back to the rhythm and sensation of your breath.
- Set a timer so you don't have to think about time. Start with 1 minute and gradually increase the duration.

Brain studies are beginning to show the immense and measurable benefits of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation increases gray matter in the part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, where the brain does higher-order thinking.

Performance Practices

- Frequency triumphs duration. It's best to meditate daily
- When stressed have "calm conversations"
- When you want to "turn it off" and leave stress behind, pause by taking a few deep breaths to activate the prefrontal cortex.

OUR CREATIVE BRAIN

Our most profound ideas tend to come between those times of deliberate thinking, when our brains are at rest.

It's only when we turn off the conscious mind, shifting into "rest," that insights from the subconscious mind surface.

It's almost like the sole reason you do the work is to set the stage for what happens when you step away.

Performance Practices

- When you are working on a strenuous mental task and hit an impasse, stop working.
- Step away for whatever it is you doing for at least 5 minutes.
- For really draining tasks, consider stepping away until the next morning.

- During your breaks, if you aren't sleeping, perform activities that demand little or no effortful thinking:
 - Listening to music
 - Going on a short walk
 - Doing the dishes
- You may have an “aha” moment of insight during your break. If not, when you return to work, you'll be more likely to make progress.

5 – Rest Like the Best

WALKING BREAKS

Walking is the perfect gateway into the subconscious mind and for stimulating creative insight that can help us overcome mental gridlock.

Have the courage to take breaks throughout the day, especially when you're stuck or feeling unbearable stress.

Put yourself in the way of beauty. Being in nature, or even just looking at pictures of nature, helps with the transition from stress to rest and promotes creative thinking

SLEEP

Sleep is one of the most productive things we can do. When we sleep, and in particular when we dream, the brain goes through the countless things we were exposed to throughout the day and decides what is worth storing in memory. It also figures out where in our brain to store these new things.

Sleep also impact our self-control. Chronically sleep-deprived individuals have less self-control and are at increased risk for succumbing to impulsive desires, poor attentional capacity, and compromised decision making.

Almost all of the sleep's benefits occur in the later stages, mainly during something called REM, or rapid eye movement. The longer we sleep, the greater the proportion of it is in REM. That's because REM time increases with each sleep cycle.

In our sleep, we grow. And we grow not just our cognitive and emotional muscles but our physical ones too.

The best athletes in the world all prioritize sleep just as much as they prioritize their hardest training sessions and their most important competitions.

Performance Practices

- Aim for at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night. For those doing intense physical activity, 10 hours is not too much.
- For a better night's sleep, follow these tips:

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- Ensure you expose yourself to natural light throughout the day.
- Exercise. Vigorous physical activity makes us tired.
- Limit caffeine intake, and phase it out 5 to 6 hours prior to bedtime.
- Limit blue light exposure in the evening.
- If you struggle with a racing mind, try inserting a brief mindfulness meditation session prior to bed
- Keep your room as dark as possible
- Try taking a nap of 10 to 30 minutes to help restore energy and focus if you hit a mid-afternoon lull.