



Don't let flagging energy levels get you down. We discover the latest proven ways to reboot your va-va-voom

Illustration MARK SMITH

Y

ou probably have a go-to list of scapegoats you blame when you're feeling tired – long hours in the office, the kids waking you up too early and that never-ending carousel of washing/tidying/ironing/cooking. But the latest research has found that there are other forces at work that might be sapping your precious energy levels. And these (unlike your boss and the kids) are ones you can control. Here's how...

## Garner your emotional energy

There are days when you bounce out of the house, ready for whatever life throws at you... and there are days when you really don't. According to therapist Mira Kirshenbaum, author of *The Emotional Energy Factor*, the difference is often down to emotional energy, which she believes accounts for up to two-thirds of your va-va-voom.

'Emotional energy – that is, hope, encouragement, optimism, desire – is the basis for acting in the world and for doing so with eagerness and generosity,' she says. 'When this is low, it's hard to act, so either we don't go out with people, we don't exercise, and we give up on hobbies; or we do them grimly and resentfully.'

Here are Kirshenbaum's tips for ramping up yours:

**DO A SOCIAL AUDIT** It's amazing the impact other people's behaviour can have on us. On a piece of paper, write two lists, titled 'positive' and 'negative', and place each of the people you interact with regularly in one of the lists. Try to spend more time with the uplifting ones, and less with the

emotionally draining ones.

Remember, friends aren't social capital unless they're emotional capital.

**TAKE YOURSELF TO COURT** Guilt is one of the most exhausting and least productive emotions. When you catch yourself feeling guilty, put yourself on trial – imagine giving evidence in a court of law. If you did the best you could do in the given situation, toss the charge out of court. If you made a hurtful mistake that could have been avoided, then set yourself a reasonable 'sentence' to make amends. Then let it go.

**UP YOUR ENGAGEMENT** When you're in a life lull, you need to expose yourself to things that are new and inspiring. Try something unexpected – learn to play the bongos, join a local choir, take an art class, grow a vegetable garden. Whether you're any good at it or not doesn't matter – you'll feel like you're pushing yourself, which is an achievement in itself.

● Find out more about Kirshenbaum's work at [chestnuthillinstitute.com/mirakirshenbaum](http://chestnuthillinstitute.com/mirakirshenbaum).

## Adopt your primal posture

Did you know you could be exhausting yourself just by sitting down? That's because, according to posture expert Esther Gokhale, you could be doing it wrong. Really!

Gokhale believes we've forgotten our 'primal posture' – the way our ancestors would have held themselves to sit, stand and walk. While our body structure hasn't changed over the millennia, our posture has worsened, owing to poorly designed furniture, restrictive fashions and even some modern workouts, such as dance routines with awkward moves. When

Gokhale studied indigenous peoples who have retained primal posture, she found that back pain was almost non-existent, and they could tackle hours of manual work without too much trouble. So what's this got to do with energy?

'Bad posture can severely affect your energy levels,' explains Gokhale. Tensed muscles and compressed bones can trap blood vessels. This compromises your circulation, which is vital for keeping your muscles working efficiently. And a hunched torso can prevent you from inhaling the optimum amount of oxygen, upsetting muscle function, brain productivity and energy levels. Here's how to move – in the classic way:

**RELAX AND ROLL** 'Slouching is bad, but so is sitting and standing rigidly upright. It's unnatural and can cause tension and pain,' says Gokhale. For a quick posture fix: 'Instead of thrusting your chest forward and pulling your shoulders back, try rolling your shoulders forward, up and back, and then relaxing them.' This will loosen them up so they naturally go back to where they should be.

**SIT RIGHT** 'Stretch-sitting' allows your back to elongate, your discs to decompress and your nerves to move freely,' explains Gokhale. Before sitting down, place a cushion on your backrest or hang a rolled towel over it. Sit back in your chair and then bend forward from the hips, curving your back and stretching out your

spine – use the arms of the chair as leverage to lengthen your spine further. To keep this elongated position when you sit back, rest the top of your back on the cushion or towel so part of your weight is supported by it.

**POWER YOUR WALK**

'When most people walk, it's like a series of falls – they stick each leg out to block their fall,' says Gokhale. This can create jarring ➔

“Emotional vitality can account for up to two-thirds of your drive”



## ● Pump Up Your Energy

and increase muscle tension. Gokhale has devised the 'primal gait', which encourages you to engage your glutes (by squeezing your bum), so you have controlled propulsion and a soft landing. It also means only the necessary muscles get a workout.

## Power up that nap

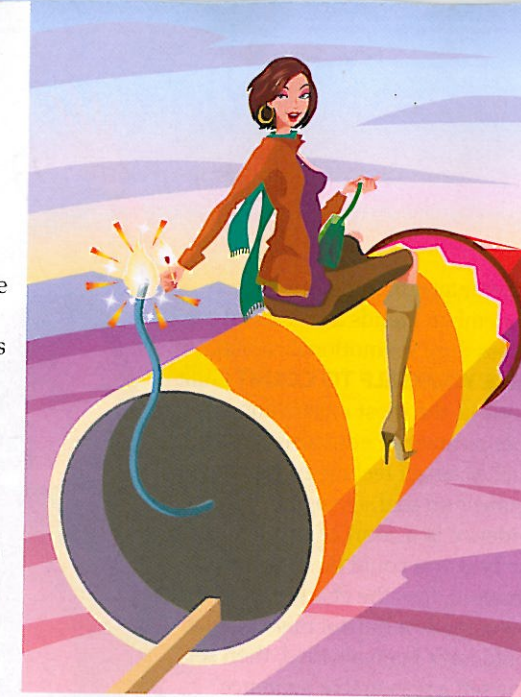
It seems the link between sleep and energy is hazier than you might think. 'We only conserve about 10% more energy, in terms of glucose stores, when asleep rather than awake,' says neuroscientist Penelope Lewis, director of the Sleep and Memory Lab at the University of Manchester. While sleep gives our muscles a chance to rest and repair, the reason it's so refreshing might be in our heads – literally.

'During the day, we take in lots of information that gets coded in the brain through the strengthening of the physical connections between neurons. Eventually, the neurons reach saturation point and become exhausted,' says Lewis. 'When we go to sleep, all these connections weaken again, so only the strongest remain, and space is cleared so we can take in new information.'

So what if we simply don't have the time to fit in the seven to eight hours' sleep that most people need to feel on form? That's where the power nap comes in – and in Lewis' new book, *The Secret World Of Sleep*, she reveals new research that shows you can maximise yours in more ways than you might think. Here's how to nap smart:

### WORK YOUR CYCLE

'We have a sleep cycle that goes through four stages of sleep roughly every 90 minutes. Having all of them, in order, is important, so a 90-minute nap would be optimum,'



says Lewis. 'But you shouldn't nap for that long if it stops you getting to sleep at night. Even naps as brief as six minutes long have been shown to improve brain function.'

**TIME IT RIGHT** Slow-wave sleep (SWS) – the third stage – is characterised by large, slow brainwaves, which 'clean up' the exhausted brain. It's thought to be the most refreshing type of sleep. 'If you have a nap in the afternoon or evening, it's more likely to contain lots of SWS,' says Lewis.

**FIGHT EMOTIONAL FATIGUE** If you're feeling emotionally exhausted, however, try a morning nap, when you'll get mostly REM sleep – the fourth stage, which is characterised by fast, erratic brain activity. 'REM is responsible for helping you process emotions and it may even help to detach traumatic feelings from upsetting memories,' explains Lewis. 'In REM, the memory is replayed but

your body is paralysed, so it can't express distress signals, such as tensing up, which is normally what triggers you to feel fear or upset, – so the memory and the emotions are separated.'

**KNOW WHEN NOT TO NAP** If you're an insomniac, napping is a no-no. 'We have something called "sleep pressure", an hunger-like need for SWS that builds during the day,' says Lewis. 'Napping

relieves this, but could make it even harder for an insomniac to drop off at night. And due to other hormones present in the brain, night sleep is the most restorative of all.'

## Sync your cycle

You probably notice that your energy levels peak and trough from day to day, and week to week. But could your hormones be to blame? They do more, it turns out, than just make us unpredictable and moody once a month. Alisa Vitti, author of *WomanCode*, believes that if we can learn to get in tune with our cycle instead of fighting it, we can feel on the best possible form every day.

**TIME IT RIGHT** Your period is due any day, you're feeling exhausted and the last thing you want to do is that Zumba class. Sound familiar? According to Vitti, trying to tackle high-intensity exercise at this time in the month, when testosterone levels are low, is likely to leave you feeling depleted. 'Our testosterone levels rise slowly throughout our cycle, peaking around ovulation (mid-cycle) before gradually tapering off again,' she says. 'When they're high, we have more stamina, whereas later in the month, our bodies need rest, so we get more out of a gentle yoga or Pilates class.'

**EAT FOR ENERGY** When we're menstruating, we lose iron and zinc, which help our bodies process our hormones efficiently. This can leave us feeling washed out. Replenish both with nutritious sea greens, such as samphire and seaweed.

**REBALANCE OESTROGEN** Too much oestrogen in your body can make you moody, and modern life exposes us to a range of chemicals – from antibiotics in meat to dry cleaning substances – which can disrupt your hormonal balance. You can help your liver break down excess oestrogen if you keep it in good working order. Simply reduce the amount of sugar in your diet and include plenty of fruit and leafy green vegetables. ♦

“Taking naps as brief as six minutes can help improve brain function”





## Psychologist PENELOPE LEWIS

Neuroscientist Penelope Lewis, author of *The Secret World of Sleep*, solves your sleep worries

**Q** I often study into the night for exams, but my mum tells me it's more beneficial for me to get a good night's sleep. Is she right? *Anna, Shoreham*

**A** Sleep boosts your memory in two ways. First, it's the one time when our brain isn't busy completing tasks or at least thinking about something specific, which makes it the ideal time for it to process the day's memories. It does this by actively replaying things that were experienced in the day. Secondly, memory replay can be intentionally triggered during sleep too, so your mum's right: it's important you get a solid night's sleep.

But studying at night is not a bad idea, as memories, particularly new ones, are more likely to be replayed when you sleep. This means whatever you've revised just before you go to bed is replayed once you've closed your eyes.

To assist memory replay, you could inhale a distinctive scent, such as rose, while you study and again before you sleep. Research shows this can trigger your target memory to replay and strengthen. But we become immune to the effects of smells quickly, so use an air freshener to release the scent in 20-second bursts.

**Do you have a question for our experts? If so, email [talkback@topsante.co.uk](mailto:talkback@topsante.co.uk) or tweet us @TopSanteUK**



**Q** Whenever I have a stressful day planned, I have trouble sleeping the night before. I often wake up at 4am and can't get back to sleep. Can you help? *Celine, Carlisle*

**A** Most of us have woken up in the middle of the night before a busy day desperate to get back to sleep. And although we know that a good night's sleep is critical in order to feel good and function normally, we just can't get back to the Land of Nod. But instead of resigning yourself to spending the early hours staring at the ceiling, there are many things you can do to ensure you have a good night's sleep.

First of all, make sure your bedroom feels as comfortable as possible –

cool, quiet and not too brightly lit – as this will give your brain all the right signals that it's time to switch off.

You need to keep your bed associated with sleeping peacefully – and not lying awake stressed – so when you next wake up at 4am, get up. Once you're up, try a relaxing activity in another room that may help you dispel any worrying thoughts – such as reading – or, if you're particularly stressed about the next day, write everything down, including a plan for your day. Next, drink a glass of milk or eat a few

# Ask The Experts

**TOP  
Santé**  
LOOK AFTER YOU

**Q** Every morning I hit the snooze button on my alarm clock multiple times before I can muster the energy to get up. Is this a bad habit to get into and is there anything I can do to help me feel ready to jump out of bed? *Steph, Durham*

**A** I fall into this 'snoozer' category, so I sympathise. Don't worry, it's normal for you to feel groggy when you first wake up and there's nothing wrong with pressing your snooze button first thing – it can often take a good 15 minutes to feel truly awake because you're in the stage of sleep inertia (halfway between asleep and awake).

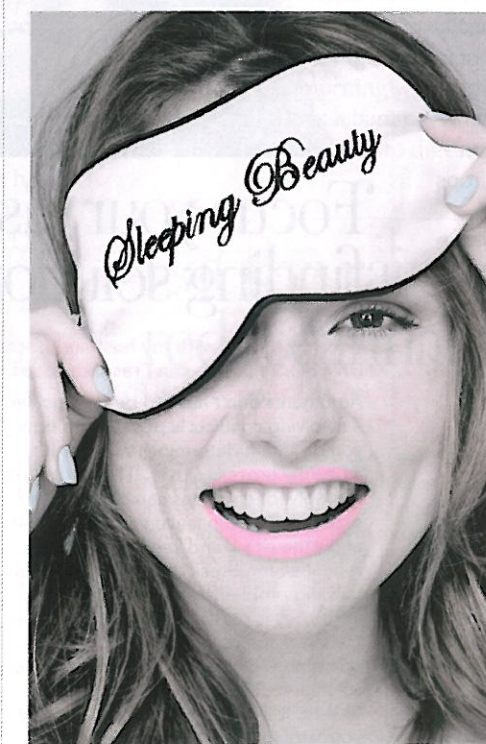
However, even though it may be tempting to fall back to sleep, it's vital you don't, as you'll end up going back through this sleep inertia

stage several times. Force yourself to stay awake by turning on a bright light to kick-start your circadian clock and turn on the radio – your brain will gradually start to engage with your surroundings.

During the winter months, set your heating so it comes on half an hour before your alarm to help raise your body's temperature and prepare it to wake up. And, for a little extra zing in the morning, try inhaling some mood-boosting peppermint or lemon scents so you're ready to jump out of bed.

## 'How can I sleep better working shifts?'

**I'm a care worker who works shifts and often find it hard to get to sleep during the day when I'm on nights. Why is this and what can I do to ensure I get the sleep I need?** *Clemmie, Horsham*



You may be finding it hard to sleep in the day because of your circadian rhythm, which works on a 24-hour cycle. These rhythms are driven by a group of cells located in the hypothalamus of our brain, which are controlled by signals from nature, such as sunshine and nocturnal darkness. During this cycle, our body temperature and hormone production changes – at night, our temperature drops and our production of melatonin (the sleep hormone) increases. But when you're trying to sleep in the day, your circadian rhythm is in the wrong part of its cycle, so it's hard to drop off.

But there are solutions. First, you can even artificially reset your clock by taking melatonin supplements three hours before you intend to sleep. Also, black out windows and stay away from your TV, phone and computer at least two hours before bed, as blue spectrum light can reset your circadian clock by breaking down melatonin. If you find it tough getting up in the dark, a sun lamp with a blue spectrum filter can reset your timings when natural light isn't available. Finally, try to group your night shift work into a minimum of a one-week stint, so your cycle has time to adjust before it has to change back again. ♦

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hazelnuts, which are both high in tryptophan. This helps the body produce niacin, which in turn helps to produce serotonin that can act as a calming agent in the brain and plays a key role in sleep. However, avoid caffeine and food containing the amino acid tyramine (such as peppers, smoked meats and fish), which is a sleep inhibitor.

If you are really feeling wide awake, a hot shower may help, too; it will not only relax you, but will also temporarily raise your body temperature, creating a dramatic and effective cooling-down process when you get back into bed. This is a signal for your body to fall asleep. You could even try a jasmine or lavender shower gel for an added soporific effect.

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