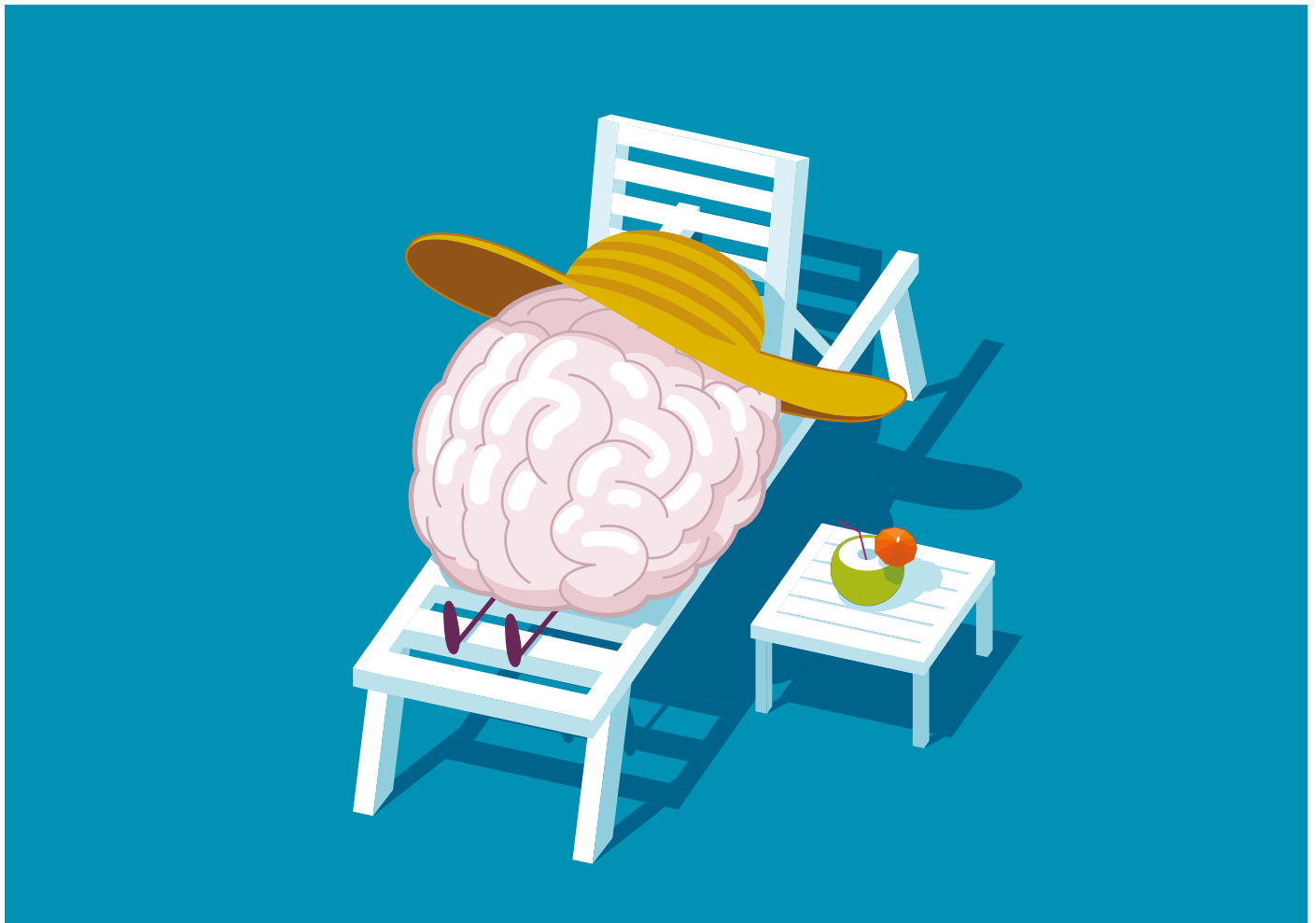


The Right Type of Rest

Karen Meager explains how to boost your performance at work by getting the right type of rest



WRITER
KAREN MEAGER

As a researcher into burnout recovery, I've long been curious about why some people can bounce back quickly after a period of exertion whilst others find it hard and remain drained for longer. The reasons behind this are complex, and there is no single remedy that works for everyone. In our search for new approaches, we moved away from the organisation and into the world of elite sports.

When we conducted research for our latest book, *Rest. Practise. Perform.*, we found that elite sports have a lot to teach us about how to rest and, as a result, perform better. In this article, we share how to find the right kind of rest and recovery to fit the role that you do.

The Performance Secrets of Elite Sports

We studied how elite sports professionals maintained high levels of performance over time by harnessing a rhythm that combines rest and practise and that leads to performance. In doing this, we discovered some interesting nuances about rest, which could be useful for everyone.

In elite sports, people are 'performing' only during an actual competition, race or match. In other times they are either resting or practising. They spend far longer in the rest and practise phases

than performing, but what they do in the rest and practise phases is a critical part of what helps them to perform when it matters.

Rest is essential to recoup what is lost during performance. Sports professionals don't just stop when they are in a rest phase; many of them remain fairly active. However, they are 'resting' a few essential parts of themselves. Usually, they need to rest whatever muscles in their body are activated in their particular sport, and they also need a rest from the pressure of competition. Many sports people enjoy other sports that they do just for fun: many footballers and F1 drivers play golf recreationally.



Rest and Burnout Recovery

Burnout is the most prominent and most frequently identified consequence of a lack of conscious rest in the world of work. When I conducted my own research into burnout recovery, I noticed that people who recovered quickly might have needed complete rest initially but soon got active again. However, rather than getting active at work, they go into something that broadens their horizons. This might be an interest or a hobby. Others who loved their work found a different way of engaging with it – writing rather than speaking, reading or learning rather than executing. This is the non-sports person's equivalent of rest.

Here are some examples of different types of work and what you can do to get the right kind of rest:

Emotionally draining work

Emotionally draining work can be anything where you need to engage with people's difficulties and struggles at a human level. People who engage in emotionally draining work include HR professionals, coaches, therapists, medical professionals who engage with the public and/or managers and leaders. Management and leadership roles have become increasingly pastoral in recent times.

If you engage in this kind of work, you will need a break from it every now and then. So, you might organise all work that falls into this category into a few days a week, giving you time for more cerebral or practical matters for the rest of the week. Some leaders, for example, pack in their team development work into an intense period and then spend a few weeks on non-team matters. A lot of people find this more useful than spreading emotionally draining work out. If you can't escape it, then you need to pace out your holidays and make sure you switch off and

also make sure your personal life provides you with some respite from it – so minimal dramas in your private life!

Mentally draining work

People who have to focus and concentrate over long periods are at risk of exhaustion from the mentally taxing nature of this work. This work is technical in some way and can include people who work in tech, architects, technical designers, engineers. To give yourself a mental rest, do something physical or practical. You could take some walks in the fresh air between bouts of mental intensity or spend some time building something concrete or tactile. Additionally, these people do a lot of work alone, so (leaning into a *change is as good as a rest*) a rest can include participating in some group project or undertaking something social. Another way people get mental rest is to focus on just one thing if normally they are overseeing a lot of things, or vice versa. This switch gives their minds an effective mental rest.

Creatively draining work

People who engage in creative work are frequently compelled to do something creative with everything they experience. It's how their mind is programmed. It is a real gift but can also be exhausting. People who engage in creative work get rest by taking things as they are, appreciating something for what it is and looking for simple, straightforward solutions. Most creative people have some of these elements in their work, so organising them in such a way that they do them in one chunk of time will help them to switch their minds off generating creative work and give it some well-needed rest.

Physically draining work

Nowadays, for most of us, work is much less physically draining, but there are exceptions. People who train or make

presentations do a lot of standing, as do those who work in retail or security – people in these roles will need physical rest. While more of us are working part or all of the week from home, many still undertake punishing commutes which are uncomfortable and sometimes stressful; this needs to be taken into account when considering rest strategies. The key is to work out whether there is a part of your work which is physically draining and plan appropriate physical rest. This doesn't necessarily mean completely stopping, but a punishing workout after a commute may not provide you with rest; more gentle exercise may be more appropriate.

To understand what you need in terms of physical rest, listen to your body. What's more, listen to it after you've done something physical. That's because what we think we need is not always what we actually need. Sometimes a workout after the commute will leave you feeling energised, regardless of whether you want to do it beforehand. If you feel exhausted and further depleted afterwards, it might not be the right thing for you.

In Conclusion

There is much all of us can learn about how to achieve and maintain performance in our own fields of work from the rhythm adopted by many professional sports. One of the findings from the research taught us just how different everyone is when it comes to energy, and therefore any remedy to tiredness or exhaustion must be tailored. However, we all need a bit of help sometimes to get us started, and I hope that thinking about it in terms of how your work is draining you will help you to create a rhythm with the right kind of rest in it. For individuals and organisations alike, elite sports teach us that well-rested people perform better.



Karen Meager is co-author of *Rest. Practise. Perform.: What elite sport can teach leaders about sustainable wellbeing and performance*. Karen takes the latest scientific and academic thinking and makes it useful and easy to apply. Her approach is grounded in research and professional practice that spans 20-plus years. Karen holds master's degrees in psychology and

health research, and her specialist research area is mental health and burnout in organisations. Karen's goal with *Rest. Practise. Perform.* is to help leaders and organisations find a working rhythm that delivers top performance whilst also prioritising people and their health. See:

www.monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk/rest-practise-perform