



Optimizing Our Brain for Success, Productivity, & Happiness

Optimizing our brain is actually quite simple, in theory. But it requires practice, awareness, and intention. Five simple ways to optimize our brain include:

- Getting to Know Our Brain
- Teaching & Training Our Brain
- Resting & Relaxing Our Brain
- Energizing & Enhancing Our Brain
- Balancing Our Brain

Read below to learn more about each of these...

Getting to know our brain is really about learning the skills and talents that either came with your brain or those that were developed because of the environment in which you grew. Each brain is unique and is shaped in combination by the genes and environment. Ask yourself, "What is my brain good at?" Spend a good chunk of time on this. Maybe even come up with a list of over 10 things that your brain is good at over the next few weeks. Each night try to think of something different. For example, you may know that your brain is good at:

- 1) seeing connections and patterns
- 2) remembering concepts
- 3) making intuitive decisions
- 4) remembering numbers like dates, phone numbers, and answers to math problems, and
- 5) problem solving.

It's also wise to know what our brains are NOT good at. We can devote some time to listing those as well. For example, you may know that your brain is NOT good at:

- 1) music and singing on key
- 2) listing off the author's names of books and papers that you have read
- 3) remembering details.

Once we know what our brain is and is not good at we can seek out more opportunities to do what we're good at and reduce the amount of time we spend on what we are not good at. Becoming a ballet dancer might be well and good if your brain has the ability to do so but if your brain is better suited to be an NBA basketball player then you're going to be exerting a lot of wasted energy on perfecting that plié. Not to mention you'll be a lot happier showing off your lay-up skills if you follow that path.

Teaching and training our brain is actually happening as you read right now. Your brain is plastic. Yes plastic. Plastic means malleable, moldable, shapeable, and changeable. Your brain is not fixed or permanent, like we once believed in neuroscience. This concept of the brain being able to change is referred to as “**neuroplasticity**” and is the reason that personal growth (and all types of change) is possible. Consider what you are teaching your brain in your regular daily routine? Are you distracted by many things, unable to focus on one thing? Are you more apt to see the negatives around you than the positives? Are you optimistic or pessimistic? Are you learning to endure your stressful situation or finding time to relax? All of these things are not fixed or permanent. They can be changed. And with practice you can change them, yourself, and your brain.

If lack of focus is a problem for you then **PRACTICE being focused**. Notice when your mind is wandering off and, rather than indulging in it, bring it back to what you are supposed to be doing. This is the basis for many popular stress-reduction techniques from Eastern philosophies that are making their way into our culture (and into our science!). Yoga, meditation, and basic mindfulness all have the power to train the brain to concentrate on the task at hand. And if we can concentrate on the task then we are more likely to get it done, and as a result, be productive. When we get things done we feel accomplished and more likely to be satisfied and happy with our day.

We can also **PRACTICE being more optimistic, positive, and happy**. A gratitude journal is an excellent way to prime your brain to see what is good in your life, what you are truly happy about and appreciate, and what brings you joy. Keeping a gratitude journal is as simple as writing down 5 things each day that you're grateful for. This practice has been shown to significantly increase life satisfaction and happiness in scientific studies. And because you are learning to see the positives, you are changing your brain and that process will reinforce your ability to feel happy.

Resting and relaxing our brain is not only good for optimizing our brain, it is good for keeping well and healthy. Chronic stress is a common problem in our society and for our brain. Our brain is damaged by chronic stress, particularly in areas that are related to memory, emotionality, thinking, and decision making. So keep your stress down! Easier said than done, admittedly, but you can kill two birds with one stone by practicing yoga, meditation, and mindfulness mentioned above. Not only do those practices help focus our brains, they significantly reduce stress, stress-related symptoms, and stress-related diseases and disorders, according to many scientific studies.

If you're not up for those activities then try something different like some quiet time alone, a relaxing book, and gentle walk, or an afternoon nap. But please do not mistake watching an adrenaline-induced TV show, reading murder-mystery book, or a not-so-relaxing evening with your most argumentative friends as relaxing. They aren't relaxing and you won't get the same benefits. Relaxing is hard work. One often hears people say “I can't relax”. True enough. That's even more reason to practice it. Remember, it's a practice, not an all-or-none skill that you either have or don't have. And remember the brain can change and it will get easier and easier to relax.

We also need to rest our brain with a good night's sleep. Some studies claim 9-10 hrs are needed, likely because we are very sleep-deprived as a society. But sleep appears to be necessary to keep our body healthy and in balance and also helps improve our memory. Again, being more productive and successful requires a good memory and, generally, good health!

Energizing and enhancing our brain is important because of the heavy demands we place on our brain. Our brains have finite resources and too much thinking will deplete our brain of the energy it needs. It is a biological organism that needs energy to function optimally. We get our energy primarily from the things that we consume, like food and water. Foods with real nutrients are needed to maintain brain function. Real foods are foods that you can grow, pick, harvest, hunt, fish for, etc. The really good ones have deep colors that imply a rich source of nutrients. Also great for brain health and optimal functioning include: Omega-3s (from fish or walnuts) and antioxidants from berries, to keep down inflammation. And of course, a good source of vitamins and minerals are needed to maintain the structure of brain cells and to allow for communication among brain cells. Good health makes sense... literally!

We also energize our brain when we exercise. We all know the many health benefits from exercising but we may not know the benefits to our brain. In fact, exercising increases cell growth in the brain, particularly in areas that are responsible for memory and emotional wellness.

Another great way to energize our brain is to do things we enjoy. Enjoyment invokes the neurochemical reward system and offers a natural way to feel good.

Oh, and drink enough water! Too many of us suffer from dehydration, which causes headaches among other things. Having a headache is going to severely affect our ability to be productive and happy. And it's pretty simple to fix!

Balancing our brain is about keeping everything in perspective and finding the balance that's right for us. Balance is about keeping our entire self in balance because our precious brain is the organ that IS in charge of everything. We also want to balance functions like creativity with logic. Too much of one over the other isn't always a good thing. We can also invoke our emotions to help with decision making. Sometimes we spend too much time trying to analyze a situation when in fact emotions can be used to make a decision, at least according to some neuroscientists. When everything feels balanced, we feel good. We are not expending more than we can afford. We feel happy and get more things done than if we are burning the candle at both ends.

Balance leads to happiness, success, and productivity. Actually, balancing all of our brain needs like letting it do what it's good at, teaching and training it to do what you want, resting and relaxing it, energizing and enhancing it, and balancing it all contribute to a well functioning and optimal brain. Ultimately, this will contribute to our sense of success, productivity, and feelings of happiness.

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