



The Energy Budget

If you're struggling with energy levels right now; whether that's because you're dealing with some difficult circumstances, or you're feeling poorly, or you're battling physical problems, or mental strain, or both, or you're just plain exhausted... here are some things to think about.

Every day, in everything we do, we're either spending or refuelling our energies. Our diet – what exactly we're putting in the engine - the exercise we do or don't take, our relationships (with ourselves, as well as with other people) and how we look after our 'spirits' (whatever that might mean to you).

Starting at a biological level: Nervous systems, and ultimately, brains, have evolved over billions of years to manage the resources needed for survival. In other words, to manage the energy budget. And the human brain – as far as we're aware, the most complex brain on Earth – has evolved to do this in incredibly complex ways.

It's such a brilliant system, that a great proportion of the brain's function runs below the level of our awareness, so we can direct our attention where it's most needed: things or people we need to look out for, things we need to do, or learn about... or what we just find more interesting, or fun.

Your brain is looking after you, right now. It's processing up to 400 billion bits of information per second; measuring all kinds of energy income and expenditure, predicting what's going to happen, what's going to be needed, and figuring out your next moves. You'll only be aware of about two thousand bits per second.

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It's a comforting thought, that your brain is looking after you. Even when terrible things happen and you may feel as though you're not functioning, your brain will continue to keep you alive. Even the phenomenon of depression, which is experienced as the draining away of all energies and ability to function normally, happens because the brain recognises that deep rest is needed, and that battling on is simply out of the question. So, it shuts much of the system down to accomplish this. So, you are still functioning, on some level, and surviving. The causes of the shut-down can only start to be addressed after deep rest. As Jim Carrey said, that's what's happening if you're depressed. It means 'deep rest'. We really do have a lot to thank our brains for.

Your 'budget' includes emotional and social as well as physical functions because we are emotional and social creatures. It all ultimately boils down to surviving and thriving – or not.

Parents are responsible for their children's energy budget while they're small. Then, when those children become young adults - party time... And it's amazing how much partying the body can take... until it can't, and we're forced to learn to budget better.

What does 'you thriving' look like, to your mind? It's often easy to notice when family and friends are doing well or not so well. When you love them, you'll pay close attention to such things. But you may not pay such good attention to yourself, until you start to experience not thriving in one way or another; at which point, you may start trying to figure out what will get you back on track. And when you're desperate to feel better again, you'll try anything. There are many services out there offering all kinds of solutions. Some of them may be just the help you need; but none of them can be a substitute for you simply looking after your own energy budget.

We know how important diet is for energy. But all the things you do, and think, and say, the company you keep, and the situations you get yourself into either generate or cost you energy that you need to thrive.

The income and expenditure picture is complex. For example: exercise uses energy, short term, but benefits longer term metabolism, strength, and many other other functions. And there's a Goldilocks balance of not too little, not too much exercise, but just the right amount - and the right kind - to improve or maintain fitness, and your needs won't be the same as anyone else's.

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If you live with a chronic condition, you need to be careful not to overdo things, but at the same time it's important to do what you can to raise your energy levels if you can - safely of course. It's very important not to compare yourself to more athletic friends. Metabolism and energy needs are a totally individual matter. But the right amount of activity and rest and healthy food are obvious energy chargers.

Conversely: comfort eating, boozing, or shopaholic binges may not be the best choices for long-term health benefits; but... on a bad day, they might just get you through the next half hour.

So, sometimes, we go for those short-term benefit choices because the brain evolved to work in the here and now, in the immediate. And there are plenty of those kinds of options available. Things like: 'ordering another bottle'; or, 'ordering pizza delivery'; or, 'finishing the whole packet of biscuits'; or, 'scrolling through TikTok videos for two hours' or playing a video game all day long. We've all done things like this. We don't meanourselves harm; but we might be making things harder going in the long term.

We often do short-term comfort things when we're struggling or flagging. Your brain recognises that comfort is needed and will direct you toward the fast-fix that it's learned brings some instant relief. Of course, it's no sustainable solution. So, you could say, the dear old brain isn't always right; but it's always doing its best.

All the time you're alive, you're just doing your best to get by. And if just getting through today is an astounding achievement, and if having three pieces of cake helped you do that, then hooray for cake, until you can find a better strategy and get back on your feet. It's so important be kind to yourself about these things, while at the same time, keeping an eye on kerbing that junk food approach to living.

Unexplained energy loss could mean depression, or perhaps apathy is shutting out a situation that needs changing. When you're feeling buoyant and energetic, raise the bar!

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But when something is depleting your energy, and you need to take care of yourself for a while and recharge your batteries, lower the bar! Lower your expectations of yourself until you are rested and restored. This is no time to take on more commitments. You won't be like this forever, although it may feel like it. But unless you look after yourself, it could be. What's the saying? 'You can't pour from an empty cup'.

So, if your energy is persistently low, there are questions to consider: do you simply need make more time to rest? Are you in the right place for you? Are you doing the right things for you? And what about the people around you? Are your relationships nourishing or depleting your energies?

Have you ever spent time in someone's company and come away feeling wiped out? Or have you spent time in someone's company and come away feeling uplifted and invigorated?

And here's a thought to end with:

Have you ever stood or sat under a tree, or on top of a hill, or by the sea, or in a garden, just looking at the view and listening to the sounds, and had a sense that you are being nourished or fuelled in some way, just by doing this? That's quite interesting, isn't it?