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# Positive Energy

**How daydreaming and other no-no's can give you a boost to get you through the day.**

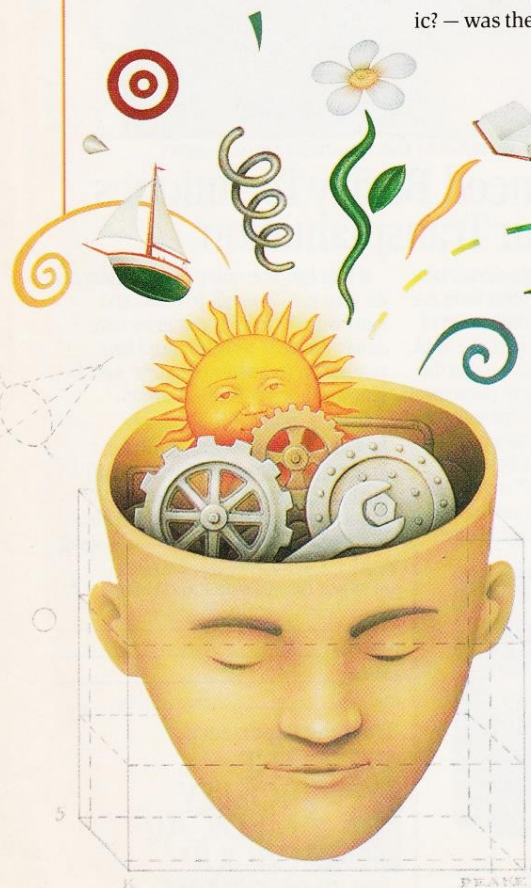
It's yet another hectic day – deadlines to meet, people to call, appointments to keep. So why am I sitting at my desk, playing with a kaleidoscope and daydreaming instead of tackling the stacks of work piled around me? Because this five minutes of playtime gives me an energy boost – a “recess” like I enjoyed when I was a child – and makes me more productive in the long run.

I wasn't always so willing to take such breaks, believing instead that a long, exhausting day of constant work – isn't that the American work ethic? – was the secret of success. But a conversation with “energy engineer” Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper gave my tired, fast-lane life a tuneup.

McGee-Cooper is a Dallas business consultant and creativity expert who works in the relatively new field of “brain engineering,” which she defines as the process of synthesizing research from a wide range of fields – say, psychology and biochemistry – and using the results to solve business problems.

“When we get angry or anxious, we flood the blood with one type of chemical, and when we're happy, we flood it with another,” she says. The idea is that brain chemistry and energy can be revved up by laughing, imagining positive events, taking risks, playing and having fun like you did when you were a kid with almost limitless energy.

McGee-Cooper can't make house calls, so she has chronicled her work with thousands of corporate leaders, employees, government officials, and academicians in a book called *You Don't Have to Go Home from Work Exhausted! A Program to Bring Joy, Energy, and Balance to Your Life*. Coauthored by Duane Trammell, managing partner of McGee-Cooper's consulting firm, and health and business writer Barbara Lau, the book includes



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case studies and comments from employees at Texas Utilities, Fluor Daniel Inc., and other companies. It also features easy-to-use exercises and techniques for renewing your energy throughout the day.

The authors write from personal experience. All three had experienced “stress-related energy drains” at some point in their lives, McGee-Cooper says. She recalls “playing Superwoman” early on in her career, juggling roles of mother, student, and teacher, and trying to unlock the secrets of creativity, a subject that had long fascinated her.

McGee-Cooper earned a bachelor’s degree in interior design and architecture from The University of Texas and a master of fine arts degree from Southern Methodist University. At Columbia University in New York, she designed her own doctoral program, focusing on creative problem-solving.

While on the faculty at Purdue University, she headed a research team that worked with post-doctoral students in science and engineering to awaken their latent creativity. “It was generally believed that creativity could not be taught,” McGee-Cooper says. She proved it could and began applying what she learned to her own life and, later, to her business clients: the importance of taking breaks, of finding creative ways to have fun while working, the importance of family and friends, hobbies, and vacations to keep energy levels high.

Her dealings with corporate clients usually involve working for several months with management teams of twelve to thirty-eight people, examining what’s going on at their companies both from a business standpoint and from a standpoint of worker productivity and satisfaction. “The more quality you bring to your personal life, the more quality you bring to the work life,” she says. “It’s the opposite of workaholism,

where you work constantly and miss out on the fun things in life.”

Some of her recommendations are common-sense things we’ve always been told we should do: eat a good breakfast, exercise, don’t drink too much. But the suggestions that caught my eye — and the ones she really focuses on — are activities we’re often told by our parents, our teachers, our friends, our co-workers, our bosses that we should not do: daydream, take frequent “joy breaks,” don’t work through lunch, retire the “superhuman” cape, don’t act your age.

Such advice sounds like the antithesis of the American work ethic, but McGee-Cooper says it actually may make people more productive. “Very often, our so-called ‘bad habits’ are bootleg joy breaks: ... The little kid in you says ‘yes,’ [but] the adult in you says ‘shame on you.’ Then the guilt starts piling up. We found that when people take seriously

the little kid in themselves, they work more productively and have more fun at it. Their lives come into balance.”

John Carlson, a vice president at Dallas-based TU Electric, says both his work life and his personal life are more balanced since he tried McGee-Cooper’s concepts. At the end of a typical ten-hour workday, he says, he follows her advice to renew himself with a favorite activity instead of just unwinding by eating or watching TV. So he spends a few hours in his woodworking shop or with his horses. “I find after a day of meetings, I need some time alone,” he says. “It’s self-renewal; it energizes me.”

TU has taken a top-down, corporation-wide initiative to boost productivity and energize employees by applying some of the concepts in the McGee-Cooper book, Carlson says. The utility company encourages employees to take lunch breaks outside their offices and to

bring “toys” to work — puzzles or pictures that remind them of favorite things to do in leisure time. “It contributes to an energizing atmosphere and a lighter attitude in the work force,” Carlson says.

And the company has learned to “appreciate the diversity of each other,” Carlson says. “Some folks may have a somewhat cluttered desk that to them is organized, whereas others may have clean desks. We’ve learned to accept and understand we’re all different and how, synergistically, that makes us stronger as a company. You can be so structured that you never create or innovate, and you can be so creative that you never implement. We’ve learned a lot about balance.”

**M**cGee-Cooper’s approach sounds good on paper, so I decided to road test it for a week to see if her sug-

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gestions would boost my energy levels and enthusiasm for working, playing, and living. Although I'm self-employed and my office is at home, sometimes I think I'm a tougher boss than any I worked for in previous jobs. In the past, I wouldn't stop for lunch or take breaks if I was working on a project. If I did eat, it would be something fast I could stick in the microwave. Then I'd get cranky by midafternoon and lose

**“When people take seriously the little kid in themselves, they work more productively.”**

my concentration. If I did take a break, I'd feel guilty.

For a week, I changed my behavior and, more importantly, revised my thinking about how I should work. Following McGee-Cooper's advice, I took a lot of breaks. I'd work an hour, then stop for five minutes to do something enjoyable: look out the window at the falling leaves, read a magazine article, play with the kaleidoscope on my desk, or doodle on a drawing pad I now keep handy.

I made a point to have a good lunch – not a sandwich eaten at my desk while I continued working at my computer. One day I made a “date” with my husband at a restaurant; the next, I ate my lunch outside and enjoyed the nice weather. Another day, I did something I hadn't “found time” to do in months: I wrote a letter to a friend. I also avoided people who are constant complainers, “chaindumpers,” McGee-Cooper calls them.

And I allowed myself to daydream. I already knew, being in a creative field, that ideas or solutions to problems usually come at times when our brains

aren't intensely focused. Mine come when I'm walking, driving, taking a shower, even sleeping.

I gave myself even freer rein after reading McGee-Cooper's book. I used her "imaging" technique to visualize myself finishing a project and seeing it printed in a book or magazine. That, along with chopping the work into small "chewable" pieces and giving myself breaks as rewards, made the project easier to do.

A chapter about brain dominance and how it affects energy was especially enlightening to me. Right-brain-oriented people tend to be creative and flexible; left-brain-oriented people tend to be more logical, structured, and serious. According to McGee-Cooper, an energy drain occurs when the left-brain side wants one thing, while the right-brain side pushes for the opposite.

My desk has been the battleground


of my mental civil war for years. While I'm working, it's strewn with clippings, stacks of files, business cards, and notebooks. I like to see it all out in the open to remind me of what I need to do. Then my perfectionist left brain cracks the whip. "You slob, how can you work in this disorganized mess!" it shouts. As the piles get deeper, I tell myself I'll straighten it up. But I don't, and I feel guilty.

"If you can learn to make peace with yourself and learn to accept the way you are, you can have much more energy," McGee-Cooper says. "Instead of wringing your hands over a messy desk and feeling inadequate, appreciate the fact that you're a creative person and like to see all your work out on your desk."

Now I straighten up my desk at the end of the week and use the task as a reward. It's a good way to review my accomplishments for the week as I tuck

finished work into a file. Then when I start the new week, I start with a clean desk – with the understanding that it's going to get messy. And it's *okay*.

At the end of every week, I also review my to-do list and try to celebrate the things I did get done rather than berate myself over the ones I didn't finish. Setting goals is important, but too often we beat ourselves up for the ones we didn't achieve rather than congratulate ourselves for our successes, McGee-Cooper says.

I'm not saying my brain is totally re-engineered yet. Old patterns of thinking don't change overnight. But I do have more energy, not just for work but also for play. It's such a relief to find I don't have to be Superwoman. After years of running, it's nice to just walk. 

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