

Psychological fatigue is an early-warning system:
something is wrong. It can be cured—but not by resting

Success Means
Never Feeling Tired

By Mortimer J. Adler

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FAILURE is probably the most fatiguing experience a person ever has. There is nothing more enervating than not succeeding—being blocked, not moving ahead. It is a vicious circle. Failure breeds fatigue, and the fatigue makes it harder to get to work, which, compounds the failure.

We experience this tiredness in two main ways: as start-up fatigue and performance fatigue. In the former case, we keep putting off a task that we are under some compulsion to discharge, either because it is too tedious or too difficult, we shirk it. And the longer we postpone it, the more tired we feel.

Such start-up fatigue is very real, even if not actually physical, not something in our muscles and bones. The remedy is obvious, though perhaps not easy to apply: an exertion of willpower. The moment I find myself turning away from a job, or putting it under a pile of other things I have to do, I clear my desk of everything else and attack the objectionable item first. To prevent start-up fatigue, always tackle the most difficult job first.

Years ago, when editing *Great Books of the Western World*, I under-took to write 102 essays, one on each of the great ideas

discussed by the authors of those books. The writing took me two years, working at it—among my other tasks—seven days a week. I would never have finished if I had allowed myself to write first about the ideas I found easiest to expound. Applying my own rule, I determined to write the essays in strict alphabetical order, from ANGEL, to WORLD, never letting myself skip a tough idea. And I always started the day's work with the difficult task of essay-writing. Experience proved once again, that the rule works.

Performance fatigue is more difficult to handle. Here we are not reluctant to get started, but we cannot seem to do the job right. Its difficulties appear insurmountable and, however hard we work, we fail again and again. That mounting experience of failure carries with it an ever-increasing burden of mental fatigue. In such a situation, I work as hard as I can—then let the unconscious take over.

When I was planning the 15th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, I had to create a topical table of contents for its alphabetically arranged articles. Nothing like this had ever been done before, and day after day I kept coming up with solutions that fell short. My fatigue became almost overpowering.

One day, mentally exhausted, I put down on paper all the reasons why this problem could *not* be solved. I tried to convince myself that what appeared insoluble really *was* insoluble, that the trouble was with the problem, not me. Having gained some relief, I sat back in an easy chair and went to sleep.

An hour or so later, I woke up suddenly with the solution clearly in mind. In the weeks that followed, the correctness of the solution summoned up by my unconscious mind was confirmed at every step. Though I worked every bit as hard, if not harder, than before, my work was not attended by any weariness or fatigue. Success was now as exhilarating as failure had been depressing. I was experiencing the *joy* of what psychologists today call “flow.” Life offers few pleasures more invigorating than the successful exercise of our faculties. It unleashes energies for additional work.

Sometimes the snare is not in the problem itself, but in the social situation—or so it appears. Other people somehow seem to prevent us from succeeding. But, as Shakespeare wrote, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.” Why blame other people and shrug off our own responsibility for misunderstandings? Doing a job successfully means doing whatever is necessary—and that *includes* winning the cooperation of others.

More often, the snare that blocks us is purely personal. Subject to human distractions, we let personal problems weigh on us, producing a fatigue-failure that blocks our productivity in every sphere.

A friend of mine went into a decline over a family problem that she had let slide. Her daughter had secretly married a man she thought her father would disapprove of. The daughter told her mother but made her promise to keep silent. Worrying about the problem, and carrying a burden of guilt over the secrecy exhausted the other. Her fatigue spilled over into her job and turned her usual successes there into failures. She was saved from serious depression only when other people intervened and told the father—who didn't display any of the anticipated negative reaction. It seems incredible that a person can allow his or her life to get snarled up in this fashion, but that is how problems can fester if they aren't solved as they come along.

So, our first step should be to use inexplicable fatigue that has no physical base as a radar—an early-warning system—and trace the fatigue to its source; to find the defeat we are papering over and not admitting. Then we must diagnose the cause of this failure. In rare cases, it may be that the task really is too difficult for us, that we are in over our head. If so, we can acknowledge the fact and bow out. Or the block may simply be in refusing to confront the problem. In most cases, it can be solved by patient attention to the task at hand—with all the skill and resolution we can muster. That, plus the inspired help of the unconscious.

I have already given an example of one way of achieving a breakthrough. First, put down all the reasons why the problem is insoluble. Try to box yourself in, like Houdini, so no escape appears possible. Only then, like Houdini, can you break out. Having tied yourself up in knots, stop thinking consciously about the problem for a while. Let your unconscious work on untying the knots. Nine times out of ten, it will come up with a solution.

The worst mistake we can make is to regard mental fatigue as if it were physical fatigue. We can recuperate from the latter by giving our bodies a chance to rest. But mental fatigue that results from failure cannot be removed by giving in to it and taking a rest. That just makes matters worse. Whatever the specific stumbling block is, it must be cleared up, and fast, before the fatigue of failure swamps us.

Human beings, I believe, must try to succeed. This necessity is

built into our biological background. Without trying to define success, it's enough to say that it is related to continuous peak performance, to doing tasks and solving problems as they come along. It is experiencing the exuberance, the joy, the “flow” that goes with the unimpeded exercise of ones human capabilities.

Success, then, means never feeling tired.



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