

FUEL FOR PRACTITIONERS

No amount of coaxing, pleading, or pedal pumping could get the engine in the rental car to turn over. It was going nowhere. The travelers had filled the car with unleaded fuel, but it had a diesel engine. It had been able to run a little way on the wrong fuel, but not far. And when it finally stopped, it stopped for good.

Sometimes cars and humans aren't so different. Both need the right fuel to run at maximum efficiency. Put too much of the wrong stuff in, and a breakdown may be unavoidable. That's especially true for those in a profession like massage therapy. The physical demands of the work are far greater than for many jobs. Thus, massage therapists need to be especially intentional about fueling up the right way to ensure a long, busy, and healthy practice. Here are some tips to keep your body humming along like a well-tuned engine, full of energy.

1. BE SNACK SMART

You already know how important a healthy, low-fat diet is, and you're conscientious in meal preparation. You eat lots of lean protein, avoid sugar, and resolutely pile on the fresh fruits and vegetables. You avoid snacking—but should you? Actually, strategic snacking can be a good way to smooth out dips in your energy level and avoid hunger cravings that can lead you to overeat when you finally do sit down to a full meal. So go ahead and snack. Just be as choosy in your snack selection as you are in meal planning.

2. AN ENERGY BAR BY ANY OTHER NAME

Don't fall for the fiction that all so-called "energy bars" are unpalatable but good for you, while candy bars are delicious but bad. "A lot of energy bars are filled with chemicals and with sugar," warns Alexis Florio, spokeswoman for Larabar, an all-natural snack bar consistently rated by consumers as among the tastiest in

the market. "You may get a temporary boost from the sugar, but then you crash." So read labels, and look for high fiber, high protein, and limited carbs.

3. IT'S HARD TO BEAT BASIC INGREDIENTS

Nuts are among the best choices for healthy, pick-me-up snacks, nutritionists say. Nuts such as almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, and hazelnuts are all loaded with magnesium, a mineral whose health benefits are legendary. Among other things, magnesium not only improves heart health, it decreases the risk of diabetes, is known to reduce stress, improves muscle functioning, and can even reduce insomnia. Another super snack food is dark chocolate, which is rich in heart-protecting antioxidants. Studies show dark chocolate can improve blood flow, which will energize flagging muscles. Even milk chocolate gets a thumbs up because it provides calcium for the bones. So enjoy it—in moderation. It's true what dieters have been rationalizing for years: in its original form, chocolate is a plant, and it's difficult to go wrong snacking on plants.





4. WATER MAKES EVERYTHING BETTER

Here's Mom's best advice ever: If you're hungry, drink some water. If you're tired, drink some water. If you're sleepy, drink some water. If you're in a bad mood, drink some water. If you have a headache, drink some water. Just because you're not thirsty does not mean you aren't dehydrated. It's easy to become dehydrated, especially in the warm, humid atmosphere in which many massage therapists work. Even slight dehydration can leave you tired and lethargic. The answer is, of course, to drink plenty of water. If the taste of plain water doesn't excite you, consider some of the flavored varieties, keeping in mind that loads of extra sugar should be avoided. One increasingly popular healthy hydration alternative is coconut water, which studies suggest may hydrate more quickly than plain H₂O and which contains more potassium and less sodium than other energy drinks. "Potassium helps with muscle cramping," says Laura Sauls, spokeswoman for Zico, one of the leaders in the coconut water field. "Someone who works on muscles will understand why that's important." Fauls points out that coconut water is so pure it has been administered intravenously as a natural saline drip to save the lives of soldiers in wartime.

5. THE SWEET SMELL OF ENERGY

Certain scents are able to fight fatigue. Queen among them is peppermint. "That's the all-time number one," says Dianna Dapkins, owner of Pure Pro Massage Products of Greenfield, Massachusetts, and an expert on aromatherapy. "It's extremely stimulating, and great for increasing mental alertness and invigorating us in general." Other lethargy busters include eucalyptus, citrus, cardamom, and even cinnamon and black pepper. Dapkins recommends massage therapists mix up a little jar of scented essential oils, then either use a diffuser to disperse the scent into the air, or else dilute and apply topically. "A lot of therapists will just mix it up in the bottle, then open the bottle and inhale deeply for a couple of minutes." Her recipe for a scented pick-me-up is simple: Start with 17 drops of lemon essential oil. Add to that 3 drops of eucalyptus oil and 4 drops of peppermint oil. Tighten cap, shake, and then inhale. For a more super-charged brew, add 4 drops of geranium and 5 drops of rosemary.

6. MAKE SLEEP A PRIORITY

The number one myth about sleep is that you can get by on six hours a night. No such thing, says Pete Bills, vice president of sleep innovation and clinical research for Select Comfort, makers of the Sleep Number

bed. "Medically, that's as ill-advised as saying you can learn to get by being 40 pounds overweight," he says. "In fact, they're almost medically equivalent." Bills says the further away you deviate from getting seven-and-a-half to eight hours sleep a night—and some people get too much, not too little—the greater the risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, obesity, and a host of other maladies. Bills advice to massage therapists who do everything else right but scrimp on sleep: Make sleep a priority. Get on a regular schedule, stick to it, and stop allotting to sleep only whatever time is left over after everything else gets accomplished.

7. BATTLING INSOMNIA

Setting aside the time to sleep is only half the battle. Once you've gone to bed, you have to actually go to sleep,



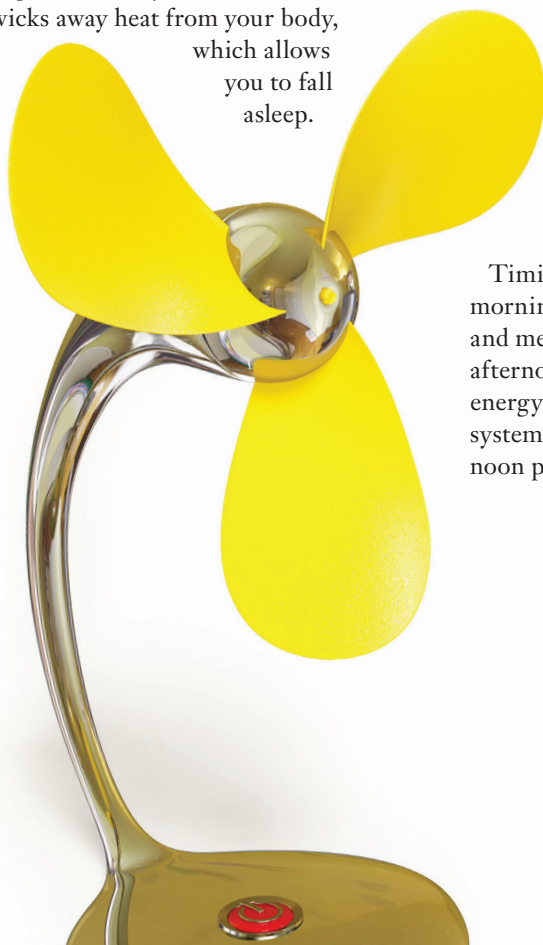
and for many people that's no easy feat. Caffeine is often the culprit. Caffeine is a great pick-me-up first thing in the morning, but it has a six- to seven-

hour “half-life,” meaning that half the caffeine in that cup of coffee you consumed to ward off the 3:00 p.m. doldrums will still be lingering in your bloodstream after the 10 o’clock news. Another stimulant many people don’t often consider is light—particularly light from a computer or television screen. Dim light from a soft reading lamp is fine, but the bright blue light of electronic devices sears itself into our minds and fools them into thinking it’s still daylight outside, which makes falling asleep seem unnatural. “At my house, the rule is that no one is allowed to look at a screen, whether it’s a television screen, an iPad, or a cell phone, an hour before bedtime,” Bills says.

8. KEEP YOUR COOL

Heat, whether internal or external, will also disrupt sleep. The ideal room temperature for sleeping is around 65 degrees, Bills says. The cool air then wicks away heat from your body,

which allows
you to fall
asleep.



Anything you do to increase your body’s core temperature, like exercising or eating a big meal right before bedtime, makes it harder for your body to cool down to a comfortable sleeping temperature.

9. POWER NAPS

Naps are tricky luxuries. Taken wisely and in moderation, they’ll restore mental alertness and fuel you through a long afternoon. But too long a nap or a poorly-timed nap will leave you feeling drained after you get up, and will make it harder to fall asleep come bedtime. “A strategically-placed nap during the day is great,” Bills says. By strategic, he means the nap is less than 25 minutes, or else 90 to 100 minutes.


Naps in the 30 to 80 minute range may actually do more harm than good because you wander into the deep sleep range but then don’t complete a full sleep cycle, which typically requires 90 minutes or so.

Timing also matters. Grab a morning nap to boost your creativity and mental alertness or a late-afternoon nap to restore lost physical energy and boost your immune system, Bills advises. A nap around noon provides a little of both.

10. THERAPIST, MASSAGE THYSELF

While you may be quite active during the day, the inherent physical demands of your job may lead to some muscle strains. Face it, massage therapists are perfect candidates for a massage. The best strategy is to work out a reciprocal arrangement with a colleague who can swap massage services. If that’s not possible, or you feel the need for some quick bodywork between clients, consider self-massage possibilities.

One option is to use the OPTP Pro-Roller, a firm foam log that comes in varying thicknesses—think of them as comfy rolling pins. Thera-Band has a variety of products that can help you stay mobile and flexible including the Foot Roller and Flex Bar. You can use your own body weight to generate direct pressure as you roll over the roller, working out muscle knots. “It can hurt a bit, but it’s a good kind of hurt,” says Rick Carlson, spokesman for OPTP, a Minnesota company that provides rehabilitation and fitness products to massage therapists and other health-care professionals. “That pressure massages the fascia and relieves soft-tissue adhesions. It’s a way of giving yourself a little one- to two-minute massage.” Foam rollers are portable and lightweight, and typically cost \$15–\$30. If you like how they feels, you may want to recommend them to your clients as well. **m&b**

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