

## REST AND RECOVERY TO IMPROVE MENTAL PERFORMANCE AND MANAGE STRESS

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February marked my third anniversary on the Iditarod Trail. The Iditarod Trail Invitational (“ITI”) is a self-supported, winter ultra-endurance race that attracts a particular type of athlete – one comfortable in solitude and with the unique risks that isolation brings when the temperature routinely plunges below -20°C and the wind howls. The trail is desolate. Racers can travel days without encountering another soul, which presents a rare chance to really slow down.

Back home, it’s difficult to find a few moments to take it a little slower. The mind whizzes through daily chores and difficult work. As a result, we get stressed. When stressed, the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol are released. These hormones regulate a wide range of processes throughout the body, including metabolism and the immune response. During periods of stress, these systems shut down

making it common to lose or increase appetite or to become ill. Our ability for rational, systematic thought is also impaired. Accordingly, the faster we move through high stress situations, the less carefully we are able to reflect on things and mistakes can occur. This is why slowing down is so important.



The beauty in the type of slowing down that comes from events like the ITI is that there isn't time to question or doubt doing it. There isn't any guilt attached to it, or any feeling that the time "should" be spent doing something more productive. The mind is fully engaged with putting one foot in front of the other, one very slow mile at a time. Besides thoughts of food and staying warm, there's isn't room for much else. Nothing but the cold demands anything from you, and the break from the day-to-day grind is welcomed reprieve.

Of course, not all of us can take multi-week hiatuses from work to live outdoors and most of us aren't interested in this sort of excursion. The solution instead is to understand that it's smart to slow down and to do it in a controlled, intentional way.

For some of us, meditation or exercise can be used to treat stress acutely or in a preventative way. By practicing mindfulness, we can slow down and identify thought patterns that might be contributing to a feeling of anxiousness. Mindfulness offers the opportunity to step back during periods of stress to get a different perspective. It might not be possible to control every detail of the world around us, but we can change the way we experience it. By allowing ourselves to slow down, we build up our reserves for periods of uncontrollable and high stress. The goal of mindfulness isn't to eliminate stress, but to change our relationship with it so it doesn't overcome us.

Adequate rest is also essential to mental wellness. Rest fosters adaptability to move through an increasingly challenging world with greater creativity. Rest is not frivolous. We can enrich our lives by prioritizing rest and allowing our brain to recover from periods of high stress. Building recovery time into a training program is important to athletes because this is the time that the body adapts to the stress of exercise. Similarly, adequate recovery allows the brain to replenish energy stores and repair damaged tissues.

By slowing down or resting, we enrich our brain capacity and creativity to handle complicated and difficult tasks with less error. Rather than assuming that life is stressful and just ploughing through the day, challenge your assumption and improve your quality of life with some R&R.

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