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BY LAURA W. GELLER

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We've all come to work exhausted, or under the weather, or while experiencing some sort of physical pain. We power through it as best we can, unaware that our brains are redirecting critical resources to manage these issues. These efforts enable us to cope. But as Mike Christian, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business

Christian has also studied mindfulness — a hot feature of many corporate wellness programs — as a means of preventing workplace retaliation. It turns out that being in the moment can help mitigate the effects of unfairness on our fight-or-flight response.

Selected as a Poets & Quants "Best 40 under 40" business school professor in 2015, Christian followed an uncommon path to academia. Before earning his Ph.D.

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School, has found, they take a toll on our performance. When our mental energy is depleted, we are less able to exercise control over our emotions and behaviors — and are more likely to be disengaged, break rules, take part in deception, or even act unethically.

Christian's research delves into the internal and external factors that chip away at our ability to self-regulate, as well as so-called moderator effects that help us regain our footing. In one study, for example, he found that coffee really does help restore in the short term mental resources drained by lack of sleep.

from the University of Arizona, he worked in construction, and as a restaurant manager, sommelier, tennis instructor, telemarketer, consultant, and childhood autism therapist. Christian spoke with *strategy+business* about how we can avoid falling prey to our biological impulses.

S+B: What role does self-regulation play in our performance at work?

CHRISTIAN: Humans have a unique ability to exert self-control. It's what has allowed us to form organizations that have rules and guidelines, to develop social norms, to have ef-

fective social interactions, and to resist temptation and focus on long-term goals.

But our ability to self-regulate is influenced by various external and internal factors. The way leaders act, and whether or not people perceive these actions as fair, can affect people's reserves of mental energy. That's an external factor. Examples of internal factors include how much sleep people get, or how sick they might be feeling, or if they're experiencing pain.

S+B: Let's start with external factors. Why do people react a certain way to perceived unfairness or injustice?

CHRISTIAN: The mental perception that we are being treated unfairly results in both "hot" and "cold" reactions. The hot reaction is a flash of anger and emotion that you experience if someone acts rudely toward you or if you're not getting the promotion that you thought you rightfully deserved. It's a quick, automatic response that's hard to control.

The cold reaction is also known as cognition. That's when you think about the situation and process what

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Mike Christian

happened. “Person A just got a raise, but I’m doing a better job than Person A. I should be the one getting rewarded.” You go over the experience again and again in your mind.

It’s a dual process — anger and rumination — and both factors contribute to employees making a decision to retaliate. Employees who retaliate against a supervisor could end up experiencing negative outcomes, possibly even losing their jobs or otherwise damaging their careers. Although it might be satisfying in the short term to retaliate against somebody who we feel wronged us, in the

their attention on their breath cycle if their mind started to wander. We told the control group they could think about anything they wanted to, and to let their mind wander freely. When we compared the two groups after they experienced an injustice, we found that people who were trained in mindfulness were much less likely to have hot and cold negative reactions, and they thus retaliated less than those without the training.

We tested this with employees in a field survey. We looked at “trait mindfulness” — an ingrained ten-

they’re going to have less of the self-control they need to be high-functioning contributors. I first looked at workplace deviance — when otherwise good people break rules or don’t follow norms or guidelines — and found a link between such behavior and lack of sleep. In subsequent studies my colleagues and I have also looked at unethical behavior, more than simple rule breaking, and found a similar link.

S+B: Is the answer just “get more sleep”?

CHRISTIAN: That’s certainly one answer. But it is not always realistic. It’s hard to disengage from work at night, because we’re increasingly connected to work at home. There’s also a biochemical effect that’s occurring when you’re using your smartphone from your bed. When you have a smartphone close to your face, it is emanating blue light into your eyes that causes your body to think that it’s morning. This inhibits the secretion of melatonin, which is what induces us to sleep.

With some colleagues at the University of Arizona, I investigated whether or not the popular belief that caffeine can help make up for lack of sleep is actually true. We gave a piece of gum to participants who were sleep-deprived, but didn’t tell them that it had caffeine in it. In our experiment, they were less susceptible to unethical behavior — specifically, engaging in deceptive behavior for money — than those who were sleep-deprived but not given caffeine. In fact, the sleep-deprived participants given caffeine behaved similarly to those in our control condition [well-rested participants]. That was encouraging, that at least in the short term, caffeine can help

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long term finding proactive solutions is usually a more productive and less risky approach.

S+B: How can people avoid succumbing to these hot and cold reactions?

CHRISTIAN: My research has shown that people who are mindful, or who have been trained in mindfulness, are better able to control their thoughts and are less quick to react. They’re more “in the moment” and are less likely to take things personally, to have that flash of anger, and to ruminate about what happened.

In one study, my colleague Erin Cooke Long and I had undergraduate students with no prior mindfulness training listen to a recording of instructions consistent with emerging conceptualizations of mindfulness. We told them to think about their breath and to be curious about their thoughts, but not to have judgment, and to practice refocusing

to be mindful. Some people’s thoughts are constantly wandering; I happen to be one of those people. Others find it quite easy to focus, to put their attention in the moment. We measured whether or not people have that tendency using a validated scale. Once again, we found that the mindful people were much less likely to experience anger when they felt like they were treated unfairly. They were much less likely to ruminate over that unfairness, and they exhibited lower retaliation.

S+B: Turning to internal influences on self-regulation: You’ve studied the effects of sleep deprivation.

CHRISTIAN: We know that the brain is affected by lack of sleep — its activity levels are reduced in some ways, especially in the prefrontal cortex. And we know that the prefrontal cortex is responsible for controlling impulses. I found that if people are sleep-deprived at work,

us replenish our mental regulatory resources. Of course, caffeine isn't a long-term substitute for sleep, and overuse carries its own risks.

I'm currently involved in research looking at other moderator effects. We haven't published this study yet, but we have some early data suggesting that people who feel like they're given power in their jobs can actually use that power as a resource to make up for lack of sleep. The hypothesis is that just perceiving that you have control over your job gives you more energy — that this experience activates what we call your behavioral approach system, which controls goal-oriented behavior.

S+B: Are there factors that can exacerbate the effects of lack of sleep?

CHRISTIAN: We found that people who were more sleep-deprived have a harder time resisting social influence to act inappropriately. If somebody tells you to lie, and you're in your "right" frame of mind, you're going to think, "This is wrong, and I'm not going to listen to this person." This changes when you are overtired. If your ability to self-regulate is diminished, you're more susceptible to that kind of influence.

S+B: What have you found about how chronic pain affects performance and motivation?

CHRISTIAN: Along with my colleagues Tali Kapadia and Noah Eisenkraft, I wanted to look at the idea of "working sick" — of coming to work when you're not feeling well. A manager might infer from an em-

ployee's behavior that he or she is not motivated or is a bad worker. But in truth there are events occurring in everybody's lives that can cause them to have depleted feelings of wellness, and thus decreased motivation, on certain days.

As you'd suspect, when you're in high levels of pain at work, it has a negative impact on performance. But my colleagues and I found that pain levels fluctuate, even for people who have chronic symptoms, like back pain or fibromyalgia. Some days are better than others, and on good days, there's an uptick in people's level of engagement in their

— people invest more in themselves. They are able to dig deep to get the motivation they need to do their job.

There's also some interesting research showing that vacations help people get back to their full level of self-control. Sabine Sonnentag [of the University of Mannheim, in Germany] and Charlotte Fritz [of Portland State University] have shown that whether you come back to work refreshed after a vacation depends not only on the amount of time you are away, but also on what you do during your vacation. People who engage in what they call mastery experiences — those where they

"I found that if people are sleep-deprived at work, they're going to have less of the self-control they need to be high-functioning contributors."

work. We also found that people who experience chronic symptoms get used to the demand on their energy that comes from the pain over time. It's almost as if they grow a larger capacity to self-regulate.

S+B: We've talked about factors that can deplete our ability to self-regulate, and factors that can mitigate some of these negative effects. Are there factors that can make us more motivated at work?

CHRISTIAN: I'm doing some research now with Noah Eisenkraft and Erin Cooke Long on this topic. What we're finding so far is that on days when people feel like their jobs are meaningful and important — when they feel like the work they're doing affects others in a positive way

learn a new skill, like scuba diving — are able to really disconnect and feel accomplished. When they get back to their jobs, they are much more replenished than people who sit on the beach and might still ruminate about work.

This gets back to my research on mindfulness. Being able to focus on the moment raises your level of self-control, but it can also recharge you, better preparing you to meet your goals. +

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