

Optimizing Personal Energy

**5 pillars to
sustain wellbeing
and performance**

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Introduction

A lot of us today can define our jobs by one metaphor: burning the candle at both ends.

Our roles have become more complex, both in size and scope. Many have taken on more projects and more responsibilities, while working with less support and fewer resources. This means we continue to stretch ourselves thinly, like the surface of a fragile bubble, to make sure the work gets done. And for nearly two years now, we have all been operating in the middle of a global health pandemic that upended the entire world of work, forcing us to adapt to new, unforeseen conditions on a daily basis. As a result, we are diving into our personal energy reserves, leaving us

feeling depleted. Burnout has skyrocketed and other health issues are on the rise.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, one survey found 57% of workers reported feeling greater anxiety and 54% said they are more emotionally exhausted. In another, 72% of employees reported that they are currently burnt out, compared to 42% last year.

When our personal energy levels are high, we are more motivated, engaged, creative,

and productive. We perform as our most effective selves. And we have a greater chance at preventing the onset of ill-health. But personal energy ebbs and flows. It is both abundant and scarce—both vitalizing and consuming. In some situations, we may feel energized or content; in others, we may feel depleted or tense. If we're not careful with our energy, we may forgo rest and recovery, like someone who cannot define the lines between *working* at home and *being* at home. And when our demands outweigh the amount of energy we have to give, we can fall victim to burnout. We become more depleted, we lose motivation, we feel disengaged, and our performance suffers.

Think of personal energy as drawing from a multipurpose reservoir of stamina. We tap into this reservoir to fuel our mind, body, and soul. When the reservoir is full—that is, when we have a sufficient supply of positive energy—we perform at our optimum, bringing our best selves to everything we do. Or we choose to protect our reserves, feeling serene or content. Sometimes, however, those high levels flow

in a negative direction, leading to tension. Or the reservoir is depleted, causing us to feel drained or demotivated—physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally, if not all four. We do not have enough in our energy reserves to power our best selves.

Given today's crises, plus rapid disruption and transformation, the wellbeing of employees has become a focal point for business leaders and their companies. After all, we know that when employees thrive, organizations shine. But an employee's personal energy—and whether or not that energy is plentiful and positive—depends on their wellbeing. And although organizational success depends on motivated and healthy employees, the topic of personal energy has remained under the radar in talent management conversations, absent a practical and holistic approach to protecting, maintaining, and increasing that personal energy—until now.

The 5 Wellbeing Pillars

To boost our personal energy, we need to keep a constant eye on our energy reserves, making sure to replenish them as often as possible. Based on our research, we've identified five ways to support and build our personal energy, which we refer to as the 5 Wellbeing Pillars:

- Awareness
- Resilience
- Social Connection
- Purpose
- Healthy Habits

Defining... personal energy

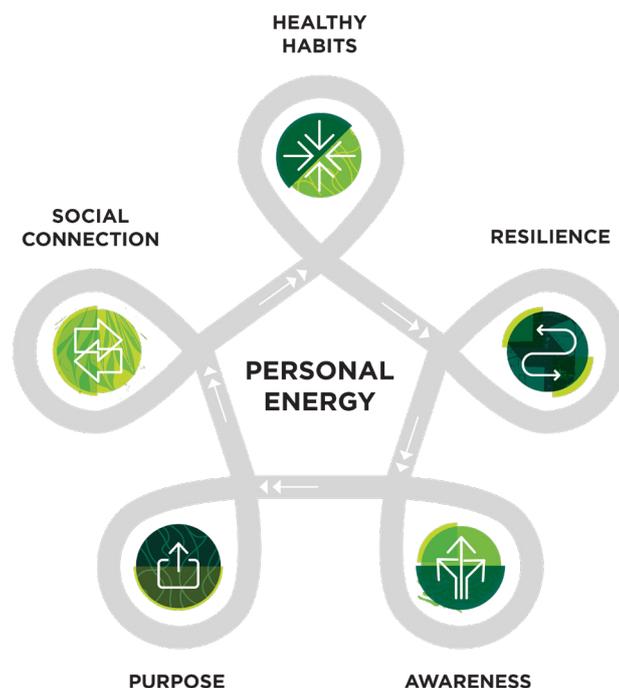
/pərs(ə)n(ə)l/ /enərjē/ noun

The subjective experience one feels when they have the optimum levels of physical energy and energetic activation in their current situation. When this combination is focused in a positive direction, it produces feelings of vitality.

The 5 Wellbeing Pillars are intrinsically linked to our personal energy—social connection, healthy habits, resilience, awareness, and purpose are the core of Korn Ferry's Personal Energy framework. The framework offers a holistic, scientifically grounded approach to personal energy

management by focusing on these key areas known to impact our fluctuating energy levels. And when we actively manage and boost each of the five pillars of wellbeing, not only can we increase our personal energy, but we can also optimize our performance at work.

Figure 1: Korn Ferry's Personal Energy Framework



Awareness

“Awareness allows us to get outside of our mind and observe it in action.”

- Dan Brule

Awareness is key to managing our personal energy. Unless we are aware of our moment-to-moment experiences, we can't take intentional actions to preserve and replenish our energy. Heightened awareness gives people the personal and contextual information they need to make decisions and take actions that lead to their optimal energy state.

Being more aware means we can be mindful and remain present even under pressure. When our brains are overwhelmed, we slide into autopilot, moving through life without witnessing ourselves in the moment. Our brains have created default mental shortcuts to help us make sense of the world while being as efficient as possible. When our brains are in overdrive, we rely more on these shortcuts—on our

assumptions, instincts, and habits—to get through the day. Sometimes our brains get it wrong in their haste. We *react* rather than *respond*, leading to unconscious bias that informs flawed decisions, and in turn, misplaces how energy is used. In the end, we eat up more of our personal energy than we save.

With heightened awareness, however, we can better overcome some of those automatic, yet unproductive, tendencies. By being more aware, we can watch ourselves experience life, free from judgment and ego. We create a space between the stimuli and our reactions, allowing us to interrupt those default actions. In

Defining... awareness

/ə'wɛrnəs/ noun

The heightened ability to objectively observe oneself and one's surroundings, simply becoming conscious of one's thoughts, feelings, and environment.

turn, when we decouple our identity from our experiences, we can better mitigate stress: studies show that people who are more mindful also report lower levels of workload stress, and as a result, feel less emotionally exhausted.

Awareness also strengthens the connection between the brain's prefrontal region and the limbic region, supporting greater degrees of control over our emotional brains. We become less ruled by our thoughts and emotions, and thus, become less reactive to the moment, improving our emotional balance. When we see situations more clearly and objectively, we are more flexible in our responses, rather than defaulting to impulse and assumption. This improves our wellbeing because we are less overwhelmed by how we feel—physically, emotionally, and mentally—reserving more of our personal energy.

Harness your energy through awareness

Like a muscle, awareness can be strengthened. And like building muscle, developing awareness requires expending more energy at the beginning. But as awareness grows, less energy is consumed; in fact, by becoming more aware, we become more energized, enhancing our impact and effectiveness.

Awareness can help us become the best, most authentic versions of ourselves by making more sound choices and appreciating the world around us. We can develop our awareness with these three strategies:

Become mindful instead of habitual. Science shows that mindfulness—the active, open attention to the present—reduces our biases and automatic habits.

A close-up photograph of a person's eye, looking slightly to the left. The eye is partially obscured by a vertical, diagonal band of light that transitions from a bright cyan at the top to a deep blue at the bottom. The light band has a shimmering, iridescent quality. The background is a dark, textured blue. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Indeed, one study found that meditation, a practice of mindfulness, can help people better control their impulses and waste less energy fighting them. Meditating, even for a few minutes a day, encourages us to slow down and pay more attention, thus becoming more in tune with ourselves—our thoughts, our emotions, and our behaviors.

Practice frequent self-reflection. Pausing is a critical step to awareness. When you pause and reflect, you are more mindful in the moment. Try Deepak Chopra's STOP method: Stop, Take three deep breath, Observe your breath and body, and Proceed with awareness and compassion. Instead of relying on your intuition and assumptions, ask if there are alternative ways to view the situation. The more you reflect, the more aware you become, and the more intentional you can be.

Develop self-knowledge. Awareness is more than being present. Awareness also means developing a deeper sense of self—of our values, beliefs and assumptions.. Take stock of your behaviors, your identity, your emotions and your tendencies. Understand how they impact your everyday life, your actions, and the people around you.

Resilience

“Men are not disturbed by things, but by the view of which they take of them.”

- Epictetus

Resilience allows us to adapt well in the face of adversity and turn stressful moments into mastery experiences. When we build resilience, we are better able to direct our energy—and our behaviors—in a positive direction. In turn, we become invigorated by the challenge ahead of us, rather than depleting our reserves in order to cope. We do not feel as defeated from the adverse experience. We recover faster. We emerge stronger on the other side.

In today’s hyper-competitive, hyper-demanding world, change is the norm and challenge is commonplace. We work in a disruptive environment where roles are becoming increasingly complex, with job requirements that have become ever-the-more taxing. Our projects are more extensive. Our timelines are more

aggressive. And we face mounting pressure to continuously upskill and reskill as automation, digital transformation, and novel technologies require new strengths and new abilities.

Meeting these challenges calls for a steady stream of personal energy—and with that, high levels of resilience. Indeed, the more we deal with difficult situations successfully, the more self-confident we become in our ability to face future challenges. Research shows that workers with high levels of resilience are better able to cope with and manage demanding conditions more effectively, in turn, preventing exhaustion and burnout. What’s

Defining... resilience

/rə'zilyəns/ noun

The capability to master challenging situational demands to not only survive, but also thrive in the face of adversity.

more, studies have found that highly resilient people are not only more likely to be engaged with their work, but also to be motivated by those challenges, thus leading to better performance and learning outcomes.

Harness your energy through resilience

To be fair, this is easier said than done. Difficult situations, after all, are stressful by nature and, more often than not, lead to heightened anxiety and tension. But, despite maximizing our output in the short-term, working in a tense state depletes our energy and contributes more to toxic stress, which can have lasting negative effects on both our performance and our health.

We can ease this tension by approaching challenges as learning opportunities. And when we do, not only do we start to feel more galvanized, but we also begin to feel

more motivated. We can enhance resilience by mastering the situation with these five practices:

See adversity through a growth lens. Understand that challenges are inevitable, but that there are always benefits in every situation. Shift the attention from threat to growth.

Simplify the problem. Break down the complexity into smaller, more actionable problems to solve. Then, regain control by prioritizing tasks and creating a plan of action.

Seek consistency, not perfection. Choosing consistency over perfection means getting better as you progress. So, instead of striving to be perfect, strive for the next best thing. Take an iterative approach to the challenge and improve along the way.



Sit with it. Challenges can trigger a whirlwind of emotions. When having negative thoughts, take the time to come up with alternative outcomes to the adverse one you are expecting. Find counter-evidence to support why your negative perception could be wrong and identify the most likely implications rather than assume only a fatalistic conclusion.

Detach, decompress, and reset. We cannot be resilient all of the time if we don't take time to recover from the experience. Give yourself time to unwind, so you can restore your energy for the next challenge. Use humor to release stress you've been holding. Talk to others about the situation to regain perspective. When you find ways to detach, decompress, and reset, you can build the resilience you need to power through adversity.

Social connection

“Only through our connectedness to others can we really know and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can we begin to enhance our connectedness to others.”

- Harriet Lerner

Human beings, by nature, are social. In fact, we have what neuroscientists colloquially call “a social brain network”—our brains are fundamentally wired to form relationships and communities with others.

But it’s not about the size of our social circle or how often we connect with others; it is, instead, the depth and quality of those interactions that have a profound effect on our energy levels. How we care for and support others—and how they care for and support us—can make a difference in how energized we feel, and whether the energy we do feel is vitalizing, draining, or toxic. In fact, research shows that social connection is a significant source of meaning, self-confidence, and self-worth. Our interactions,

social support, and sense of belonging—whether through relationships, altruism, or simply showing gratitude—all help sustain our wellbeing and personal energy when positively perceived and felt.

This is because the neural networks in our brains that process social experience overlap with those that process physical threats. Positive social experiences, according to neuroscience research, trigger the brain’s primary reward circuitry, while perceived negative social experiences light up the brain’s primary threat circuitry. In one experiment, holding a loved one’s hand while being

Defining... social connection

/ˈsōSHəl/ /kəˈnekSH(ə)n/ noun

One's preference around how one derives energy from their interactions with others.

exposed to a painful electric shock had activated the regulatory regions of the prefrontal cortex, functionally helping the participant downregulate the negative emotions and stress response. What's more, learning to become more compassionate supports higher levels of connectivity between regions of the brain's executive networks and those related to positive affect and reward, leading to more altruistic behavior. And when we collaborate as one, we promote broader perspectives and reduce bias, because we see things more holistically and share responsibilities by working as a team.

Social isolation, on the other hand, has been shown to have a significant negative impact on mental and physical wellbeing. Because social exclusion and physical pain stimulate the same regions of the brain, a person who feels isolated is more likely to report feeling anxiety, loneliness, and low levels of self-worth, social support, and life satisfaction. And in one recent global study, social isolation emerged as the strongest predictor of depressive symptoms, such as sadness, loss of

energy, lack of focus and motivation, and forgetfulness.

Harness your energy through social connection

Social support, in part, can explain why connection has such a positive and tremendous impact on personal energy.

Employees who feel supported—that is, valuable and trusted—feel psychologically safe to be their authentic selves on the job, according to research, and in turn, are more highly engaged and collaborative. Giving support, in contrast, boosts self-esteem and promotes a sense of importance, thus contributing to psychological meaningfulness. In both cases, wellbeing is improved, filling the basin of positive personal energy.

Social relationships are reciprocal, and we can promote energizing social interactions by engaging in these four strategies:

Express gratitude. The areas of the brain most typically associated with gratitude, such as the medial prefrontal cortex, are also related to social reward and social connection. Because gratitude is an inherently positive emotion, people who are grateful are more likely to feel supported by others and use active coping strategies, thus enhancing well-being, according to studies. Practice gratitude by writing in an appreciation journal, saying kind words often, expressing thanks, and being an active listener.

Practice compassion. [Compassion training](#) not only supports unconditional kindness, but also cultivates a deep, heartfelt wish for the happiness and wellbeing of others. And research has found that when we develop compassion, we increase our positive emotions and improve our health. Developing compassion through meditative practices help decrease stress and anxiety, enhance connections, and increase our capacity for forgiveness, among other benefits. By becoming more compassionate, we can improve the quality of our professional and personal relationships.

Feel good by doing good. Studies show that altruism results in deeper, more positive social integration, enhanced meaning and purpose, a more active lifestyle, and positive emotions. Plus, giving support to others can enhance positive self-confidence and nourish self-esteem, as well as increase longevity, according to research. Find more ways to volunteer, provide active support to others, or offer an ear to someone in need.

Team up. Collaboration is a powerful way to deepen social connections. Collaborating with others helps develop our empathy, compassion, and effective communication skills. And when we become more empathetic, compassionate, and attentive, we foster stronger cultures of respect, support, trust, and goodwill, which in turn, create stronger, healthier, and more rewarding relationships. Find more opportunities to collaborate with coworkers, whether that means teaming up on projects, brainstorming new ideas, solving tough problems together, or going over plans and proposals.

Purpose

“He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how’.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

We are all driven by—and toward—something. What that something is, looks different for each of us. But no matter how big or small, our purpose is and will always be central to who we are—our unique talents, what we value, what we care about, what we hold dear.

Purpose is the source of lasting energy that influences, encourages, and inspires us every day. A clear purpose helps us make sense of the world, and find meaning within it, giving a sense of direction and significance.

When we do things in line with our purpose, we are naturally motivated, which in turn, powers our personal energy. This is because purpose provides an anchor in a fast-changing environment—a core principle to inform

choices. As Korn Ferry research shows, people who have a strong purpose are better positioned to navigate and achieve success in an uncertain world. Purpose supports hope and resilience, allowing purpose-driven employees to manage complexity, tolerate ambiguity, and cope with stress more effectively.

A strong sense of purpose, according to our research, also bolsters greater work engagement and organizational commitment. People who can fulfill their personal purpose at work are more deliberate about what they do and how they do it, in such a way that expresses their



Defining... purpose

/ˈpərpəs/ noun

The central motivating aim and guiding principle of one's life. It is the essence of who we are and is an expression of the deepest dimensions within us: one's unique talents, what one values, and what kind of impact one wants to generate.

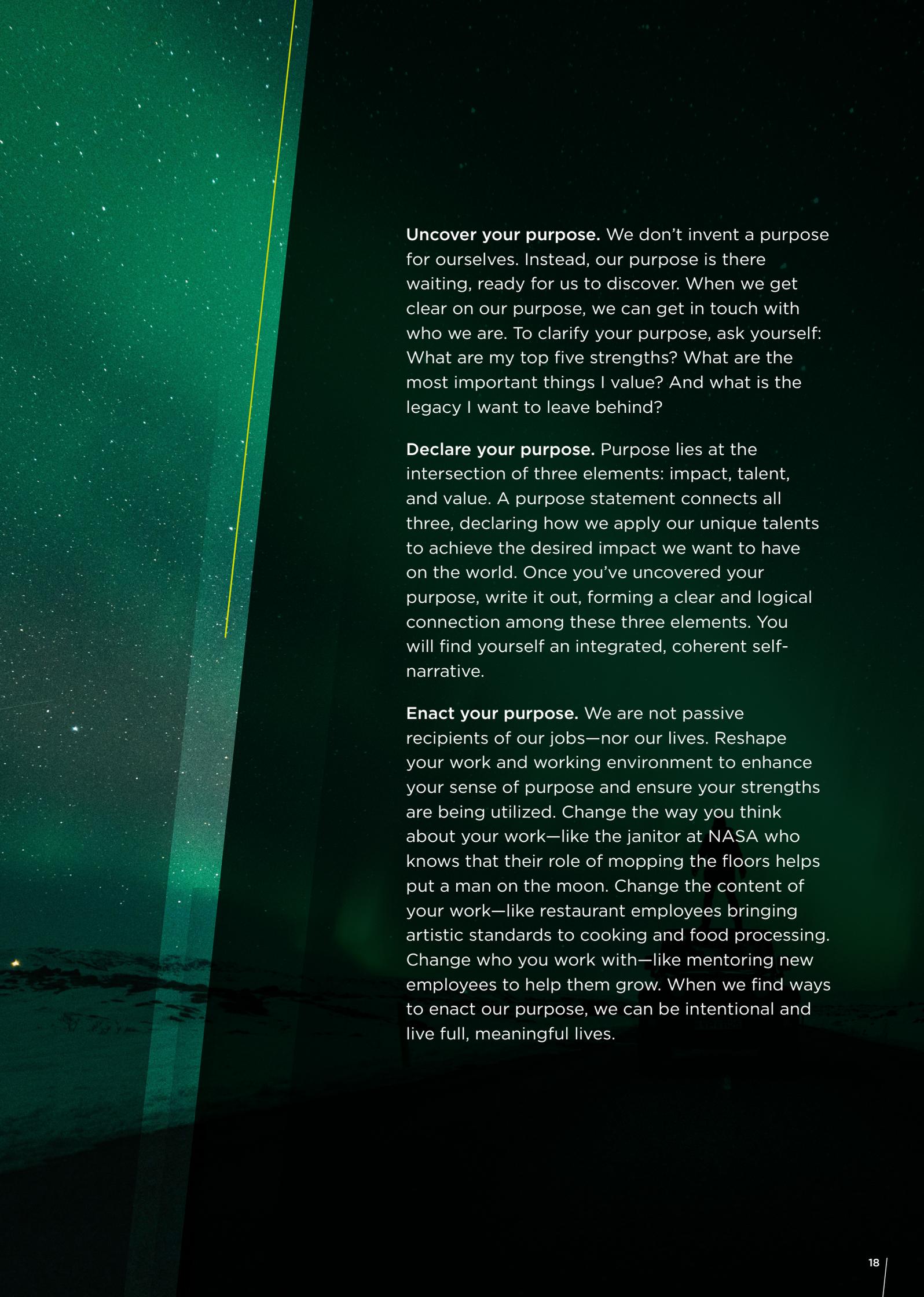
values and creates greater impact. Our jobs become more meaningful when we can connect our work to a higher purpose. As a result, we are able to bring our best selves to the workplace, thus increasing our job performance outcomes.

But beyond the job, fulfilling a purpose sustains our personal energy and boosts our wellbeing, allowing us to live longer and live better—happier, healthier, and wiser. In one study, researchers found that people with a strong sense of purpose had a 43% lower mortality risk than those with weaker purposes (Cohen, 2016). In another, purpose-driven participants were shown to be roughly 2.4 times less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease (Boyle, 2012). Biomedical research also confirms that enacting a purpose boosts cognitive function, improving action planning and decision making.

Harness your energy through purpose

When living in a way that aligns with our purpose, we become more engaged with and committed to our work—and our lives. In fact, multiple studies have found that purposeful people are more active, both physically and socially. This is because, when we have a purpose, we have a reason to commit to behaviors that promote wellbeing—like getting a full night's rest or using preventive health care. We are also likely to forge deeper connections, feel happier and less stressed, and experience higher levels of self-esteem.

Being purposeful means we can tap into a new source of energy and inner strength that motivates and drives us. And we can get clear on that purpose by following three key practices:



Uncover your purpose. We don't invent a purpose for ourselves. Instead, our purpose is there waiting, ready for us to discover. When we get clear on our purpose, we can get in touch with who we are. To clarify your purpose, ask yourself: What are my top five strengths? What are the most important things I value? And what is the legacy I want to leave behind?

Declare your purpose. Purpose lies at the intersection of three elements: impact, talent, and value. A purpose statement connects all three, declaring how we apply our unique talents to achieve the desired impact we want to have on the world. Once you've uncovered your purpose, write it out, forming a clear and logical connection among these three elements. You will find yourself an integrated, coherent self-narrative.

Enact your purpose. We are not passive recipients of our jobs—nor our lives. Reshape your work and working environment to enhance your sense of purpose and ensure your strengths are being utilized. Change the way you think about your work—like the janitor at NASA who knows that their role of mopping the floors helps put a man on the moon. Change the content of your work—like restaurant employees bringing artistic standards to cooking and food processing. Change who you work with—like mentoring new employees to help them grow. When we find ways to enact our purpose, we can be intentional and live full, meaningful lives.

Healthy habits

“Take care of your body. It’s the only place you have to live.”

- Jim Rohn

Someone once said, “Remember to take care of yourself. You can’t pour from an empty cup.”

Self-care is not just a buzzword—it’s critical to refilling, maintaining, and protecting our energy reserves. And those healthy habits we develop as part of self-care allow us to restore the energy we use every day, for everything that we do. When we focus on our wellbeing—for example, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, rest and decompress, and get enough sleep—we can recover and rebuild our energy quickly so we can function as our more effective selves.

When work pressure mounts, it could deteriorate into stress that is chronic—and toxic. That toxic stress, in turn, can have long-term, harmful effects on our

physical and mental health. Neuroscience research shows that excessive production of cortisol, the primary stress hormone, can damage glucocorticoid receptors in the brain’s limbic system, impacting our immune system and triggering depressive systems.

In other words, toxic levels of stress compromise our sleep, our nutrition, our activity levels, our concentration, our overall health. We become more fatigued, more lethargic, more worried. We feel less focused, less motivated, less energized. When our wellbeing is diminished, so is our performance: studies show

Defining... healthy habits

/ˈhelTHē/ /ˈhabəts/ noun

The ability to retain, restore, and boost energy by managing activities and making healthy lifestyle choices.

chronic workplace stress can lead to increased absenteeism, loss of productivity, and employee turnover. And continual decline of social, emotional, physical, and mental health impacts our lives at work and at home.

Recovery is vital to restoring our personal energy. In order to recover, though, we have to prioritize our wellbeing. When we adopt healthy habits, we are putting our health—and ourselves—first. We are building the tools we need to mitigate workplace stress and its effects on our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. And when we take care of ourselves, we can perform at our optimum, and do so consistently.

Harness your energy through healthy habits

One way to reduce workplace stress is to leave work at work. But in this age of heightened connectivity, shutting off our work brain when the clock hits five is nearly impossible.

Add to the fact that so many of us are working from the one place that should be our sanctuary: our home. We live at work.

We now work jobs that are much more challenging, with shorter deadlines and longer to-do lists. We try to juggle our work responsibilities while we also manage life's increasing complexities. We do everything we can to make everything fit—and fit well.

But we can't achieve our goals if we don't have the personal energy to drive us forward. And we won't have the energy if we don't practice healthy habits. We can follow a healthy, holistic lifestyle by following these four strategies:

Detach and relax. Research shows employees who detach from work during off-hours report higher levels of life satisfaction, better sleep,



less emotional exhaustion. What's more, employees who enjoy their leisure time as leisure time are more likely to exhibit proactive work behaviors, such as addressing problems at work. To reduce stress over the long-term, make relaxation part of your routine: for example, meditate in the morning, write daily in a journal, practice yoga, spend time on your hobbies. If you take time to detach and relax, you will restore your energy more quickly.

Eat well. Live well. The brain uses more energy than any other human organ, and it needs a steady supply of energy to maintain optimal function. Food provides those much-needed nutrients for your body to break down and absorb for fuel. Because whole foods are digested at a slow, consistent rate, eating a diet rich in nutrient-packed foods, such as leafy vegetables, dried beans, and whole grains, is best for prolonged energy.

Let's get moving. There is a reason why exercise is integral to our wellbeing. According to neuroscience research, not only does movement promote brain health and growth, but it also releases a host of chemicals, including endorphins and dopamine, that help us relax, improve our mood, combat chronic stress, and boost our energy. Make movement a ritual: for example, exercise at least three times a week, set hourly reminders to stretch for 15 minutes, create a dynamic workplace. Adapt movement to you and find what works for your body—and your schedule.

Fall in love with sleep. Studies show that anxiety and stress can lead to insomnia, which has been linked to reduced gray matter volume in the brain's prefrontal cortex—the region responsible for executive function, like planning and self-control. When we're deprived of our sleep, we can't focus well, we have low moods, and we feel tense. Put another way, we need to sleep to conserve and restore our energy. To get longer, more restful shuteye, limit caffeine intake at night, turn off screens an hour before bedtime, dim your lights at night, and keep your bedroom cool.

Conclusion

“Energy work is priceless. It makes every day extraordinary and transforms the mundane to the holy.”

- Silvia Hartmann

The workplace can be a drain or a boost to personal energy. And the last 18 months have illustrated just how critical personal energy is to corporate success.

In one recent study, researchers found that, worldwide, the economic burden of unwell workers, in both medical expenses and lost productivity, is astronomical, representing 10% to 15% of global economic output. With the global pandemic shining a huge spotlight on wellness, organizations are recognizing that they have a responsibility to support all aspects of employee wellbeing, ensuring their talent is safe, energized, happy, and thriving at work.

Although most organizations invest in professional development, rarely do they help employees manage their personal energy—aside from perhaps a standard wellness program offered as part of a benefits package. But these programs, while useful, often fall short in equipping employees with the tools they can use to build and sustain their personal energy.

The Personal Energy Framework gets to the heart of many of the struggles we face today. It provides sustainable strategies to enhance employee motivation, commitment, and engagement. By utilizing the framework, companies can develop and offer science-backed energy management strategies that build their employees’ personal energy so they can bring the most to work.

Energy, after all, is the fuel for life, essential to health, development, livelihoods, joy, and productivity. When companies shape a culture around positive wellbeing, they feed that energy, enabling and empowering employees, and thus, improving their bottom line.

Healthy employees and healthy organizations go hand-in-hand.

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Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers. Our 7,000 experts in more than 50 countries deliver on five core areas: Organization Strategy, Assessment and Succession, Talent Acquisition, Leadership Development, and Total Rewards.

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