

# The 3 p.m. Stretch

## Surviving the Mid-Afternoon Slump

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Have you ever been working your way through the afternoon, and suddenly your energy drops and you're dragging, finding it difficult to stay alert and focused during meetings, finish a project, or write a coherent email message?

Given the hectic pace, heavy workload, and long work days, the mid-afternoon slump is a common occurrence for professionals. This is the time many push through the feeling and keep plugging away, while others consume candy, cookies, chips, and/or cola. While these strategies may seem to work in the short term, if you want to be healthy and perform optimally every day, then let's take a step back and see what's really going on.

First, recognize that the energy drop you feel is the symptom, not the cause. Then, instead of suppressing the feeling, forcing yourself to focus, or reaching for the snack that gives you that temporary sugar high, consider these other causes:

- **Thirst**- Are you drinking enough water to keep your system well hydrated and functioning its best? Many people don't, and consuming coffee and sodas further dehydrate your system, which means you need more water to compensate for these drinks. Also, people often confuse hunger with thirst. If you're not sure you're thirsty, drink a glass of water and see if you feel more awake and energized.
- **Tired**- If you're not getting enough sleep at night, you're depleting your internal reserves. So, after toiling all morning, by the time you get to the afternoon, it's really time for a break. As a culture we don't allow time for siestas, but you may be able to slip in a short rest without the rest of the office knowing. Closing your office door, resting in your car, using an empty office, or spending some quiet time during your lunch break are all options, depending on your situation. Need support? Maybe I'll start a group called Nap Takers Anonymous.
- **Fatigue**- Similarly, if you've been sitting for a long time and concentrating on a project, your body needs a change in position, and your eyes and brain need a rest. Stand up, stretch, and go for a short walk to get oxygen, blood, and lymph moving, which are essential for good health. Or, switch to doing a more physical task that's less taxing on your brain.
- **Excessive stress and uncomfortable feelings**, such as the boredom of doing a task you don't enjoy or the anxiety of an impending deadline have caused more than a few to eat a whole bowl of candy or package of cookies. To counteract this, step away from your desk and take a few deep breaths. What can you do to see a different perspective? Perhaps take a few minutes to laugh with a coworker or think of something you enjoy. (Note: Dealing with stress is not always so simple. It's what I work on the most with clients to get to the underlying issues.)
- **What you ate (or didn't eat) for lunch** can also cause your internal system to crash. Just like your car, you need the right fuel to get where you're going. Eating too much of the wrong kinds of foods clogs your digestive system and bogs you down. On the other hand, skipping lunch can make you run out of gas. While the plethora of diets can be confusing, you know the general guidelines: eat more fruits and vegetables, eliminate junk foods, consume smaller portions, and drink plenty of water.
- Finally, you could actually be **hungry**; however, eating nutritionally "empty" foods doesn't solve the real problem. You need the right fuel. For a quick pick-me-up, keep a small "emergency" stash of healthy snacks, such as raw nuts (almonds, cashews, pecans), trail mix, fresh fruit, or protein bars in your desk.

Depending on the day, you could experience any one or a combination of these reasons. So, can you see that if you eat a candy bar but you're really tired, bored, or thirsty, you're not solving the real issue? By learning to tune into what your body needs when the mid-afternoon slump hits, you can feel better, have more energy, and be more effective at work.

In fact, having a plan to deal with the mid-afternoon slump is your best strategy. In baseball, there is the ritual seventh inning stretch that gives fans and players a short break. Want a suggestion you could do at work?

When it's 3 pm-- or whenever you feel an energy lag coming on-- stand up, stretch, and walk to the break room to refill your water glass, while taking deep breaths. Drink a glass of water. Walk the long way back to your desk to eat the raw nuts you keep on hand, stopping by a coworker's office to laugh for a minute. By that time, you'll have taken 5-6 small steps to address the most common causes and probably made it past the slump (and perhaps forgotten about it!). Odds are you'll feel re-energized and can finish out the day strong.

Or maybe we could all stand up and sing a song I've written called "The 3 p.m. Stretch" (sung to the tune of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"):

**I want to have fun during the work day  
and finish the tasks on my list  
without eating all of the crappy food  
that drags me down so I'm in a bad mood.**

**So, I'll take a break when I'm tired,  
drink H2O for my thirst  
and I'll stand, stretch, & eat some raw nuts  
for that extra burst!**

Live well and thrive at work!

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