

The art and science of well-being at work

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Leaders of high-intensity, high-performing organizations are beginning to recognize the important effects of mindfulness, exercise, and sleep on the body—and the brain.

Living in a fast-paced, digitally focused, hyperconnected world often means sacrificing the ability to step back and take a breath. In this episode of the *McKinsey Podcast*, McKinsey Publishing's Lucia Rahilly taps principal Manish Chopra, specialist Els van der Helm, and author and McKinsey alumna Caroline Webb for their experience and expertise on the mind-body connection and why executives are increasingly taking notice.

Podcast transcript

Lucia Rahilly: Welcome to the *McKinsey Podcast*. I'm Lucia Rahilly, McKinsey's publications director—and I have a confession to make: today I am really overtired. Nonetheless, I plan to have a pretty productive day through some combination of caffeine, maybe a little sugar, hopefully the odd adrenaline rush. So I'm doing what most of us do, which is powering through the fatigue. But is my lack of sleep having more of an effect on my performance than I realize?

We're going to talk about sleep and other risks to executive well-being posed by today's relentlessly fast and furious work culture. We'll also discuss some techniques that high-performing business leaders use to manage those risks successfully. Joining me in New York today are Manish Chopra, a partner in McKinsey's New York office and author of the book *The Equanimous Mind*, which chronicles the impact of meditation on his personal and professional life. Welcome, Manish.

Manish Chopra: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Lucia Rahilly: We also have Els van der Helm, a specialist in McKinsey's Amsterdam office, who advises McKinsey clients and consultants on the importance of sleep in organizations. Welcome, Els.

Els van der Helm: Thank you.

Lucia Rahilly: And Caroline Webb, a former partner in McKinsey's London office and an external senior adviser to McKinsey on leadership. Caroline is also the CEO of Sevenshift, an advisory firm that uses behavioral science to help clients improve their professional lives, and she is the author of the new book *How to Have a Good Day*. Welcome, Caroline.

Caroline Webb: Thank you.

Lucia Rahilly: I want to start by asking each of you to give a few words of context on what seems to be a burgeoning interest in wellness, and particularly in wellness in the workplace. People have been griping about the accelerating pace of working life and its effects on attention and well-being for 150 years, basically since industrialization, and probably before. So why now—why this intensifying focus now on how best to cope in the workplace? Els, let's start with you and what you've learned from your research on sleep.

Els van der Helm: Even though people are used to being tired, I do think it's changed in that with new technology there are fewer moments in the day where we take a break, have some self-reflection, and take it easy.

When I ask people in my workshops where their phone is at night, 80 percent say it's in their bedroom. Over half of them check their email in bed. I think there is definitely something that has changed compared with, say 20 years ago. We're also much more aware of what the effect is of a healthy lifestyle so that in general we know we should eat more healthily and spend more time exercising.

I think mindfulness and sleep are the next things to focus on. Companies are starting to realize that they have these highly educated employees who are very capable, but that that's not enough. You need to make sure that they are engaged, happy, and healthy.

Lucia Rahilly: What about some of the research on brain science? Has that illuminated the effects of well-being on performance in a way that businesses can see? Caroline, do you want to take that one?

Caroline Webb: Oh, enormously so. I would say everything that Els has just said is absolutely right, that the shift in technology has led to our always-on lives. That's obviously raised awareness of the impact of executive well-being.

But I think it's also the fact that the evidence is just much sharper and more compelling. There are statistically robust studies that show that when you are sleep deprived it affects your cognitive functioning and your emotional resilience. There are studies, across the board, that show that, effectively, what you're doing is depriving the part of your brain that is more sophisticated, what I call the Deliberate System—you're making it very difficult for it to do its

job fully. For data-driven, evidence-hungry, senior people who need to know that there's a real reason for shifting behavior, the scientific evidence really helps.

Lucia Rahilly: Manish, your journey seems to have been more of a personal one. We were talking before this podcast started about the broadening of meditation in the culture. Do you have thoughts on that that you'd like to share?

Manish Chopra: Sure. I think it's interesting what we're talking about. I think wellness and well-being are often used interchangeably. But what we are talking about here is more along the lines of well-being. Wellness often tends to focus more on the physical aspects of health and lifestyle, which are also important.

I do feel that what is changing is that people's expectations for how effective they need to be have gone up because they realize that the standards of the past are not going to be sufficient in the future. Take, for example, even health. People are more focused on that than they were 20 years ago.

The same way people are realizing that—just like health is important to personal effectiveness from the standpoint of lifestyle and retaining longevity—people are realizing that your mind is the other asset that you have to continue to invest in.

So meditation, which, interestingly, grew more out of the Eastern cultures and is focused more on liberating one's self from suffering, has found a very interesting audience in the professional world, where it has a lot of other side benefits, which are a value to the time-strapped executive—whether it's stress levels, managing attention, speed of decision making, resilience, and so on and so forth. So I do feel that the time is right for these kinds of forces to converge to allow executives—and I'd even say it doesn't have to be an executive, any high-intensity professional—to focus on these effectiveness habits, or different tools, that would make their mind a more healthy asset than we've been able to do in the past.

Lucia Rahilly: Do you think that some of the attention to meditation is driven by Silicon Valley, and luminaries in Silicon Valley, who have taken up meditation? Like Steve Jobs, for example?

Manish Chopra: It's not just Silicon Valley, right? Oprah Winfrey is a known meditator, Ariana Huffington, and Congressman Tim Ryan.

Caroline Webb: The US Army.

Manish Chopra: The US Army is using it for posttraumatic stress disorder; Bill George, who used to be the CEO of Medtronic and is now a professor at Harvard. So I think it's been a confluence of things. I think there are people on the West Coast, for sure, who have jumped into this a little bit faster.

The tech industry probably found a way into this sooner because there's probably even more information overload there. And that has made it a little bit more acceptable. Frankly, I feel there are a lot of closeted meditators out there in the corporate world who feel some sense of uneasiness about being open about it.

Lucia Rahilly: I myself meditated for a couple of years, as I mentioned to you. Talking about that in the workforce was not something that I thought would enhance my professional stature, particularly. I was kind of a closet meditator, in fact. And that leads to a question about pockets of resistance, both at the individual level and at the institutional level, to promoting this kind of well-being effort. Maybe we could talk about some of the typical barriers that you encounter and how you've seen executives navigate those barriers successfully.

Caroline Webb: I think there's a mind-set shift that happens when people start to take this seriously, which is to go from seeing the investment of time in sleep, exercise, and mindfulness as a cost to thinking of it as an investment. In fact, it's not just an investment that pays back long term, it's an investment that pays back, all the evidence suggests, rather immediately. The idea of that shift—that this is not down time, it's simply investing in your ability to have more up time—is something which I've seen at the heart of everybody who makes a difference in the way that they're living their lives, and also in the way that their teams around them are living their lives.

One executive I was working with said that she'd always thought of these sorts of investing in herself as something which was nice to have. It was always lower down the list than everything that was going on for her at work and with her family. Then she realized that that investment in herself allowed her to be more effective in everything else she was doing. That was what shifted her approach and made her take time each day to invest in herself.

Manish Chopra: I boil it down to two things, and I think both are perceived barriers: one is lack of time, and the second is lack of belief. The lack of time, as I think Caroline just pointed out, is a little bit of chicken and egg. The return on investment on that time is really high. But you don't know that yet because you're lacking the second thing, which is belief. So just like you talk to people who exercise regularly, they couldn't go without it for a long period of time without feeling something was missing.

The same is true for when you invest in these activities that enhance your personal effectiveness, whether it's through meditation, exercise, or sleep management. But the science is there. I think the role models which you were talking about earlier are a big factor in overcoming skepticism because if they see a relevant person, or a senior person, speak more openly about this, people tend to pay attention.

Lucia Rahilly: Yes, the experiential benefit. You described yourself as a skeptic of meditation prior to trying it, correct?

Manish Chopra: It was an unexpected arrival at a ten-day retreat that changed my mind about it.

Lucia Rahilly: Was that retreat the particular catalyst for you to start? There wasn't a business problem that you were trying to solve?

Manish Chopra: Ironically, I went to it because my wife found a location that was offering the executive version of the course. I thought I was going to have some networking opportunities. Lo and behold, I was suckered into it. I thought I wouldn't last even a day. I ended up coming out a different person.

Lucia Rahilly: That's fantastic.

Caroline Webb: I do think that there are two classic ways that people get into this state of mind about the fact that it's worth investing in your sleep, exercise, and mindfulness. The two archetypes that I've seen are, one, you dip your toe in the water and you're convinced enough by the evidence that you do—what you're saying, Manish—you decide you're going to try a little bit, and then your brain gets that nice feedback loop, which is something we know is needed to develop a new habit, and there you go.

The other classic archetype is a crisis of some sort, some kind of transformational experience—and hitting the wall, hitting the buffers, some major personal incident in your life. For me it was definitely a health crash, where I suddenly realized that my body was not somehow completely separate from my brain, and vice versa. That was, for me, the big turning point. It wasn't the same as a retreat, but effectively, I was forced to retreat and think about what it takes to be effective when you're working very hard.

Lucia Rahilly: Els, you've done some research on the effects of sleep deprivation on performance. Would you like to talk about that? You had some interesting comparisons between sleep-deprived folks and drunkenness.

Els van der Helm: There are many things that happen when you don't sleep enough. Your blood pressure goes up, you're responding differently to sugar—and you can imagine what that means for your health longer term.

But when you look at the brain, there are so many different functions that you need to master every day at work. You need to be able to focus your attention and not be distracted by other things. As Caroline said, the front part of your brain, the best part of your brain, which makes you who you are and makes you smart, is the most vulnerable to sleep deprivation.

The rest of your brain can cope relatively well, but it's also suffering. The front of your brain is the first one to get hit. That also leads to us not being aware that we're not functioning as well as we are supposed to because that part of your brain also gives you that insight. That's why I

think a lot people think they can just get away with it and they're functioning perfectly fine, when they're not.

Lucia Rahilly: I'm one example of that.

Els van der Helm: There are these studies where they have two groups of people. One group gets alcohol, the other, poor guys, get sleep deprived. You can compare their performance on a host of different tasks and try to equate—when they are equal. You see that if someone skips a whole night of sleep, they're legally drunk.

You're basically at 0.1 percent blood-alcohol level, which is double the legal limit for driving in many countries. I often say this in my workshop where we look at, OK, what is everyone's sleep debt? What did you lose out on sleep this week compared with what you actually need?

There have been so many people that lost eight hours or more. I tell them that that is as if you're showing up drunk at work. We just don't seem to realize that. It would be way more fun to actually show up drunk at work instead of showing up that sleep deprived. I often refer to the series *Mad Men*, taking place in the '60s, where they're drinking and smoking in the office. And you think, What are you doing? You're at work! But we're doing the exact same thing right now. We're showing up just as bad, in terms of performance. We're not nearly having as much fun, though.

Lucia Rahilly: We're also in denial about it, right? That statistic about the percentage of executives who said that sleeplessness has no effect on performance.

Els van der Helm: We looked specifically at leadership performance and the behaviors that we already know are critical to the leadership of a healthy organization: what effects does sleep have on them? Each of those you can relate to needing sleep before you can be a good leader. Whereas if you ask leaders themselves, Are you sleeping enough? The answer is no. Are you happy with your quality of sleep? No. Is this affecting your leadership performance? No. That's scientifically impossible.

Lucia Rahilly: How much sleep is the right amount of sleep? What is the guideline?

Els van der Helm: On average, the population needs about eight hours, but it's a normal curve. You could be one of the lucky ones that is fine on seven or six and a half, or unlucky that you need much more than eight. I usually tell people to try to figure out how much they sleep on vacation when there's no stress to mask how much you need. And, how much do you sleep on vacation when you take the time to disconnect and sleep?

Lucia Rahilly: How do approaches like using caffeine affect cognitive behavior after a sleepless night? Does caffeine give you the temporary boost that you're seeking?

Els van der Helm: It depends on the type of task. It definitely helps in your subjective feeling of tiredness, your attention levels definitely go up. But there are a lot of other things that happen when you're sleep deprived. It's harder to think more creatively and come up with new solutions. Caffeine doesn't help you overcome that deficit.

Caffeine has a long half-life, so it's not out of your body that quickly. When you don't get enough sleep, your sleep gets a little bit more efficient at night. So don't go crazy. It doesn't fix everything, but it gets a little bit more efficient with a little bit less light sleep and more deep sleep. However, when you've had caffeine, that doesn't happen, because your brain has been tricked into thinking that it hasn't been awake for that long. Then you don't get that better recovery sleep.

Manish Chopra: There is one thing that you guys were talking about earlier that I wanted to comment on, and I'll give you the one-person view on this equation. I think there is an issue, at least in our culture, that less sleep is like a badge of honor.

So never mind that people are not admitting that it's impacting their executive functioning, but I think for some people, at least when I was early on in my career, you'd see people walking around saying, "OK, so until what time were you in the office?" "Oh, I was here until 3:00 AM."

The thought that would go through my mind was a combination of sympathy and, frankly, some sense of you need to get a life. As opposed to expecting some kind of reward from me, an acknowledgement that you are a superior being who can operate on three hours of sleep—they weren't getting it.

We were talking about the closeted meditators and so forth. I think there is still some shame I see people experience when they are admitting that they want to have a life. We need to overcome that, in general, because otherwise all of these things are theoretically good. Maybe there are some people who are higher performers or senior enough to be able to say, "OK, I deserve balance in life." But people who, early on, start in high-intensity professions feel like this is the price to pay to survive professionally. I think that's one. I think the second thing you guys are talking about, the balance, I feel like I've been an interesting experiment in all of this myself.

I was the guy who had trouble getting out of bed in the morning at 7:00 AM. My teams would joke about the fact that a 9:00 AM meeting could be too early for Manish. I started meditating, and the whole equation turned upside down. I'm now the early-morning guy and have a hard time sleeping beyond 6:00 AM even if I tried to.

On the one hand I think the baseline point is—I completely agree that there is some critical number that you don't want to fall below, because then you're running the risk of deterioration in all departments of your life.

On the other hand, I do feel that there is the ability to manage how much awake rest you can have versus sleeping rest. What I mean by awake—some people call meditation restful awakeness—is, ultimately, again, not as a scientist but as a practitioner, I feel that all of these things are targeted toward slowing down the mind or quieting the mind to a point where it can relax, restore, and repair.

Caroline Webb: I think there's a general point that it's good to start to tune in to your body and your mind and what it needs. Because we are all a little different. I would have no shame in admitting that I need eight and a half hours of sleep, and throughout my whole career at McKinsey, I needed to make sure I got that. I prioritized it and managed to make my way through 12 years at the firm without anyone thinking that that was too terrible an idea.

But I know that there are other people who need even more, and there are people who can get by with less. There is a part of me that thinks, "Oh, you know, I wish. I wish that I were like that." But I think that I've made my peace with who I am and what I need. For me, exercise, we haven't talked a lot about exercise, but I never have been a gym person. I've been one of those people who has had dozens of gym memberships that have been an incredible waste of money. It was only when I found ways to build it into my everyday life—making sure that I walked to a meeting, for example, or just even walk around as I'm doing a conference call, just getting a little bit of activity. And becoming more adept at noticing when I needed that physical boost, which, typically for me, is about every 90 minutes. I at least need to stand up and kind of shake myself and do a tiny little bit of activity.

I think just being becoming better at noticing when you're worn down, when you need to take a break, when you need to take a walk, when you need to slow down is central to getting this right.

Lucia Rahilly: Each of you has your own point of entry, again, into finding this sort of productivity and focus and flow within our always-on work culture. For Manish it's meditation, for Els it's sleep, and for Caroline it's a combination of different behavioral tweaks.

If executives can only do one thing every day, if they have one thing that they're willing to commit to every day as a kind of starting point into addressing the mind-body balance, what would you recommend that that one thing be?

Caroline Webb: That's really tough.

Els van der Helm: It's supertough.

Manish Chopra: I have one, an easy one. Don't check email before 7:00 AM, or whenever you wake up, maybe two hours before. I say 7:00 AM. Maybe that's too late for some.

Caroline Webb: Not a problem for me.

Manish Chopra: Yes, exactly. Set yourself a goal to not check your email for the first two hours you're awake. That alone, it seems to me, could change your effectiveness. Because I use the time to, first of all, meditate or exercise.

If I'm going to force myself to stick to certain habits, I can do that first thing in the morning. It's a lot easier to control your day in the morning versus in the evening when you have client dinners and things like that. Or you're traveling. And it also allows me to spend time thinking about how I want to use the day.

Caroline Webb: I would broaden that to acknowledge that, for people who are vampires, like me, who are not morning people, that the argument for going off-line is very, very strong. The timing may be different. But I absolutely, wholeheartedly second the idea of being more deliberate about taking yourself off-line for periods of time, especially when you want to do your biggest thinking and your deepest thinking. Whether it's thinking about what the day holds for you as you head into it, or even whenever your peak time is, cognitively, just thinking about how you can help yourself be at your best in that time. That usually means taking yourself out of the maelstrom and giving yourself that space. But I think sleep. I was doing a talk with Google last week, and I was asked, if you could argue for any one single change, what would it be. The answer was to work at how much sleep you need and to make sure that you get it. Els is nodding frantically at that.

Els van der Helm: Yes, what a lot of people do is not get that amount of sleep during the week and then think they can just catch up on the weekends, which doesn't actually work. I think my advice would be also sleep related. Stop snoozing. About 60 or 70 percent of the people I see snooze. So that's setting your alarm in the morning, waking up, falling back asleep. It goes off again. So you wake up multiple times. It's the opposite of what your brain wants. It wants to wake up naturally. Instead, you make it wake up by sound multiple times in a row, hurting the quality of your sleep. If I could tell people to stop doing one thing, it's snoozing.

Lucia Rahilly: Manish, Els, Caroline, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us. You've given us a lot to think about. For more on the topics of executive well-being and organizational performance, visit mckinsey.com. Thanks for listening. □

Manish Chopra is a principal in McKinsey's New York office and the author of *The Equanimous Mind* (Amazon Digital Services, May 2011), and **Els van der Helm** is a specialist in the Amsterdam office. **Caroline Webb** is a senior adviser to McKinsey, an alumna of the London office, and the author of *How to Have a Good Day: Harness the Power of Behavioral Science to Transform Your Working Life*. **Lucia Rahilly** is a member of McKinsey Publishing and is based in the New York office.