

wellness lab

THE MORNING MENTAL RESET

The beginning of the day offers a unique opportunity to prime your brain for success and feel energized and happy, science shows. Here's how to take advantage of this power hour. *by Tula Karras*

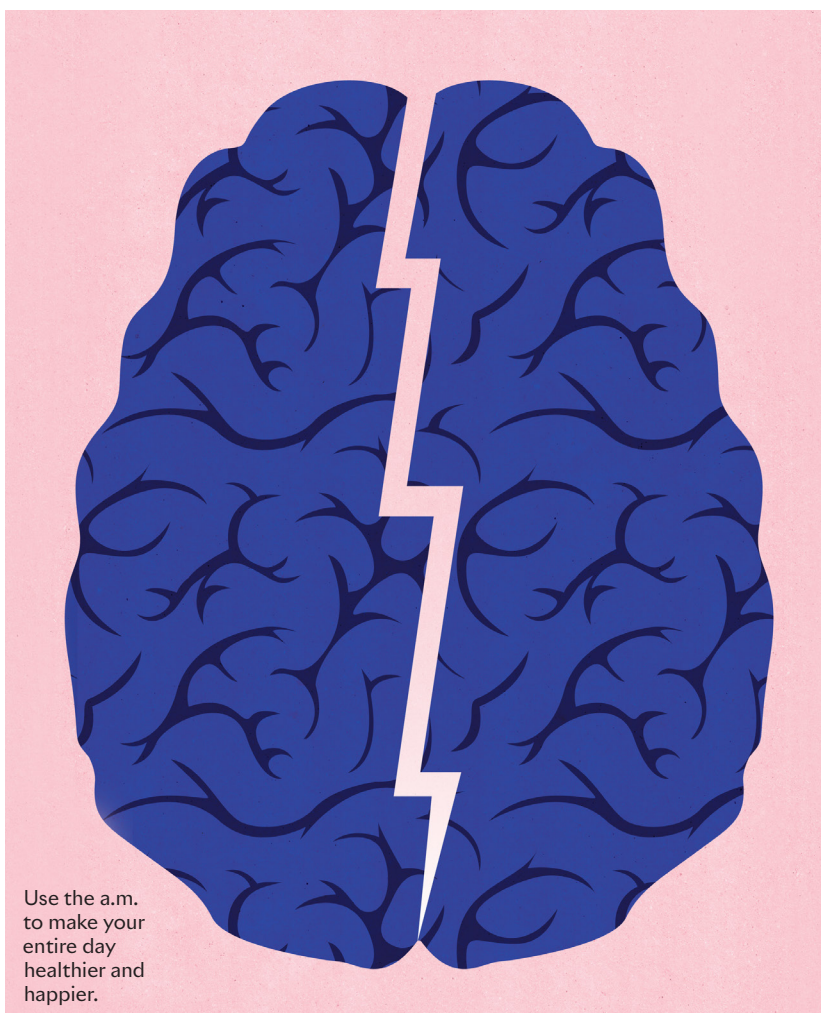
For a great day, start with a morning routine that stacks the deck in your favor. "We want to use the strongest tools that work the fastest to help set our brain to a motivated and productive mode first thing," says Wendy Suzuki, Ph.D., a neuroscientist and the author of *Good Anxiety: Harnessing the Power of the Most Misunderstood Emotion*. Creating a wake-up practice can also help you tap into the benefits of ritual: Research finds that people who perform repeated behaviors that have meaning attached to them feel more in control and can better cope with anxiety and stress. Try these science-backed strategies (pick the ones that are most doable for you) to build the perfect mindset to fuel your next 12 hours.

LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Exposing the optic nerve in your eyes to light activates your cortisol arousal systems, releasing energizing neurotransmitters, peptides, and hormones, including adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin, and testosterone, says Kristen Willeumier, Ph.D., a neuroscientist and the author of *Biohack Your Brain: How to Boost Cognitive Health, Performance, and Power*. Our body's energizing cortisol and testosterone naturally peak in the morning, but exposing your optic nerve to light is the permanent "on switch" your brain needs to stay alert throughout the day, she says. Open your curtains or blinds immediately after awakening, and have your coffee or smoothie on your porch or by a window. Natural light is best—sunshine is the most intense trigger for alertness.

PICTURE A DAY OF SUCCESS

"Visualization helps us form mental images that haven't been experienced or perceived by the senses but that you may have witnessed someone else doing and want to emulate," Willeumier says. And when you imagine something, you're laying the neural pathways for that to happen in real life: Functional MRIs have shown that certain areas of the brain look similar whether we're experiencing an activity (like playing an instrument or hitting a tennis ball) or just imagining doing so. Visualization techniques such as mentally rehearsing an event the way you'd like it to go, imagining yourself having qualities you admire in a role model, or seeing yourself making healthy food choices for the day ahead have been proved to improve performance in sports, work, and personal goals, building confidence and focus. For a guided visualization, try the Headspace app.



Use the a.m. to make your entire day healthier and happier.

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ANGELA BASSETT

Actress, Director, Producer & Activist



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SPEAK UP FOR NATURE 

Starting your morning with a workout predicts better brain functioning, research shows.

GET UP AND GET MOVING

Exercising first thing delivers daylong mind and body benefits. “Exercise bathes the brain in a chemical bubble bath of serotonin and dopamine, which helps with focus and mood,” says Suzuki, who switched her workout routine from p.m. to a.m. based on her research on the exercise-mood-productivity link. Another reason to rise and sweat: It sets you on “active” for the whole day. Dopamine is a reward chemical, and the more you get, the more you want to do the thing that delivered it in the first place. “We have evidence that the more movement you do, the more motivated you are to keep moving throughout the day,” Suzuki says. Starting your morning with a workout predicts better brain functioning too. One study found that those who worked out for 30 minutes after they woke up and moved three minutes every half hour throughout the day were better at focusing, decision-making, organizing, and planning.

GO OUTSIDE

If you’re someone who opens your eyes and instantly starts to worry about your to-do list, Mother Nature can pump the breaks on the stress pedal. Just being in nature—watering the garden, strolling through a park—activates our parasympathetic nervous system, helping us feel chill. “A little stress and cortisol is OK, since it’s activating and makes us productive, but you want to pair that with a sense of calm so you can move forward in the most positive way,” says Suzuki, who meditates facing her plants to get some green into her routine. Simply hearing nature’s chorus makes a difference: Research finds that natural sounds like raindrops and wind rustling leaves in trees lower stress, decrease pain, and boost mood and cognitive performance.

TURN CAFFEINATION INTO MEDITATION

Doing something that has several steps to it, like making a pour-over coffee or brewing tea, is an easy way to give meditation some shape, rhythm, and purpose, and to have something to focus on as you guide your mind. Meditating regularly has been shown to relieve stress, improve learning, and increase the volume in areas of the brain associated with attention and memory, says Willeumier, who does it every morning for 30 minutes. Suzuki sets aside 45 minutes each a.m. for a tea ritual and an open-monitoring meditation, which she learned on vacation from a monk in Bali. “The tea ritual is the engine that keeps me in the meditation—there’s always a next step to focus on,” she says. “As I brew, wait, pour, taste, and drink, I observe what comes into my mind. It helps me wake up gently and gives me the time to ask myself, How am I feeling? I tune in to what my body needs for that day.” If you’re short on time, even five minutes of deep breathing will give you healthy brain benefits, science shows. ■

