Seven time-savers for early career researchers

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I want to summarize my thought and rationales for certain things that I do, which I believe have given me a little bit more time for research each day. As an early career researcher, juggling between family and research duties can be difficult. And the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly not helping. Here is how I tackle such a problem.

1. Fasting:

I have been very interested in time-restricted feeding (intermittent fasting) for over two years now. I have been practicing it quite often, as research has shown fasting has many medicinal benefits (Di Francesco, Di Germanio, Bernier, & de Cabo, 2018). Most days I fast 14-16 hours (I stop eating or drinking anything that has any calories in it between 8 to 9 pm, then wait until lunch the next day). Since my second child was born, once a week, I have a fasting window of 20-22 hours. Without being tethered to eating like I am used to, it really gives me time each day, one or two hours more of free time and clear-mindedness. I just have to make sure I drink enough water, then I am good.

Besides, there is a promising area of longevity research related to fasting (Mattson, Longo & Harvie 2017). If fasting prolongs life in humans as it has been demonstrated in animal subjects, it could clearly give each researcher a few more productive years. But that is for the future. What I am interested in is the present. And now, two benefits stand

out for me: I have a bit more time every day and every week, and I feel more awake and hungrier, literally and metaphorically.

2. Mindfulness meditation:

Research shows that the mind wanders very often, and as Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) said in their Science paper: “A wandering mind is an unhappy mind.” One way a wandering mind makes you unhappy is that, once you lost your focus, it takes on average 25 minutes, maybe even more, to regain your focus, according to a famous paper on the cost of interrupted work (Mark, Gudith, & Klocke, 2008). Mindfulness meditation, viewed in this way, is the ultimate time-saver. If you catch your mind starting to wander five times a day, you will save yourself from 125 minutes of distraction per day. If you spend 10 minutes a day to practice meditation formally, this is clearly one of the best returns on investment.

Another helpful thing about meditation is that it strengthens the neural correlates for curiosity and nonjudgmental interest (Brewer, Davis & Goldstein, 2013; Siegel, 2007). In formal practice of meditation, you learn to pay as much attention as possible to as little as possible. Usually, in the beginning, you learn to focus exclusively on your breath and notice every detail of this most mundane and seemingly boring activity. If you can be non-judgmentally curious about boring things like your breathing pattern or the ambient sound in the background, you can become more attentive to ideas, which will be a great time-saver for research.

My mentor has taught me a lot about the importance of paying close attention to the connection among ideas, turning on my “*ideas-radar*” to catch any serendipitous idea coming my way—which he calls a “*creative quantum*,” training my “*mind-sponge*” to flexibly absorb good ideas and values and filtering out non-productive ones (Napier & Vuong, 2013; Vuong & Napier, 2014, 2015; Vuong, 2016). I think meditation helps these processes.

Finally, meditation teaches you to take a step back from your current thoughts. We all know what it is like to be lost in thoughts without realizing you are. Being able to

detach, to evaluate whether some patterns of thoughts are useful (at this moment) or not is a good mental tool to have at your disposal. As a researcher, I sometimes find myself overwhelmed and not sure what to do for a paper because all the thoughts that come in tell me different ways to approach it. Thus, just being able to breathe and be aware of what emotions drive my thinking process makes me more clear-headed when writing.

3. Podcasts, blinkist, and audiobooks:

You can listen to podcasts, blinkist, and audiobooks while cleaning the dishes, taking the trash, or going for a jog. It is clearly a time-saver.

But I think it saves time in even a better sense: it helps the process of “sampling ideas.” I often listen to authors discuss and especially debate their new books or their new journal articles. I come to know some of the influential concepts, people, and institutions in my field this way. Then if something becomes more relevant, I will invest in researching these concepts and ideas.

Recently, I’ve subscribed to Blinkist, the app that offers a short 15-minute summary of non-fiction books. There are so many book titles there, which serve both research and pleasure. When I find a book that I really like or podcasts and Blinkist are not enough for me to get the its core arguments, I will look for the full audiobook version.

Here, if you apply the “*mindsponge*,” the “*3D methods creativity*,” and “*ideas-radar*” principles, sampling ideas this way makes even more sense (Napier & Vuong, 2013; Vuong & Napier, 2014, 2015; Vuong, 2016).

4. Wake up early:

Mike Tyson, when he trains for a fight, said he wants to wake up super early and train in order to gain a mental advantage over his opponents. This, I think, applies for researchers too. You want to wake up super early, jump start your day. By the time other people wake up and start their day, you have already done some research and writing.

Since my second child, I kind of give up on working late. Of course, when it matters, I will pull myself together and stay up late and work, even pull an all-nighter if

necessary. But normally, I try to sleep around 6-7 hours per night: go to bed around 10 pm and wake up at 4:30 am. My kids wake up around 7:30, so that gives me 3 hours of working with a rested, clear head.

I think working late at night after a long day already working and doing all the house works is comparable to the overtraining of athletes. Your brain and body are spent at 10 pm, let alone staying up working another 3 hours. The situation is like pushing yourself to keep doing strenuous exercises after a long day of training. You just need more rest in this case, which mean the rest from 1-7:30 am will not do. Then as a parent, you don't want your kids to see you sluggishly waking up, stumbling out of bed. I want my kids to wake up and already see me working and training. That gives me some mental advantage.

5. Remove carbs and oily foods from your lunch:

So, I usually don't eat breakfast and instead drink a lot of water in the morning. At lunch, I try to only have some meat and veggies, and I only drink black coffee. I always find myself sleepy or lousy during the afternoon if I eat rice, bread, noodles, and anything oily at lunch. Clearly, if you don't feel sleepy or lousy, you can use your time better.

6. Text readers of Microsoft Edge:

This is a new feature in Microsoft Edge that I stumbled upon recently. You can open any PDF file by Edge, and then you can use the text readers for free. Sometimes, when I don't want to read a journal article, I will open it with Edge and let the machine read to me while I do something else, usually, house works.

7. A decent amount of sleep and exercises:

Then, of course, even if you are busy, try to get a decent amount of sleep and exercise. Good habits of sleep, diet, and exercises prevent you from having chronic stress, mood swings, and anxiety and more likely to make you more productive and creative in general (Doi, Minowa, & Tango, 2003; Lupu, 2012). They prevent the vicious spiral from happening: Being stressed and anxious reduces your productivity, and in turn makes you

even more stressed and anxious, which makes you unpleasant to everyone around, and consequently making you more stressed. General good health is often taken for granted, but once you are sick, all you want is to have your health back.

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