

The 5:2 diet for your mind

Psychologist Meg Arroll expounds on a novel approach to reducing overstimulation – incorporating two days of ‘active rest’ a week, enabling our brains to pause for breath and reboot with an optimised outlook

Fasting is nothing new – but what if the reduced intake in question was not about food, but about two days of ‘mind fasting’ every week?

The world’s largest survey on rest – 18,000 respondents from 134 countries – found that 68 per cent of us want more rest. Perhaps even more significant is that rest-deprived people rated their overall wellbeing as half as good as those who felt that they regularly have enough time out.

Solving this is easier said than done, and doing nothing is as bad for us as doing too much. Our minds seek out information and stimuli, and we require a certain amount of input to function at our best.

The ‘5:2 mind diet’ approach does not equate to sitting on the sofa for two days – although there’s nothing wrong with the occasional box-set marathon – it’s more about cutting

out ‘negative mind calories’; the ones that drain us. Negative mind calories are triggers that lead to ruminative thoughts and worry, or make us anxious or bored. For example, focusing on what we need to do next week, or replaying some perceived indiscretion from yesterday are thoughts that sap our energy and mental space. This type of thinking will not only make us feel stressed, but can also contribute to a range of health problems.

Like the 5:2 calorie-restriction diet, the 5:2 mind diet aims to give us enough mind calories to maintain the level of input we need, but supplants negative thoughts with ‘active rest’. On ‘5 days’, we do fun things that boost our positivity, and on ‘2 days’ we seek to engage our minds fully, to keep negative thoughts at bay. Here are some simple ways to change your state of mind, every day.

1 *Monday*

To start the week, try a little game of mind tennis. Whenever a negative thought pings into your head – ‘Oh no! It’s Monday morning again and I have so much to do!’ – lob that thought back over the net with a positive reframe, such as: ‘It’s Monday morning and today is a new opportunity for me.’ If your return shot is volleyed back, continue with a positive drop shot, or even a smash back: ‘Today I get to finish my day with a yoga lesson. Hurrah!’

With practice and in time, the negative ‘shots’ will be less frequent, as your thought patterns become more positive, even on a Monday.

2 *Tuesday*

Research from the London School of Economics, which collected data on happiness via smartphones, found that Tuesdays



are considered to be the most miserable day. To combat this high load of negative mind calories, and give yourself a break on this perceived longest day of the week, be 'mindless' and allow yourself to daydream. Your mind will find it easier to wander if you're in a quiet, peaceful place but if you can't leave your workplace, simply using headphones can help you reach this 'zenned out' state.

If you start thinking about negative things such as getting revenge on your ex, nudge your mind back to something positive. Try to keep your daydreams grounded in reality – a barefoot walk on the beach, a loving reunion with a family member, a novel you're going to write... rather than 'empty' mind calories. This approach exercises your motivational mind, too – getting you excited about things that you may soon be doing, and boosting your mood, and resolve, in the process.

3 **Wednesday**

'Hump day', and time to try to rewire your brain by doing something that makes you feel nostalgic. Research shows triggering feelings of nostalgia bolsters social bonds, increases positive self-regard, and generates an upbeat mood.

Watch your favourite classic film, or browse some of your best-loved children's books in the library, and you're guaranteed a warm glow, plus if your mind meanders down memory lane, you get additional 'active rest' points. Or, pick something fun, active and absorbing to do – bowling and mini-golf will spark that nostalgic vibe on a weeknight after work, and these are great activities for a date, too.

4 **Thursday**

Take a photo today – an ordinary photo, not a selfie. This can be an object you look at every day, such as a your favourite chair,

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a local bus stop or your favourite coffee mug. Focus on the object and notice its little grooves and colours. Does it surprise you in any way? Take another photo at a different angle, and look at it again. By concentrating on an everyday object in this way your mind is fully occupied – mindful, present, absorbed – and utterly devoid of negative mind calories.

5 **Friday**

Make Friday 'Fabulous Fallibility Day'. We generate a mass of negative mind calories on trying to be 'perfect' – but human beings make mistakes. If we let go of the idea that we must be flawless, we release ourselves from the tiring self-expectation of faultlessness.

So, celebrate your fallibilities. Our imperfections make us unique and they deserve positive recognition. You may also find that by accepting others as they are, warts and all, social bonds strengthen and grow, which is beneficial to health. A great way to do this is with an honest, but not 'fishing for compliments' type post on Facebook or Instagram, or by simply calling a friend for whom you've always put on your 'best face', and admitting that you don't really have it all figured out. What a relief! Let your shoulders drop, breathe deeply, and shake it all off with a little dance.

6 **Saturday** **'MIND DIET DAY 1'**

On this first 5:2 mind diet day, use a couple of the previous techniques and then try something greater. The aim of 'diet' days is to keep our minds wholly focused on positive thoughts and tasks, within which we can lose ourselves. A way of doing this is by teaching someone something. When we pass on a skill, we not only bring knowledge to mind, but we must also be able to express it well, and attend to verbal and non-verbal signs from our student. This process involves high levels of cognitive capacity, concentration and focus, but also empathy, compassion, and human connection – and will restrict the negative mind calories that we might consume otherwise.

7 **Sunday** **'MIND DIET DAY 2'**

On mind diet day 2, attempt something that scares you, or at least puts you outside of your comfort zone. As Eleanor Roosevelt said: 'You must do the things you think you cannot do.' These can be small things, such as trying a food you're convinced you don't like, or a big event like a skydive. By doing something 'scary' your mind will be focused on the event, instead of being stuck in negative thinking. The combination of doing something significant, as all new things feel, and proving that you're never too old to learn/try/dive in, is truly positive.

It doesn't matter if the two diet days are consecutive – explained here as the weekend – it's the consistent practice of these active rest techniques that's important. By doing small activities to rid our minds of draining thoughts on five days of the week, then spending two days dedicating time to a task that consumes a great deal of our conscious mental processes, we can rest our minds and increase our wellbeing.