

# serotonin seekers

matt  
church



Happiness makes up  
in height what it lacks  
in depth.

**Robert Frost**

To my kids



# What is a serotonin seeker?

Some days you are completely joyous and full of creativity. You are calm and centred and people rely on you.

You often crave sweet things. You can be a little addictive in your personality. You love routine and dislike chaos.

## But sometimes ...

There are days when you carry a sense of emptiness around with you that nothing can fill. You can't get to sleep when you go to bed and can't rouse yourself in the morning. You're woken up with restless legs in the night and then you can't get back to sleep again.

- 
- > Do you find that a cloudy day affects your disposition?
  - > Do you eat after you have had an argument?
  - > Do you crave sugar mid-afternoon?
  - > Do you find you snack mainly on carbohydrates rather than proteins?
  - > When stressed are you likely to have mood swings?

If you answered yes to 3 or more of these questions you are probably a serotonin seeker.

## There are 2 natural highs

1

1 quick (adrenalin)

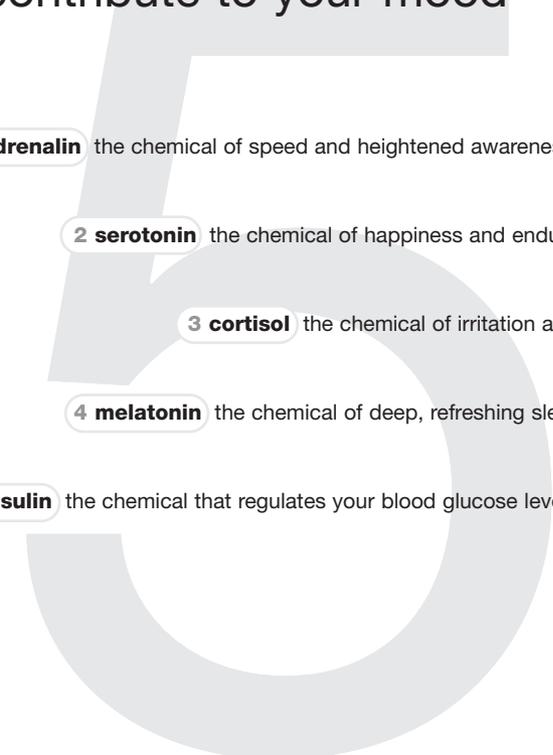
2

1 slow (serotonin)

**adrenalin** switches you on for short bursts when you need it  
**serotonin** keeps you feeling calm and centred for longer periods

The secret to a natural high 24/7 is to maintain the right balance between the 2.

## There are 5 major natural chemicals that contribute to your mood

- 
- 1 **adrenalin** the chemical of speed and heightened awareness
  - 2 **serotonin** the chemical of happiness and enduring motivation
  - 3 **cortisol** the chemical of irritation and high anxiety
  - 4 **melatonin** the chemical of deep, refreshing sleep
  - 5 **insulin** the chemical that regulates your blood glucose levels

The 5 big natural chemicals are activated by 2 distinct biological processes

# 1 brain chemistry

(subtle, slow-acting, long-lasting)

# 2 body chemistry

(direct, swift, volatile)

## brain

The 100 billion neurons in your brain link up with each other via neurotransmitters to create the almost infinite variety of complex networks that govern memory, language, appetite, mood, the sleep-wake cycle and much, much more. There are several key neurotransmitters. Serotonin is the most important for maintaining inner contentment.

## body

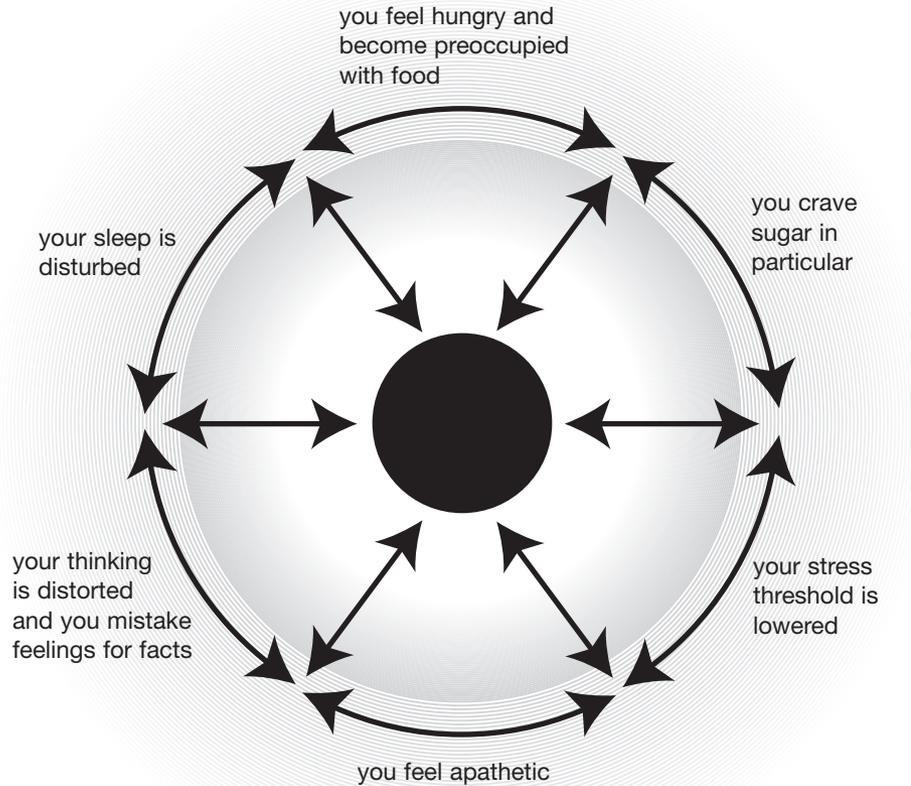
Body chemistry is regulated by hormones, which are produced in the endocrine glands. Their secretion into your system can have an immediate and dramatic effect — for example, the sudden flood of adrenalin from the adrenal cortex when you have to break unexpectedly to avoid rear-ending the car in front.

The balance of slow-acting brain chemistry bears a direct relationship to your general mood. What you eat and when you eat it, the amount of exercise you take and the amount of sleep you get are among the key factors that affect the production of neurotransmitters. This means you can control your internal ecology to maintain abundant supplies of your feel-good chemical, serotonin.

## Serotonin is important for

- > a **steady, cheerful** frame of mind
- > a **normal** appetite
- > **satisfying** sleep patterns
- > **tolerance** for the daily frustrations and irritations of life
- > long-term **motivation**

Make sure you provide your body with the right environment to function on a sustainable, natural high.



Living with a serotonin imbalance is like being stuck on a roundabout. The physical responses all feed into each other, perpetuating the cycle.

One of the most vital functions of serotonin is to regulate your sleep–wake cycle. This process requires serotonin to work in conjunction with another neurotransmitter, melatonin.

Melatonin is like an off-ramp that you have to locate at the end of the day so you can recuperate in preparation for the new day ahead.

# serotonin

the accelerator during the day, keeping you happy and energetic and controlling your appetite

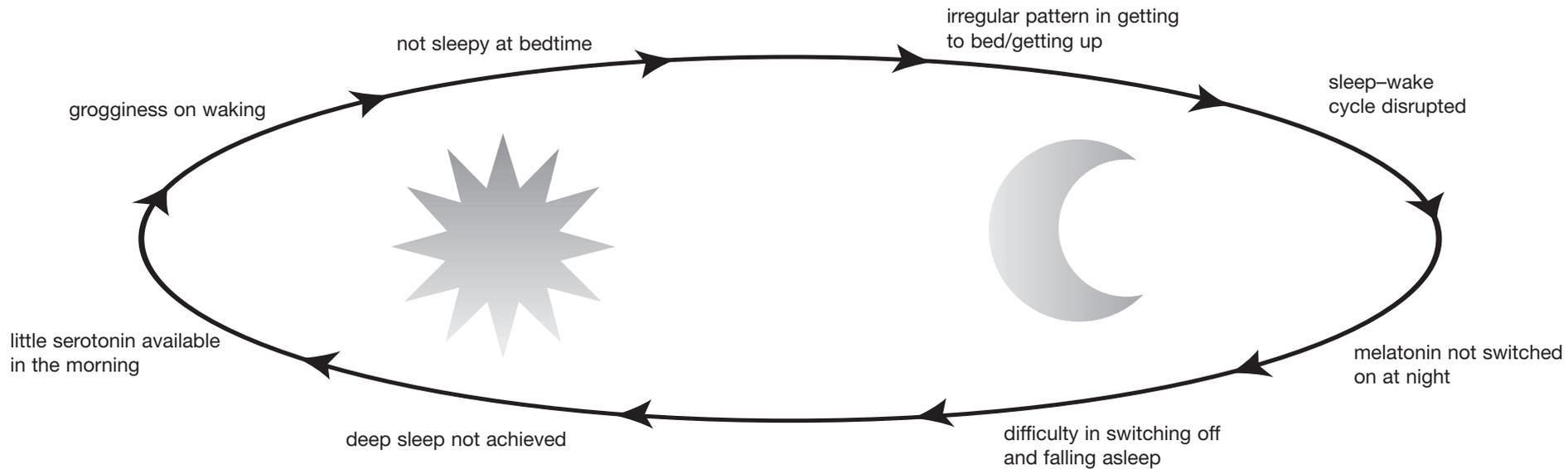
# melatonin

the parking brake during the night, allowing you to restore and replenish

Melatonin is created by the pineal gland, deep in the brain. This gland is stimulated by sunlight received through the eyes during the day. That is why it is important for serotonin seekers to enjoy a little fresh air at some point during the day.

The release of melatonin into your system is triggered by darkness and the release of serotonin is triggered by sunlight.

If for some reason your body doesn't switch off serotonin at night, your melatonin system can't function properly. Sleep deprivation contributes to your depression, which in turn decreases your chances of sleeping well. And so the serotonin roundabout goes around.



By balancing your serotonin levels you'll re-establish the reciprocal actions

of to serotonin and melatonin. You'll be relieved enjoy peaceful sleep again.

# How can you identify if you are on a serotonin low?

- You may experience
- > **low** energy or even fatigue
  - > **poor** concentration
  - > **decreased** sex drive
  - > huge appetite fluctuations and **cravings**
  - > a hollow **emptiness** and sense of **discontentment**

If you have ever felt

the misery of quitting smoking



disappointment at failing an exam



loneliness when a lover goes away



homesickness on a rainy day

you know what low serotonin feels like.

There are 5 key lifestyle factors that help you navigate your daily expressways and maintain a natural high 24/7



① **Sleep** restores chemical balance, repairs damage to muscle tissue, processes memories and stores those that are significant in your long-term memory.

② **Food** has a direct and immediate effect on your internal chemistry. What you eat can elevate your serotonin levels or cause an adrenalin spike.

③ **Activity** has both a foundation and trigger effect. A good fitness level provides a stable foundation for managing pressure with less adrenalin. Certain exercises boost the production of serotonin for good calm vibes. And exercising during the day elevates your melatonin levels and guarantees a better night's sleep.

④ **Thinking** influences body chemistry profoundly. If you are scared, adrenalin kicks in. If you are sad, serotonin levels are decreased. It's essential to tune into your inner dialogue if you want to pursue a naturally high life.

⑤ **Stress** throws your chemistry out of balance, but you can improve your tolerance to it. Recognising your response to stress and acting appropriately is crucial to avoiding depression and distorted thinking.

# yes/no

## Check your lifestyle

### Sleep

Do you wake up without an alarm clock most days?  
Do you take about 20 minutes to fall asleep?  
Do you sleep through most nights?

### Food

Do you eat a variety of lean proteins?  
Do you eat regularly?  
Do you drink fewer than 3 cups of coffee a day?

### Activity

Do you exercise regularly?  
Do you exercise in the morning before breakfast?

### Thoughts

Are your thoughts predominantly positive?  
Are you able to keep a sense of perspective?

### Stress

Do you only focus on what you can control?  
Are you still learning something new every day?

**Sleep is the number 1** way to maintain your body balance. With great sleep you're assured a natural high. Deep sleep means you'll have

- > greater productivity
- > better focus
- > more creativity

When you feel depressed, you are also likely to feel lethargic and tired. It can be difficult to tackle even basic daily tasks and you lack concentration.

Being depressed for prolonged periods gradually leads to you being less active, which makes you less tired when you go to bed. You set up a lethargy circuit that feeds off itself:

- > **negative thoughts** (I can't be bothered, it's all too hard)
- > **self-defeating feelings** (discouraged, de-motivated, bored)
- > **self-defeating actions** (sleeping-in, avoiding activity, not exerting yourself)

Not sleeping well is the enemy of peak performance, so don't put up with bad sleep. Work out the source of the problem and take action.

**get in a** **rut** **with your sleep**

Make the effort to develop a regular routine. Go to bed and get out of bed at the same time every day. Yep, even weekends. Sleeping in only makes you feel groggier.

**make your bedroom** **dark**

Artificial lighting can suppress melatonin. Dim the lights as the evening progresses or burn candles. Read in bed with a mini book light.

**control** **noise**

Level out random noises that interrupt sleep. High-quality earplugs can help if you're desperate.

**regulate your body** **temperature**

Don't swelter under a hot doona and don't cuddle all night long. Wear nightwear made from natural fibres and let your skin breathe.

**don't let the** **bedbugs** **bite**

Debug your mattress, change or refill your pillows often, sleep in crisp, clean sheets, give the doona a good shake daily, keep your bed fresh and inviting.

**tire** **yourself out**

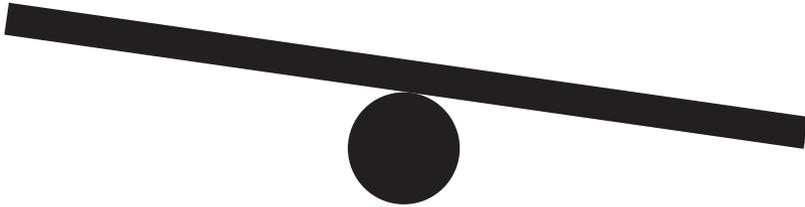
An hour of aerobic exercise during the day — no matter how much you don't feel like it at the time — will pay rich dividends when it's time to turn in.

**break** **the lethargy circuit**

Don't put up with depression indefinitely. If you think you need some extra help, talk to your doctor.

Serotonin works on your body as well as your brain.

It plays a crucial role in muscular contractions. You might get restless legs at night because your serotonin system is not switching off. This is a kind of safety mechanism, preventing you acting out your nightmares.



Taking practical steps to balance your body chemistry has the benefit of reducing the incidence of restless legs. Your partner will be pleased as well.

You may find it hard to get going in the morning as the serotonin in your system isn't warmed up and ready to go.

- > **progressively contract your muscles as you lie in bed waking up**
- > **take a walk first thing and get moving**
- > **eat breakfast outside**

# Sudden and irresistible food cravings are a sure sign that your brain is trying to manufacture more serotonin.

There are times when you're more susceptible to being overpowered by cravings. These include

- > **the mid-afternoon slump**
- > **when you're upset or stressed out**
- > **when the weather's miserable**

Your cravings are a signal that your brain is low in tryptophan, the amino acid from which it makes serotonin. This registers as a need for sugar, as insulin plays an important role in allowing tryptophan to cross the blood-brain barrier.

Unfortunately too much sugar can disable the serotonin hit, leaving you feeling more lethargic later. The other danger is if you eat too many highly processed snacks you end up consuming more calories than you require, leading to weight gain.

You can help your brain make serotonin by eating 300 mg to 600 mg of tryptophan from foods rich in this chemical each day.

- excellent sources of tryptophan**
- > **almonds**
  - > **meat, especially turkey**
  - > **dairy**

You also need to have a sugar hit for insulin to clear the blood around the brain. Go for something full of natural sugars, low in fat and high in nutrients such as 1/3 cup of raisins or 2 bananas.

# eat regularly

- > **don't skip meals or replace valuable nutrition with junk**
- > **eat low-GI foods that slowly release energy into your system**
- > **craving-proof your environment by keeping plenty of healthy and appetising snacks to hand – especially for when times are tough and you're more likely to seek comfort in food.**

There is another mood food that is vital for boosting your serotonin levels and keeping your brain in great shape

# omega-3 fatty acids

Just as our muscles are composed primarily of protein and our bones of calcium, our brains are mainly made of fat. To function well, the brain needs a steady supply of long-chain, polyunsaturated fatty acids. The problem is most of our diets are too high in one kind of this fat (omega-6) and deficient in another kind (omega-3).

The serotonin receptors are composed of an omega-3 fatty acid called DHA. An imbalance of omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids can damage the receptors and is implicated in severe depression. Regular consumption of DHA keeps cell membranes more fluid, so that serotonin has an easier time making its way into the brain and working its magic.

Brain-protective omega-3 is present in richest concentrations in deep-sea, oily fish, especially

**salmon, tuna, trout, herring, sardines, mackerel, anchovies**

At least 3 serves of this fish a week will help to regulate your serotonin levels and provide you with a good supply of vital DHA.

### **Can't stand fish?**

Try taking one or two good-quality **fish oil capsules** daily.

### **Vegetarian?**

Omega-3 is also found in

**cruciferous vegetables, nuts, flaxseeds, canola and olive oil and soy products.**

Try making salad dressing with flaxseed oil or adding a teaspoon to protein smoothies.

# The worst thing you can do for good brain chemistry is skip a meal.

**Good eating for a serotonin seeker entails having protein with every meal and ensuring that the carbs you eat are mostly slowly digested ones. You need also to spread the amount of food you eat evenly throughout the day.**

## sown oats for dinner

Oats are both quick to prepare, nutritious and satisfying. Most cereals are high in refined sugars and are not a good choice before you drop off to sleep. Porridge, on the other hand, works a treat.

## strawberries and cream-ish

Ricotta is no substitute for great dollops of thickened cream. But fresh ricotta with a punnet of strawberries is a healthy response to a craving for something sweet.

## potatoes not prozac

Baking a big potato and filling it with lean ham and calcium/protein-rich cheese is a great mid-week lunch.

## stuffed turkey

Turkey is the perfect food to stuff in anything. A caesar salad with thick turkey chunks or a plain turkey cracker lunch provides an excellent low-fat/protein mix. Try pear and smoked turkey combinations.

## boiling point

Don't underestimate the amino acid and omega-3 benefits of a good boiled egg.

## almond additions

A handful of almonds is delicious in salad, yoghurt or with some dried fruit, and also contains valuable omega-3 fats.

## old smoothie

Regular or soy milk enriched with skim milk or protein powder fills the spot between meals.

# exercise

produces its own buzz and leaves you exhilarated and on a natural high. Regular exercise lays a foundation for peak performance by giving you more energy, improving your stress threshold and burning up those nasty stress chemicals.

- > **stand more** and sit less
- > **stand up straight** and don't lean or slump
- > **climb the stairs** instead of taking the lift when you can
- > **park** the car a distance from where you want to be and walk the rest of the way
- > **walk** your kids to or from school
- > **walk up** escalators
- > **go and talk** to your colleagues sometimes, rather than firing off emails all day

## more energy

Being fit gives you more stamina for handling tough or draining situations.

## better sleep

All forms of exercise help you to produce melatonin more effectively for a good night's rest.

## increased stress threshold

Your stress threshold is linked to how efficiently your lungs transfer oxygen into your bloodstream. Being fit improves this efficiency, so everyday activities become easier as they begin to fall under your threshold.

## stabilised blood sugar

A regular resistance training program evens out blood sugar levels, which means more stable energy without the ups and downs caused by swinging insulin events. Resistance training also helps to significantly slow down the process of muscle wasting that occurs as we age.

There are 3 key areas to focus on in order to achieve good all-round fitness

## cardiovascular capacity

(anything that elevates your heart rate)

## strength

(anything that puts your muscles under load)

## flexibility

(stretching out those tight muscles)

Seek out activities that you enjoy in each area. A good weekly balance is

**3 cardiovascular sessions**

**2 resistance training sessions**

**1 flexibility session**

Don't forget to step up the pace progressively. It's regular, small changes that cause your body to adapt and grow stronger, more toned and more flexible.

Repetitive patterns and rhythmic movements are best suited for serotonin seekers. The aim is to choose a mild intensity that you can maintain for at least 30 minutes. If you exercise first thing in the morning, you help your body to switch off melatonin and switch on serotonin, securing a great start to the day.

try

swimming laps or kayaking

working out on a rowing machine

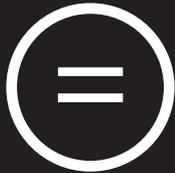
a yoga or Pilates class to settle your mind

If you're having trouble sleeping, get some exercise in the middle of the day out in the sunshine. This gives you the double whammy of sunlight on the pineal gland and exercise to elevate your melatonin levels.

try

a walk or bike ride in a park at lunchtime (just make sure you practise sun-safety)

handle change effortlessly  
crave less frequently  
create more easily



the satisfied serotonin seeker

Do you keep getting in the way of what you want to achieve?

If so, think hard about what you are afraid of and get out of your own way.

Have you let someone else get in the way?

If so, then stop using them as an excuse.

Do you know the best order for doing things?

The key to being at peace during change and growth is to change things one piece at a time.

Serotonin seekers can think themselves silly.

They get stuck in a rut.

The clue to getting unstuck is behavioural flexibility.

If you are overreacting or being intractable, then you are most likely to be in a low-serotonin state.

You will know you are stuck when every awful thing is happening only to you. You blow events out of proportion and only focus on the bad things.

Be a bit kinder in your judgments of yourself and others. Make room for greater flexibility. **Avoid rigid thinking.**

Become grateful for everything around you. Open up your awareness to all aspects of a situation. **Avoid selective thinking.**

Put things in perspective, keep a sense of humour and gather facts before jumping to negative conclusions. **Avoid blow-out thinking.**

2 primary focal points in counselling  
for depression are

# optimism responsibility

## optimism

We each have a natural predisposition to either optimism or pessimism. Defining your own way of looking at the world is an essential building block for change. The one thing that is always within your power to control is your attitude. With a little training, you can develop a more optimistic outlook.

## responsibility

It can be difficult to accept things the way they are. We can put a lot of emotional energy into trying to find someone or something to blame when we don't get what we want or deserve.

Don't get stuck in the blame game. Act as if it's up to you to fix the situation or make the most of things when life doesn't go your way.

If you are 30 years old and still blaming your parents, it's time to get over it.

## The top 10 thought actions for serotonin seekers

1

plan more often and react less

2

eat more often and crave less

3

drink more water and thirst less

4

pause more often and spin out less

5

work out more often and be worn out less

6

communicate more often and guess less

7

trust more often and be scared less

8

touch more often and be sad less

9

give more often and demand less

10

love more often and fear less

### Thought mission

> think good thoughts  
about yourself  
> defend against  
irrational thoughts that  
sabotage your calm

### Ask yourself

How does this make me feel?  
Is that a rational thought?  
Is that just a feeling, or is it a fact?  
What can I do to change the situation?

### maintain a sense of humour

Don't take things to heart and don't let yourself dwell on the dark side. Keeping your sense of humour alive when life is difficult is a means of keeping a sense of perspective.

### educate yourself

Learning broadens your thinking and helps you to develop behavioural flexibility. Don't let shyness stop you from asking questions. Stimulate your curiosity by reading lots of different types of material.

### build others up

You can build someone else up by avoiding criticism and being a good listener. Earning someone's gratitude or appreciation can deliver a powerful boost to your self-esteem.

### get on with a variety of people

Encourage yourself to think differently by mixing with different types of people. Having a mix of friends and pursuits helps you to develop different aspects of your personality.

Stress is an inevitable and necessary part of life. Anything that affects you, for good or bad, causes stress.

There are 2 types of stress

# eustress

'Good' stress that can help you stretch, grow and expand your comfort zone.

# distress

Constant stress or too much stress that destroys health and creates a natural low.

The point at which eustress becomes distress is different for each individual. We all have our own stress threshold, the point at which we're tipped over the edge. Stressful events can add up and no matter how high your threshold is, you can still suffer from burnout. For serotonin seekers, burnout often leads to depression.

Burnout is a particularly unpleasant state in which you have

> increased cortisol  
> decreased serotonin

Finding yourself slipping into a blue mood that you can't seem to shake can be an indication that you're under too much pressure.

## Know what fills your battery

Do you relax better around others or by yourself?

Do you need to relax every day or can you go for weeks before you have to take a break?

Do you prefer active relaxation or a seriously lazy chill-out session?

What is your recovery cycle?

Knowing your source and cycle of restoration is crucial to avoiding burnout.

Life is a  
grindstone!  
Whether it  
wears you  
down or  
polishes you up  
is up to you.

**Cavett Robert**

# Relax

Regularly practising deep relaxation will help the serotonin seeker maintain that all-important sense of calm.

Try some focused breathing when you need to clear your head.

- > **sit in a comfortable chair**
- > **close your eyes**
- > **turn your attention to your breath**
- > **breathe deeply for 10 to 20 mins while observing your breath**
- > **if your attention wanders, gently bring it back to your natural breathing rhythm**

# Get away

Well-deserved breaks away from the hustle and bustle are ideal serotonin-boosting pit-stops.

Don't skimp on your downtime. This holiday prescription may help you justify time off

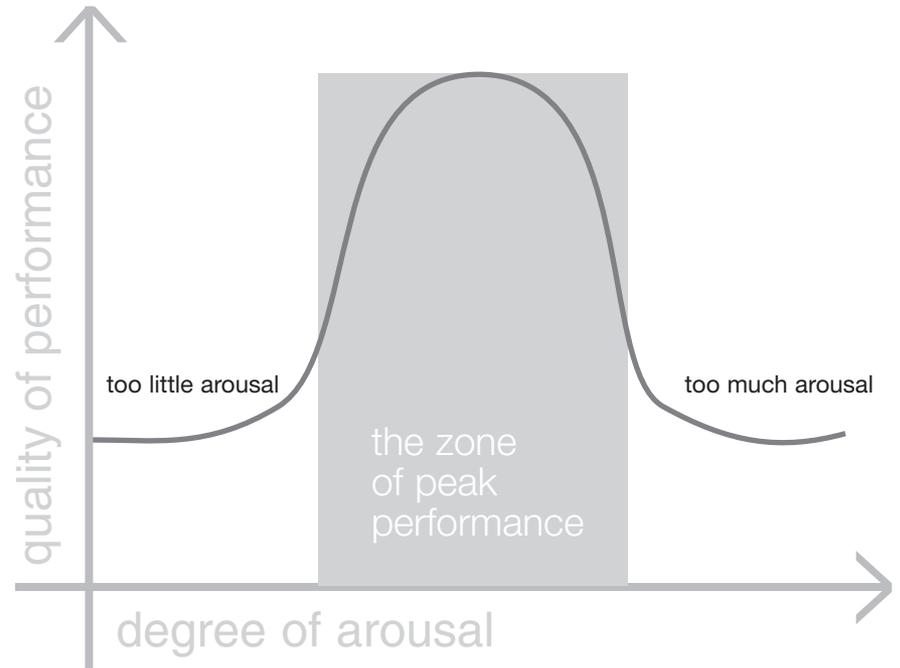
- > **6 long weekends a year**
- > **2 two-week holidays a year**
- > **every 18 months to 3 years reward yourself with a 4 to 8 week break**

One of the keys to maintaining peak performance is to understand what it means to be in a state of flow. You want to be somewhere between totally relaxed and overly hyped-up. If you are exhausted or burned out you may be so under-aroused that your performance is below its usual standards. You're not firing and you don't really care.

Reward yourself with sufficient downtime to boost your serotonin levels. Balance your body chemistry and achieve a calm readiness rather than a dull apathy.

# This calm readiness is called being in flow.

## Optimal arousal



Hold on tight  
with an open  
palm

Zen proverb

## What does it mean to thrive?

It is a paradox that if we're too desperate to find happiness it eludes us. It's not within anyone's power to be full-on, over-the-moon happy 24/7, but a reliably positive and constructive frame of mind is linked to restorative sleep, good nutrition and regular exercise. In other words, serotonin management.

The little things in life that bring you pleasure can add substantially to your quotient of happiness. Make a list of your favourite things and make sure you enjoy at least one of them every day.

Nurture  
yourself and  
you will thrive.

# It's OK to hate the hype

## Have you ever wondered why hyped-up motivation talks don't work for you?

Serotonin seekers don't get their juice from noisy, over-excited, boisterous spin. They like a calm, enduring enthusiasm.

If you manage your serotonin levels and stop to smell the roses, you'll stabilise your moods and improve your motivation naturally. This is more useful for you than trying to rev yourself up with affirmations, pep talks and goal-setting.

## Motivation for serotonin seekers

### INSTEAD OF ...

### DO THIS ...

preparing lists of goals

think hard about what you really need

striving to tick off items on a dream list

dream a little more

creating pictures of a perfect future

be present in the living moment

conforming to restrictive standards

be yourself

knowing your mind

trust your instinct

# clarity

get clear about what you want

# choice

make choices and take action towards achieving what you really want

# sequence

do the things you need to do in the correct order

# integrate

bring all the parts of your life together

# investment

do the things that will bring you the biggest return and ignore the rest

You will know if you tend to be a serotonin seeker or when your melatonin levels are out of whack. The important thing is to acknowledge your tendencies.

Be honest with yourself about how you can better control your body chemistry to attain a more even frame of mind.

## serotonin seekers

- > control your cravings by eating regularly and well
- > eat foods rich in tryptophan and omega-3 fats
- > make time for enjoyable, restorative exercise every other day at least
- > take mini-breaks throughout the day to maintain your focus
- > watch out for stinking thinking
- > indulge in a massage to increase calm and defuse anger
- > nurture your ability to find rewards in the events of each moment

## melatonin madness

- > get plenty of natural light by day and shut out light at night
- > get to bed at a set time and get up at a set time
- > exercise during the day
- > relax before bedtime
- > watch out for overheating in bed

Happiness is  
nothing more  
than good  
health and a  
bad memory.

Albert Schweitzer

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