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## Training for mental gymnastics: 5 back-to-school tips



Get in shape for the  
mental gymnastics  
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## Training for mental gymnastics: 5 back-to-school tips

With the Olympics well under way, it's time to get in shape for the mental gymnastics of the year ahead. Whether you are a professor or a student returning to school this August, here are a few basic tips to help you go for the gold! You will do better work, write better papers, and possibly even get better teaching assessments. As a side benefit, you may discover you are living a more balanced life.

Yes, these tips are basic. But do you know why they are so important? Read on.

1. **Exercise:** "Exercise is really for the brain, not the body. It affects mood, vitality, alertness, and feelings of well-being," says John J. Ratey, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *A User's Guide to the Brain*. Aerobic exercise decreases the hunger hormone, lowers stress, and reduces anxiety and depression by setting off pleasure chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine. Who wouldn't want to feel calmer and happier?  
*Take exercise seriously. Make an appointment with yourself, schedule it like a meeting, and do it.*
2. **Meditate:** Anyone in school can tell you that they often feel like there is just not enough time to get everything done that needs to be done. Engaging in slow, deep breathing produces a calming effect on your nervous system. Your stress hormones dissipate and your energy is restored. Practicing mindfulness is a way to expand time, because you literally slow down your thought processes. Notice

what you are saying and feeling, without any need to take action. Let go of negative self-talk and judgment.

*Pay attention to just one thing at a time, and you will get far more done.*

3. **Eat right:** You'll be sitting most of your school life, whether student or professor. It's entirely too easy to get fast foods, that are not going to help your brain or your physique, from the vending machines when you are in a hurry. In general, you want a high dose of protein in the morning to get your brain working. Protein rich food also suppresses ghrelin production, an appetite-boosting hormone that encourages the brain to eat. Ghreline is produced in response to anxiety, and makes you crave those high fat, high carbohydrate foods. Adding some good fats to your diet also suppresses the appetite (salmon, avocado, nuts).

*There are plenty of good diets out there, but find the one that is right for you and stick to it.*

4. **Sleep:** Not sleeping enough can quite literally make you psychotic. It's one reason that sleep deprivation is often used in those old war films to break a prisoner. Most people need eight hours of sleep for 16 hours of awake time. Give your body as much sleep as it needs. It's counterproductive to sleep too little and spin your wheels at night working. Decide when are you at your peak creatively: Morning, afternoon or evening? Your brain needs sleep to rebuild its chemistry, and you will not think clearly about anything without it. You learn better when you sleep, too. One laboratory study showed that while a rat was sleeping, its brain was learning about the maze it was running earlier, writes Dr. John Medina in *Brain Rules* (2006).

*Create a sleep pattern that works with your particular chronotype.*

5. **Socialize:** Humans are social beings. It is one of the basic things we know about the way we have evolved, and the need for real connection is incredibly important. Edward Hallowell, a well-known psychiatrist, notes that isolated people are three times more likely to die in the face of known health hazards like smoking, drinking, obesity, poverty or generally poor health. Connectedness literally has an immunizing effect. It reduces the stress of feeling alone against the world. Hallowell does not mean contacts or networking, either: he means actually feeling connected to another human being. Heartfelt connections can literally save your life.

*Take time to connect with friends, family and significant others in your life.*

You might have noticed that all of these five tips have one thing in common: they reduce stress. No matter your position in the system, reducing stress is a very real concern. Release stress and tension to invite creativity and fun in. Then enjoy the new school year.

If you need more help staying on track and reducing stress in your life [let us know](#).

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