

# Executive Performance

## **Executive Habits for Performance: Consistently Be Your Best**

Innovative Thought and Cognitrition team up to help executives maximize their first and best competitive advantage: their brains.

White Paper

Date: April 2015



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## Feedback

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### **About Innovative Thought**

Innovative Thought is a consultancy focused on developing smart and creative people. Innovative Thought designs and delivers unique, custom-built solutions for their clients. We work to identify the core organizational issues and find flexible and unique solutions. Innovative Thought believes that working with smart and creative people requires a smart and creative approach. Companies that are expertise-centered such as law firms, consultancies, advertising agencies and the like face distinctive challenges in developing their organization and people.

### **About Cognitrition**

At Cognitrition we help our clients leverage the “power of 1%” to optimize their performance by making many small, practical – but ultimately decisive – upgrades to their nutrition, sleep, and activity habits. We do this through an entertaining educational system that provides our clients with clear steps to help them learn and adopt evidence-based habits that lead to consistent results. Clients come to understand the value of small incremental change as they learn to fuel their best selves through sustainable actions and habits that become second-nature. Executives and high performers know the importance of the mental competitive edge, and by encouraging clients to focus on progression through the system, Cognitrition supports better decision-making, clarity of mind, and maximum productivity for immediate and long-term impact - because in the end, the game goes to the continuous thinker.

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## Introduction

In a world that is increasingly data-rich but often information-poor, the physical and mental demands on the modern executive can be very big – and they are getting bigger. Today’s competitive environment requires the effective decision-maker to be an “informavore”, seeking out and consuming many different kinds and quality of information to help them make difficult, time-constrained, and often high-consequence decisions.

This is no easy feat however in an age of “decision fatigue,” when - by one estimate - executives have to make as many as [5,000 decisions per day](#) often under time pressure, while having to work harder to sort through growing volumes of noisy data to find meaningful signal as information. Add to this the fact that people may have to make up to [200 decisions about what to eat](#) while checking their smart phones up to [150 times each day, and it is no wonder that the](#) concept of an executive as a “cognitive athlete” becomes less figurative and much more literal: these are folks whose days are the mental and emotional equivalent of a marathon, interrupted by periodic javelin throws, pole vaults, hurdles, and repeated sprints.

Research has demonstrated that these kinds of testing conditions can lead to a number of cognitive challenges that are likely to negatively impact executive performance in the near- and long-term. A common challenge is that executives have to make so many decisions that – by the end of the day - even the simplest decisions can come to feel like impossible dilemmas. Another challenge is the drain of self-control: the reason why at the end of the day it becomes harder to resist the temptation for high fat, high sugar foods, harder to feel motivated to be active, and why people tend to [act less ethically](#). As when supporting an engine on overdrive, how, when, and what you use to fuel an executive brain becomes even more important

### A Client Challenge

We had a client that had a very busy calendar often booked from 8 AM to 6 PM with meetings and very little time of his own and no obvious time to look after himself. He found himself struggling to focus before and after lunch and sleeping was also a challenge. The on-going craziness of his work began to take both a mental and physical toll on him and ultimately ended up sending him to his doctor with gastrointestinal complaints.

However, like many driven professionals who already have their bandwidth maxed out, executives will often view “high performance nutrition” and lifestyle strategies as secondary priorities at best, and just another distraction at worst. In the beginning, this belief may appear to be rational as professionals’ natural abilities mean they can get by on sub-optimal nutrition and lifestyle practices; however, like many other elite performers including athletes, as executives age or begin to struggle they only then begin to appreciate how early adoption of high performance approaches might have helped them sooner, more effectively, and more sustainably.

## Optimizing Performance

Given this modern combination of high stress and low self-care, it's not surprising that at Innovative Thought and Cognitrition we often find ourselves working with clients who are at the point where their natural abilities are beginning to be tapped out. This leaves them struggling to manage not only their time but also their mental and physical well-being: working 12-14 hour days, often on the weekends, while still raising families and maintaining meaningful relationships – and trying to keep their sanity at the same time. To be able to perform at your best under these circumstances, you need to look after yourself like the elite performer that you are

### Client Challenge - Changing the Mindset

When we started working with him our goals were to help him manage his schedule to provide more "thought time" but to also help him manage himself physically and mentally through the day. The first step was to look at how he was fueling his body and his brain. Even though this client used to be a competitive athlete and understood the need for nutrition for physical performance, he did not understand that the same is true for the brain – he had not yet appreciated that "you think as you eat."

### Client Challenge - Using Coffee and Sugar to Survive (But Not Thrive)

When we looked at how our client was eating throughout the day, it was clear that a few simple but evidence-based nutritional and lifestyle "habits" could provide this decision-maker with significant physical and cognitive Returns on Investment. Like many people, he usually started with coffee and high carbohydrate, low-protein foods in the morning to start off – usually a pastry and then he would not eat again until after 1pm, leading to wild fluctuations in blood sugar while depriving himself of vital nutrients. He would rely heavily on more coffee in the afternoon to get through until he would get home, play with his baby and finally eat again at 930pm, when he was least likely to make smart decisions about what to eat, leading to a vicious cycle that would start over again the next morning. When you lay out his day, it is a wonder that he wasn't having even more problems.

At Innovative Thought and Cognitrition, our experience working with executives, while being executives ourselves, means we understand far too well how the "real world" can practically limit which, and to what degree, new habits can be formed. In the appreciation that "simple is sustainable," our approach with clients is to focus only on prioritizing those practical changes that will provide each executive with the biggest cognitive Return on Investment on their new nutritional and lifestyle behaviors.

## High Performance Habits

Below are some examples of the habits we help clients adopt – one at a time, and at a pace that guarantees success - to maximize their performance by focusing on the behaviors that have the biggest ROI. We assess their baseline habits, and then are able to help them focus on simple progressions while addressing specific challenges that individual executives face in their busy day – making the customized habits simple to adopt and to adapt, and therefore sustainable. There are a number of more advanced habits that take executive performance to a higher level including supplements, managing sleep patterns and blood tests to look at different nutrient levels and monitor one’s biological status. However, as a start, any executive who adopts the habits below will feel more energetic and have a higher ability to focus, even if performance can be further optimized after these have been adopted.

- **Nutrition.**

- **Make every meal a snack.** Eating smaller portions (snacks, not meals) more regularly (on a schedule, not according to hunger) can stabilize blood sugar by leveraging the 3-hour blood sugar cycle that occurs after eating – and has also been shown to improve concentration, focus, self-control, and mood. These are all good qualities for decision-makers, as well as the people and companies they lead, for whom they make decisions and who must live with the consequences of those decisions.
- **Make as many snacks a protein-rich salad as you can.** By focusing on the salad (3 veggies, a good fat, and quality protein) as the basis of snacks, we not only support blood sugar stability, but also provide the wide variety of necessary nutrients for boosting repair from, and resilience during, periods of physical and mental stress. It is also quite impressive – and surprising - what range of foods can be made into a salad if one is determined and creative.
- **Cut every snack in half, eat half now, eat the other half 2-3 hours later.** This ensures that snacks are available when it’s time to eat again – and that we know what we’re having in advance, avoiding poor on-the-spot decisions about that doughnut or pastry that will come back to bite *us* later on.
- **Drink water all the time. Drink green tea much of the time. Drink anything with sugar none of the time.** Hydrated brains function at their best, while green tea has been shown to actually improve cognitive performance over and above hydration (and not just because of the small amounts of caffeine). Whereas drinks with sugar (sodas and juices, aka liquid candy) is collecting an impressive body of research on how bad sugary

drinks are for your body and your brain. So one of the best ways to hamstring your own cognitive performance? Allow yourself to become dehydrated while regularly drinking sugary drinks and juices.

- **Don't eat or drink anything *directly* out of a wrapper, a can, a tub, or a bag.** If you can eat something directly from a wrapper, a can, a tub, or a bag – it's probably not food you should eat. By transferring food to a proper plate or another container, you can often distinguish between things you're eating because they're convenient, compared to things that will actually help fuel your best you.

- **Physical maintenance.**

- **A little can be a lot.** Strong research suggests that all it takes is 20 minutes every other day of interval training to enhance working memory, improve energy, improve health values, and generally make wrong go right. It seems counter-intuitive that expending energy can give you more of it, but short, sharp exercise is magic and a key tool in high performers' toolbox.
- **Never sit when you can stand. Never stand when you can walk.** Sitting negates all the work in the gym, and causes us to miss an easy chance to improve our creativity, mood, and performance. If you have access to stairs take them.
- **Enhance sleep, don't deny it.** Some things in biology are non-negotiable, only momentarily deferrable. Sleep is such an imperative, and we deny this in pursuit of "productivity" to our great detriment. Improving sleep quality by working with – rather than against – circadian rhythms can be done even in the busiest schedules. Improving sleep environments can increase the quality and onset of sleep.

**Client Challenge – Fueling like a High Performing Executive**

The client took on the High Performance Habits and within the week he found that he had more energy, his gastro issues disappeared and he was sleeping more effectively. Some of his adopted habits included:

- Increasing the amount and quality of protein intake in all his meals
- Ensuring there are healthy snacks in his office
- Creating a regular and doable workout schedule that aligned with his schedule
- Using tactical breathing and getting out of the office after difficult meetings
- Going to bed at a regular time, adding quality to his work without sacrificing quantity

4 months later and the client still reports high energy levels, no lulls in the middle of the day and increased ability to focus, helping him maximize his time and performance.

- **Mental sustainability and resilience.**
  - **Learn to calm your nervous system with tactical breathing.** This allows you to prioritize your “rest and digest” system over your “fight and flight” system in under 2 minutes, with impressive – and cumulative – benefits.

In sum, the best executives are looking for effective tools and approaches they can adopt to make even better decisions – for themselves, their companies, and those they care for. While advances in software and analytics can help in the data-to-information pipeline, another competitive edge can be found in the original information processor: the human brain. At Innovative Thought and Cognitrition, we work with our clients to adopt research-based habits that can give them that competitive edge by fueling their best selves.

## Appendix - Weekly Habits for a Senior Executive

This is the ideal – and indeed, with travel and unexpected demands, there are times when our clients are not been able to practically follow all of these. Nonetheless, by focusing on building habits by doing what they can, when they can, our clients have reported much better energy throughout the day and a consistent ability to focus, process information, and find their “flow.” The challenge for all executives is to *slowly* change their habits in a way that is sustainable, focusing only a single habit at a time, even though their nature is to aim for revolution, not evolution. However, attempting to completely reinvent your day in one effort may lead to a short-term change, but is unlikely to lead to a sustainable approach for long-term ROI.

### Nutrition

Meal	Food	Drink	Potential Supplements
Breakfast	Egg frittata with olive oil and avocado <i>or</i> whole wheat breakfast sandwich from Starbucks.  Cut in half, save other half for mid-morning snack	Coffee with cocoa powder  Glass of Water	Fish oil, probiotic, vitamin D
Mid-AM Snack	Other half of breakfast	Green tea or coffee with cocoa powder  Glass of water	
Lunch	Burger/fish/chicken/lobster etc. - on greens with veggies and extra virgin olive oil or salad from Chipotle or protein smoothie with greens. Piece of fruit for dessert.  Cut in half, save other half for mid-afternoon snack	Glass of water	
Mid-PM Snack	Remaining half of lunch	Green tea	
Dinner	Dinner “salad” – whatever is available turned into a salad, with lots of vegetables and a good fat (olive oil, fish, avocado, nuts, etc.)  Frozen tart cherry compote for dessert	Glass of water	
Pre-Bed			1-3 mg of melatonin  100 mg l-theanine



<b>Monday</b>	Elliptical/Run/Bike 20 min (30 seconds hard, 30 seconds easy)
<b>Tuesday</b>	Resistance Training 25 min (5 minute warm up, then full body circuit with TRX or bodyweight)
<b>Thursday</b>	Elliptical/Run/Bike 20 min (30 seconds hard, 30 seconds easy)
<b>Saturday</b>	Resistance Training 25 min (5 minute warm up, then full body circuit with TRX or bodyweight)

## Sleep

- Awake at 630am
- In bed by 1030pm
- No blue light before bed

## Office Behavior

- Stand at desk - 4 hours/day
- Use stairs and not elevator
- Tactical breathing: 2 min at 8AM, 2 min at 12PM and 2 min at 9PM

## Hydration

- Drink water with every meal
- Have a water bottle at your desk
- Never be worse than 3 on the DIY test below

### CHECK YOUR URINE!

