

Top up your tank

Dr. Mamta Gautam



Imagine your dream car – sleek lines, high performance, total luxury. You finally get to drive it, racing around in it as long as you can, impressing yourself and everyone else as you pass by. Until it runs out of gas. Then, regardless of its potential, your amazing car grinds to a halt and is not going anywhere!

Luckily, cars come with a gas gauge, usually mounted in a highly visible location that allows us to keep track of the amount of gas in the tank. We can easily see when we are getting low and make plans to fill up the tank so we do not run out of gas.

We are like that dream car – seemingly full of limitless potential. We all have an energy tank, a repository of energy that allows us to achieve our goals, meet our responsibilities, and get through our day. Unfortunately, unlike that car, we do not come with an energy gauge. We have to keep track of the level of our energy in other ways and recognize when we are running low, so that we can take action to “fill up our tank.”

Create a “gas” gauge

For us physicians, keeping track of our energy level is difficult at the best of times. During a pandemic, it can seem impossible. There is too much to do. We are busy, conscientious, and highly responsible. We sacrifice our needs to meet those of others. This is part of who we are. This behaviour is also reinforced by the culture of medicine, our training, our colleagues, and our patients.

Because we don’t have a meter to indicate our level of energy, we often don’t recognize a problem until we are almost “running on empty.” We must proactively stop to consider our level of energy and ask ourselves how full our tank is.

Is your energy tank full? What are you feeling that supports this conclusion? Take a moment to define how you feel. Think about how you feel when you are full of energy. For example, you might feel positive and optimistic, confident, have good self-esteem, a high sense of satisfaction, healthy fulfilling relationships.

Are you at empty? What are the signs and symptoms? They could include feeling physically unwell, fatigue, insomnia, and anxiety. You might feel negative and irritable, experience problems in relationships and the onset of bad habits, such as overeating, drinking too much, or not exercising.

Try to identify a key early sign of low energy, watch for it regularly, and address it as early as possible.

Input and output

Let’s consider the energy tank further. Imagine that it has holes in the bottom through which your energy drains away. Think about what activities, situations, or people are energy drains for you? Can you let go of these activities or relationships and “plug up” these drains? That will help maintain your level of energy.

At the top of the tank is a large opening through which you can pour in energy. What activities, situations, and people create energy for you? Identify these and do them more, so that you can top up your tank.

If possible, identify four groups of activities: those that take 10-30 minutes to do, those that take 1-2 hours, those that you can do in a half day, and those that you can enjoy in a full day. Keep a running list and add to it as new ideas come up.

The Tarzan rule

The Tarzan rule¹ is a simple, yet brilliant, concept based on how Tarzan swings through the jungle, never letting go of one vine until he has another one in hand. Similarly, do not let go of something that is good for you without arranging for the next one. For example,

- Don't end a holiday without booking another one.
- Don't end a run without knowing when you are going for another.
- Don't end an evening with good friends without knowing when you will be seeing them again.
- Don't end a visit to the spa without booking your next visit.
- Don't end date night without knowing when you can go out again without the kids.
- Don't end the golf game without booking the next tee-off time.
- Don't uncurl yourself from that chair and stop reading without knowing when you are coming back for the next chapter.
- Don't end that telephone or Skype call with your older parent without pinning down when you will call next.

Continue this list on your own and personalize it. Focus on what you can do, realistically, during this time of social distancing. Identify the things that make you feel re-energized, and make a commitment to booking one more before you end the current one. Follow the Tarzan rule to maintain healthy behaviour and remain strong and resilient, especially during this pandemic.

Key questions

1. How full is my energy tank?
2. How do I know that; what is a key sign that it is full or empty?
3. What drains my tank that I could stop doing?
4. What can I do to top up my tank?
5. How can I use the Tarzan rule to maintain positive activities on an ongoing basis?

Reference

1. Gautam M. *The Tarzan rule: tips for a healthy life in medicine*. Ottawa: Partner Publishing; 2011.

Mamta Gautam, MD, MBA, FRCPC, CPDC, CCPE – a psychiatrist with 25 years of experience treating physicians and physician leaders – is also a coach, author, and president of Peak MD, Ottawa, Ontario.

Energy in, energy out

What could you do to top up your tank?



What drains your energy tank?