

Chapter 8. Restoring and Protecting Your Energy

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Rather than asking how to regain energy, many teachers asked how to continue living and working without collapsing under prolonged exhaustion.

You spend your days under shelling and air-raid sirens, while continuing demanding work and supporting students. Under such conditions, energy is easily depleted. Many teachers experience chronic exhaustion and symptoms of burnout. In wartime, maintaining and restoring energy is not simply a matter of self-care; it becomes a central psychological challenge.

The authors believe that sustaining energy requires two complementary approaches:

1. reducing unnecessary energy depletion, and
2. replenishing energy in realistic and meaningful ways.

Both are essential.

Reducing Energy Depletion

In wartime, a great deal of energy is inevitably consumed simply by adapting to reality. This external burden cannot be eliminated. However, internal energy depletion—the wear and tear that occurs within ourselves—can often be reduced.

One major source of internal depletion repeatedly mentioned by teachers is anticipatory anxiety: a constant state of waiting for something bad to happen. In the Zaporizhzhia group, teachers often described this as “waiting all the time, even when nothing is happening.” Another source of depletion is impatience and self-blame, especially when teachers feel tired, unmotivated, or unable to escape difficult realities such as work pressure, strained relationships, or unpleasant tasks.

To reduce energy depletion, it is important to:

- 1) reduce anticipatory anxiety,
- 2) find meaning in both work and enjoyment,

- 3) reduce self-blame by living “as it is,”
- 4) remain committed to the present moment.

1) How to Reduce Anticipatory Anxiety

Many teachers reported that even during relatively calm periods, they remained tense, waiting for disaster. Long-term exposure to war conditions intensifies anticipatory anxiety. Paradoxically, attempts to suppress or control anxiety often increase fixation on it, creating a vicious cycle.

In many cases, fear is intensified not by what is actually happening, but by what might happen. Anxiety also interferes with planning, and the inability to plan further increases anxiety. Several teachers noted that simply hearing others describe the same experience reduced their sense of isolation, even when anxiety itself did not disappear.

A key premise is to acknowledge that the future cannot be fully controlled, especially during war. While we cannot manage what has not yet occurred, we can prepare flexibly. Planning is helpful—not to achieve certainty or perfection, but to create partial structure and realistic direction.

2) Finding “Meaning for Me” in Work and Enjoyment

In group discussions, teachers often said that they could clearly explain the social meaning of their work, yet struggled to find what they called “meaning for me.” Teaching, daily chores, and family responsibilities all have value, but unpleasant duties are often experienced only as obligations.

Reflecting on “What does this mean for me?” can reduce energy loss. Sometimes meaning lies not in enjoyment but in simply doing what must be done. Accepting this reality can itself conserve energy.

The same applies to enjoyment. Many pre-war sources of pleasure—travel, entertainment, deep concentration—are no longer effective. Small pleasures may feel insignificant, yet they are essential. Some teachers expressed guilt about

enjoying even small things during the war. However, temporary and modest pleasures accumulate over time and help sustain life.

Do not compare current pleasures with pre-war life. Writing a diary, brushing your hair slowly, massaging your body, cooking something special, or simply acknowledging your effort—all have meaning. Morita Therapy emphasizes non-judgment: even small positive experiences have value.

3) Using the Power of Art

Art did not “restore” energy in a dramatic way for most teachers. However, many described it as helping them endure another day without breaking down.

Teachers shared various creative practices that supported them:

Write & Reflect: keeping a diary, writing poems or letters to release emotions and organize thoughts.

Create: drawing, painting, origami, or handcrafts, which bring calm through physical engagement.

Listen & Play: listening to music or playing an instrument to regulate emotions.

Share: singing with colleagues, crafting together, or holding small exhibitions to foster solidarity.

Rituals: spending 5–10 minutes sketching or writing at the end of the day to shift from work mode to rest.

Art allows energy to circulate rather than stagnate.

4) Self-Compassion: Living “As It Is” and Committing to the Present

Living as it is (arugamama in Morita Therapy) means releasing rigid images of what we should be. Idealized self-images collapse easily and demand constant effort, leading to anger, self-criticism, and exhaustion.

Several teachers said that self-compassion felt unfamiliar or even inappropriate at first, especially when they compared their own suffering with that of soldiers or displaced families. This hesitation itself became an important topic of discussion.

Instead of harsh self-judgment, teachers are encouraged to speak kindly to themselves and to treat themselves with the same care they offer others. Helping others and helping oneself are not opposites.

Being committed to the present frees us from the pain of the past and anxiety about the future. In this moment—here and now—you are alive, breathing, and there are aspects of safety and health present. Focusing on this moment allows energy to be conserved and restored.

Exercise (Neff & Germer, 2018)

Here we do compassion meditation. Compassion meditation is a Buddhist tradition in which one wishes for the happiness of oneself and others, and for the liberation of oneself and others from suffering. Everyone should sit relaxed. You can also lie down. Close your eyes half-closed so that you can see a little in front of you. Breathe slowly.

(Meditation practice) 'May I be safe', 'May I be happy', 'May I be healthy', 'May my worries and suffering cease'. (Three times)

The practice of compassion meditation begins with a wish for one's own happiness. Relax the body and repeat the four phrases at intervals that feel comfortable. If you get distracted, just realise that it is a thought or feeling, let it go and return to repeating the phrases. Warm, tender feelings may arise, which you keep in mind and return to the repetition of the phrases. As you get used to it, gradually expand the target to include benefactors, close people, neutral people (people who do not harbour positive or negative emotions), people you dislike, and all living beings, and say, 'My benefactors, close people, strangers, people I dislike, people who hate me May all living beings be happy'.

If you are deeply sad. Your head is full of self-blame, "I wanted to do this, I am no good at this, I can't do anything else", and you may start to cry. At such times, imagine yourself with compassion and say, "You are so depressed that you are crying. I know exactly how you feel". Then, after a couple of gentle breaths, repeat to the rhythm of your breathing, phrases of your own choosing, such as 'May I be free from grief', 'May I accept this pain without thinking that I am bad or wrong', 'May my thoughts be thoughts of compassion'. During meditation, you may notice various body sensations, moments of calmness, and you may also notice that you are able to let go of 'sadness' or critical thoughts. This is an example of how, even with difficult emotions, you can accept yourself 'as you are' by increasing self-compassion.

If you are tormented by anger. Even during meditation, you may look for what is wrong and say things like 'Oh no, I'm not concentrating' or 'I don't feel kindness'. I can't concentrate', 'I don't feel any kindness', etc., and then you may tend to get angry again, saying, 'I'm meditating, I shouldn't be angry'. When accepting the 'angry' self as it is, as in the case of sadness, one can also notice the 'angry' self and meditate on compassion, using phrases such as 'May I be calm' or 'May anger and frustration not arise in my heart'.

As self-compassion increases, you become aware of and accept many things and become aware of what is really good for you. The number of objects for which we feel gratitude and happiness increases, such as close people, loved ones and the nature that nurtured us. And you realise that the time you spend properly caring for and loving the people, animals, things and nature you love is precious. When we extend our feelings of compassion from ourselves to all living things, we realise that we all have one thing in common in that we are ultimately beings with life, and that the form of happiness is to accept each other 'as we are' and support each other.

"The Art of Small Steps" Prayer (by Antoine de Saint Exupery)

We can improve every day by small steps. If we want to go straight to the goal, everything seems hopeless. Let's do this prayer together.

Lord, I'm not praying for miracles and visions, I'm only asking for strength for my days. Teach me the art of small steps.

Make me clever and resourceful, so that I can find important discoveries and experiences among the diversity of days.

Help me use my time better. Present me with the sense to be able to judge whether something is important or not.

I pray for the power of discipline and moderation, not only to run throughout my life, but also to live my days reasonably, and observe unexpected pleasures and heights.

Save me from the naive belief that everything in life has to go smoothly. Give me the sober recognition that difficulties, failures, fiascos, and setbacks are given to us by life itself to make us grow and mature.

Send me the right person at the right moment, who will have enough courage and love to utter the truth!

I know that many problems solve themselves, so please teach me patience.

You know how much we need friendship. Make me worthy of this nicest, hardest, riskiest and most fragile gift of life.

Give me enough imagination to be able to share with someone a little bit of warmth, in the right place, at the right time, with words or with silence.

Spare me the fear of missing out on life.

Do not give me the things I desire, but the things I need.

Teach me the art of small steps!

Discussion Note: Voices from the Group

Questions for discussion

1. How do you preserve your energy and prevent burnout under wartime conditions?

2. In what ways does art or creative activity help you sustain energy during the war?

At the beginning of the discussion, many teachers were quiet and hesitant to speak. It appeared difficult for them to talk about their own exhaustion or lack of energy. The authors sensed that some teachers felt they had little positive experience to share, which may have contributed to the silence.

However, as the discussion gradually unfolded, several meaningful voices emerged.

Teacher A, who had remained silent during earlier training sessions, spoke up for the first time and even turned on her camera. She shared that what helps her preserve energy is changing activities and environments—moving to a different place, listening to music, visiting exhibitions, and consciously shifting her focus. She also emphasized the importance of psychological trainings during the war and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in these sessions.

Teacher B spoke about the restorative effect of walking in nature, meeting with friends, and traveling when possible. Even short changes in environment helped her feel less exhausted.

Teacher C highlighted the importance of fiction and literature. She described how some children who were forced to move abroad still vividly remember the books they read together at the beginning of the war. As an example, she mentioned *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. She expressed appreciation for the curriculum and textbooks that include such works, noting their lasting emotional impact on students.

Teacher D described her work with children in a shelter, which is dark, cold, and physically uncomfortable. She works in two shifts each day and noted that small forms of care—such as hot tea and coffee provided by the administration—make a significant difference. For her, communication with colleagues in the shelter is itself a source of energy. She also emphasized the role of physical activity, including

dancing and yoga, and noted that children are motivated to learn when textbooks and lessons are engaging.

Teacher E stressed the importance of limiting excessive work. She said that working too much inevitably leads to exhaustion, while maintaining boundaries, eating well, and staying physically active help preserve energy.

Teacher F offered words of encouragement to the group: “You are extraordinary. You help your students enormously, and most importantly, you are alive and healthy. You have survived and preserved your health under extremely difficult conditions.”

One of the authors added a personal reflection, sharing a video she had created during the war on the theme “The Amazing in the Ordinary,” featuring an old tree she encountered in western Ukraine. The tree was presented as a symbol of endurance and life.

Finally, one of the authors shared her own experience from the early stage of the war. She spoke about listening to lectures by scientists, philosophers, psychologists, writers, and actors. These thoughtful conversations provided her with inspiration and strength. She noted that war changes not only daily life but also consciousness and mentality. To prevent absurdity and moral disintegration from penetrating one’s inner world, it is important to remain connected to thoughtful voices and to rely on art and intellectual engagement.