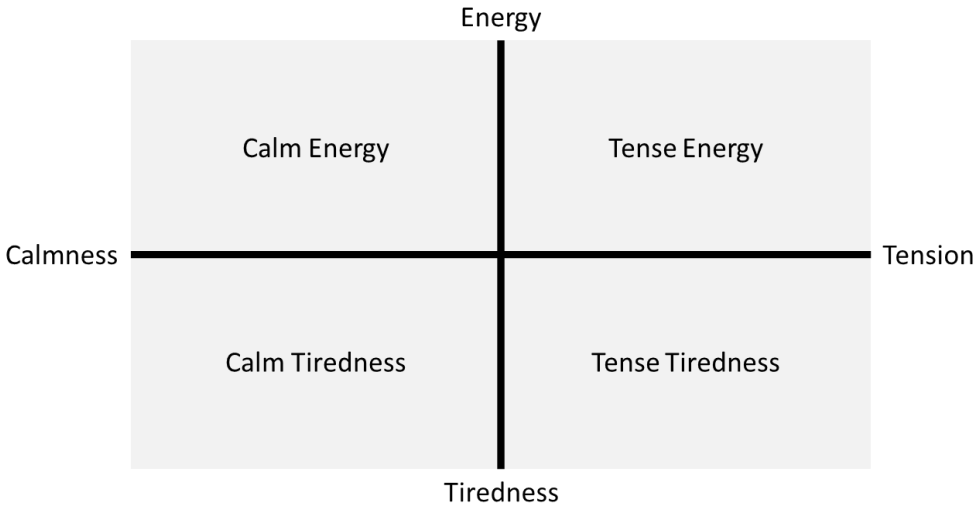
Calm Energy: How People Regulate Mood with Food and Exercise

Robert Thayer, PhD

In the book, Dr. Thayer explains that moods are very much influenced by our energy levels, which in turn are greatly influenced by stress and sleep. In short, *high stress and poor sleep combine to produce bad moods*. Today, more than a third of American adults fail to get enough sleep, which is seven or more hours each night. Also, recent surveys indicate that stress levels in society are at an all-time high. Both findings are not good because they suggest that people are struggling more than ever with bad moods. One of Dr. Thayer's big research findings was that bad moods are associated with overeating and a lack of exercise, both of which are contributing to the epidemics of obesity, chronic illness and addiction.

There are four general mood states that are experienced throughout a given day, influenced by two dimensions, *energy and tension*. And each of these dimensions have two variations. Take a minute to study this figure.



Let's start with the upper left box, *Calm Energy*. This is the most desirable of all mood states, where you feel energetic and not bothered by stress or tension. When we are calm and have energy, we experience many positive feelings, like joy, happiness, and love. Now let's consider the box on the upper right, *Tense Energy*. This mood state is a combination of feeling energetic, while at the same time experiencing tension or stress. It's what most people feel when they're involved in the "doing" of life, rushing between work commitments, meeting deadlines, and multitasking projects.

In the bottom left quadrant is *Calm Tiredness,* a mood often occurring later in the day. For many it's experienced as a pleasurable state, but not as good as Calm Energy. You may experience this mood while on vacation, or relaxing on a weekend doing very little. Lastly, in the bottom right box is *Tense Tiredness*, where you experience your worse moods, fueled by low energy and high stress. It's this mood state that is associated with many emotional disorders, chronic illnesses, and addiction. And it's when you are tense and tired that you are most vulnerable to overeating, not exercising, and relapsing back into addiction.

On most days we spend time in all four mood states. By doing the simple exercise that comes next, you can greatly enhance your awareness of the time you spend in each state. The results may surprise you,

because often we're not mindfulness of the level of energy or tension we feel in our bodies during different times of day. With this increased knowledge, you can then focus efforts on spending more time in the calm energy quadrant and less time in the others. How do you do this?

Getting back to habits, Dr. Thayer found that the best way to increase calm energy – or live your life in an optimal mood state – is by ensuring you get at least seven hours of good sleep each night, engaging in regular exercise, and reducing stress and tension as much as possible. When you do these things, they tend to create a positive feedback loop, where the better your sleep, the more consistent your exercise routine, and the less stress you experience in life. Which all contribute to less overeating and greater control over your diet.

One last thing to know about moods. They are a bit different than *feelings or emotions* in that they tend to last longer in duration and are usually less intense. Whereas our emotions often have clear triggers, moods are often experienced more randomly, coming and going without a clear cause. Understanding the difference can help you better navigate what's happening in your body, and give you more control over your daily experiences and responses.

Charting Your Energy and Tension

Instructions

Print off three copies of this page or you may record these scores on your smart phone. Your task is to rate your energy and tension when you awaken, and continue to make these ratings at the top of every waking hour. It will take only a few seconds for each rating, but you must continue your ratings consistently throughout the day. You may want to use your watch or smartphone and set a timer to remind yourself to record your scores. Choose a typical day for the study, when you awaken and go to sleep at about the same time as you do on most days, and then repeat the tracking on two more typical days so you have three days' worth of data. Then plot your average for energy and tension for all three days on a graph. Use different colors for energy and tension. The final graph will give you a picture of your natural biopsychological energy cycle.

Note: If you use any medications or drugs that may alter your energy or tension, please make note of when you take them as well.

Energy: At this moment, how energetic, vigorous, and full of pep do I feel? 1 (least) to 7 (most)

Most 7																		
6																		
5																		
Average 4																		
3																		
2																		
Least 1																		
	Wake	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	Sleep

Hours of the Day

Tension: At this moment, how tense, jittery, and intense do I feel? 1 (least) to 7 (most)

Most 7																		
6																		
5																		
Average 4																		
3																		
2																		
Least 1																		
	Wake	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	Sleep

Hours of the Day

Chart of Biopsychological Energy Cycle

Most 7																	
6																	
5																	
Average 4																	
3																	
2																	
Least 1																	
	Wake	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	Sleep

What patterns, lessons, or insights emerge when you study your graphs of energy and tension throughout the day?

What percent of your time is spent in each of the four quadrants?

What effect do the patterns have on your sleeping behavior?

What effect do the patterns have on your eating behavior?

What effect do the patterns have on your exercise behavior?

If you take medicine or any drugs, what effect to they have on your patterns of energy and tension?