

7 Tips for Staying Cool and Focused When It's Too Hot To Think Straight

By Delilah Gray, WELL + GOOD

If this summer seems warmer than usual, you're not imagining the sweltering heat. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), July was one of the hottest months ever recorded. And if you were wilting (alongside house plants) last month, August likely hasn't granted much relief—there have been extreme temperature warnings across the United States.

Higher temperature brings serious health risks, including heatstroke, cramps, and exhaustion. So, it's essential to make sure that you're aware of common warning signs like goosebumps during the heat, dizziness, and a weak, rapid pulse. You should also prioritize conserving your physical energy, staying hydrated, cooling down whenever possible, locating a cooling center in your area, and checking in with a doctor if you feel ill. But even when heat isn't downright dangerous, it can be inconvenient and uncomfortable. So, if you're struggling to focus right now, it's understandable.

Carla Marie Manly, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in neurobiology, says heat waves can be mentally arduous. "During a heatwave, it's difficult to focus for a variety of physical and psychological reasons," Dr. Manly explains. Why? Regulating your body temperature isn't as passive as it seems. "Combating extreme heat—particularly with the threat of global warming—often triggers the body's stress response; this causes a spike in stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline," she explains. When our fight or flight response is activated for a long period of time (say during a heat wave), concentration is likely to dip.

It should go without saying: If you're able to power down and conserve your energy right now, do it! Still, obligations might be at an all-time high right now, and blasting air conditioning might be impossible. So, what do you do when it's too hot to think straight, and you can't find respite near a comfortable AC? We have a few ideas.

1. Experiment with your blinds and curtains

The sun brings summertime cheer into your space, but it can also make you feel warmer, so Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., suggests you "close drapes and blinds to keep the interior as cool as possible." There isn't an exact science to this, and if you have thick dark drapes, you might be making your room warmer. Ultimately, you can experiment with blocking light and see what works for you.

2. Skip sugary drinks

While it's tempting to go for that iced macchiato, it may not be the best thing for your productivity, says Jaydeep Tripathy, MD, a primary care provider at Doctor Spring. "You use more glucose when it's hot, but if you want to increase your energy, don't go for sugary drinks," Dr. Tripathy explains. Instead, opt for water and, when you're hungry, eat smaller and lighter meals to support hot-weather brain function, he says.

3. Embrace cold showers

Cold showers are notorious for their slew of health benefits. Some of the most notable are lowering metabolism, burning calories, and helping with eczema. While many love their hot showers, an extra cold shower can "wake you up and energize you," says Dr. Tripathy. If you're concerned about water consumption, you might "dampen a towel with cold water and wipe it on your face now and then."

4. Slip into something more comfortable

This might be common sense, but if you're having trouble concentrating because you're feeling too hot, examine what you're wearing. "Wear loose-fitting clothing, preferably of a light color. Cotton clothing will keep you cooler than many synthetics," says Adkins, adding that you can focus on your feet. "Try storing lotions or cosmetic toners in the refrigerator to use on hot, overtired feet."

5. Chill some accessories (and wear them)

Dr. Manly also told Well+Good, “Keep a chilled or frozen bandana in the fridge or freezer. If you begin to feel hot, place the cooling wrap around your neck.” Harland Adkins RDN, a registered dietitian, recounted a similar tip he learned from a tennis professional: “If you’re wearing a cap or hat, remove it and pour a bit of ice-cold water into the hat, then invert it and place it on your head.” It might not be the most attractive hot-weather hair trick if you’re headed into a Zoom meeting, but it will likely cool you down a bit.

6. Consider a foot soak

Your feet can play a pretty solid role in regulating body temperature. Do you tend to reach for fluffy socks on a chilly night? Well, the inverse can be helpful when you're hot. With that in mind, a cost-effective way to cool while being productive might be a foot soak (which arguably uses less water than a proper shower). Make sure to use cool tap water with a little bit of ice. If your foot bath is too cold, it may be more painful than relaxing.

7. Adjust your schedule if possible

If you can, try and tweak your schedule so that you’re working with the temperature (instead of against it). “Handle difficult or outdoor tasks as in the early, cooler hours of the day or after the sun goes down,” Dr. Manly says. Even if you're not doing anything outdoors, waiting until you're cool might be instrumental to your productivity. “This might require a change in your schedule, but you’ll be far more focused on important tasks if you’re not overheated.” Even if you’re a notorious night owl or have early morning fatigue, it’s an easy way to focus better in the heat.

EXPERTS REFERENCED

Carla Marie Manly, PhD

Clinical Psychologist

Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D.

Jaydeep Tripathy, MD,

Primary Care Physician