

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a short book published by an American doctor in 1871. Responding to what he sees as a new culture of overwork, the writer explains the differences between physical and mental work, with a particular interest in getting readers to pay attention to the strain that comes from mental work.

Wear and Tear, or, Hints for the Overworked

I have called these Hints WEAR and TEAR, because this title clearly and briefly points out my meaning. *Wear* is a natural and legitimate result of lawful use, and is what we all have to put up with as the result of years of activity of brain and body. Tear is another matter: it comes of hard or evil usage of body or engine, of putting things to wrong purposes, using a chisel for a screwdriver, a penknife for a gimlet*. Long strain, or the sudden demand of strength from weakness, causes tear. Wear comes of use; tear of abuse.

[...]

In either form of work, physical or mental, the will acts to start the needed processes, and afterward is chiefly regulative. In the case of bodily labor, the spinal nerve centres are most largely called into action. Where mental or moral processes are involved, the active organs lie within the cranium. As I said just now, when we talk of an overtaxed nervous system it is usually the brain we refer to, and not the spine; and the question therefore arises, Why is it that an excess of physical labor is better borne than a like excess of mental labor? The simple answer is, that mental overwork is harder, because as a rule it is closet or counting-room or at least indoor work – sedentary, in a word. The man who is intensely using his brain is not collaterally employing any other organs, and the more intense his application the less locomotive does he become. On the other hand, however a man abuses his powers of motion in the way of work, he is at all events encouraging that collateral functional activity which mental labor discourages: he is quickening the heart, driving the blood through unused channels, hastening the breathing and increasing secretions of the skin – all excellent results, and, even if excessive, better than a too incomplete use of these functions.

[...]

When a man uses his muscles, after a time comes the feeling called fatigue – a sensation always referred to the muscles, and due most probably to the deposit in the tissues of certain substances formed during motor activity. Warned by this weariness, the man takes rest – may indeed be forced to do so; but, unless I am mistaken, he who is intensely using the brain does not feel in the common use of it any sensation referable to the organ itself which warns him that he has taxed it enough. It is apt, like a well-bred creature, to get into a sort of exalted state under the stimulus of need, so that its owner feels amazed at the ease of its processes and at the sense of *wide-awakefulness* and power that accompanies them. It is only after very long misuse that the brain begins to have means of saying, “I have done enough;” and at this stage the warning comes too often in the shape of some one of the many symptoms which indicate that the organ is already talking with the tongue of disease.

[...]

Whenever I have closely questioned patients or men of studious habits as to this matter, I have found that most of them, when in health, recognized no such thing as fatigue in mental action, or else I learned that what they took for this was merely that physical sense of being
35 tired, which arises from prolonged writing or constrained positions. The more, I fancy, any healthy student reflects on this matter the more clearly will he recognize this fact, that very often when his brain is at its clearest, he pauses only because his back is weary, his eyes aching, or his fingers tired.

The most important question, as to how a man shall know when he has sufficiently tasked
40 his brain, demands a long answer than I can give it here [...] Many men are warned by some want of clearness or ease in their intellectual processes. Others are checked by a feeling of surfeit or disgust, which they obey or not as they are wise or unwise. Here, for example, is in substance the evidence of a very attentive student of his own mental mechanism, whom we have to thank for many charming products of his brain. Like most scholars, he can scarcely
45 say that he ever has a sense of "brain-tire," because cold hands and feet and a certain restlessness of the muscular system drive him to take exercise. Especially when working at night, he gets after a time a sense of disgust at the work he is doing.

Glossary

* gimlet – a hand tool for drilling small holes, mainly in wood, without splitting

This extract is from *Wear and Tear, or, Hints for the Overworked* (1871) by Silas Weir Mitchell and the full text can be found online at <http://archive.org/details/weartearorhintsf1871mitc>

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