Cognitive Performance and Focus

Steady Practice Applied Science Series — SP-12

Steady Practice Research · 2026

Abstract

Cognitive performance — encompassing sustained attention, working memory, executive function, and processing speed — is both a mediating mechanism in behavior change and a direct target for many platform users. The evidence-backed levers for improving cognitive performance are less exotic than the "biohacking" industry suggests: sleep (largest effect, most robust), aerobic exercise (acute and chronic benefits, d $\approx$ 0.5), structured focus sessions with deliberate breaks, mindfulness for attentional control, and strategic caffeine use. Brain training apps do not produce meaningful transfer to real-world cognitive tasks; most marketed nootropics lack efficacy evidence in healthy adults. Cognitive performance is strongly time-of-day dependent — the analytical peak for evening chronotypes occurs 4–6 hours later than for morning types, making generic "do deep work in the morning" advice wrong for ~25% of the population. This survey covers attention architecture, working memory, executive function, flow states, attention restoration, cognitive load theory, evidence-based interventions (with effect sizes), and evidence-thin interventions. It also addresses cognitive performance as a measurable within-person outcome for personal science experimentation.

Contents

1. Why Cognitive Performance Matters for Behavior Change Platforms

Behavior change is a cognitive activity. It requires working memory to track goals, executive function to override habits, attention regulation to notice cues, and decision-making quality to select health-consistent actions under constraint. Cognitive fatigue — whether from sleep deprivation, sustained mental effort, or high emotional load — measurably impairs health decision quality: people make worse food choices, are less likely to exercise, and are more susceptible to temptation under high cognitive load (Hagger et al., 2010; though note: the specific "ego depletion" model of self-regulatory resource depletion has largely failed preregistered replication — see SP-11 §5.2; the downstream decision impairments are real, but the mechanism is motivational and attentional rather than energetic).

Cognitive performance is also directly a target for many users: professionals optimizing for focus and output, students managing study quality, knowledge workers trying to do deep work effectively. Understanding the science of cognitive performance serves both the platform's behavior-change engine and its users' explicit goals.

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2. The Architecture of Cognitive Performance

2.1 Attention as the Core Resource

Cognitive performance depends fundamentally on attention — the capacity to selectively process information relevant to current goals while suppressing irrelevant inputs. Attention is not a single faculty:

Sustained attention (vigilance): maintaining focus over time. Declines after ~20–45 minutes of continuous task performance (Warm, Parasuraman & Matthews, 2008).

Selective attention: filtering relevant from irrelevant stimuli. Highly trainable; degraded by anxiety and cognitive load.

Divided attention: performing multiple tasks simultaneously. Generally limited; "multitasking" at cognitively demanding tasks is largely myth — what occurs is rapid task-switching with switching costs.

Attentional control (executive attention): top-down regulation of where attention is directed. This is the component most relevant to self-regulation and behavior change — and the one most sensitive to sleep, stress, and training.

2.2 Working Memory: Cognitive Workspace

Working memory (WM) is the cognitive workspace where information is temporarily held and manipulated. WM capacity correlates strongly with fluid intelligence, academic achievement, and decision quality (Cowan, 2010). Individual capacity is approximately 4 ± 1 chunks for novel information.

WM is degraded by: sleep deprivation, acute stress, multitasking, and distracting environments. It is supported by: consistent sleep, moderate exercise (acute and chronic), and focused practice.

2.3 Executive Function Umbrella

Executive functions (EF) are higher-order control processes: - **Inhibition**: suppressing prepotent but task-irrelevant responses - **Updating**: monitoring and refreshing WM contents -

Shifting: mental flexibility, switching between task sets

EFs are implemented primarily in prefrontal cortex (PFC) and are highly sensitive to sleep, stress, and developmental factors. They are also the target of mindfulness training (see SP-5).

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3. The Deep Work Thesis: What Cal Newport Gets Right

Cal Newport's *Deep Work* (2016) is a productivity book, not a scientific paper — it does not generate original evidence. Where it succeeds is in synthesizing and popularizing a set of findings from cognitive psychology and organizational research that deserve wider attention. The claims worth taking seriously are grounded in the underlying primary literature, not in the book's framing:

Task-switching costs are real: switching between tasks incurs attention residue — cognitive preoccupation with the prior task that reduces performance on the new one. Gloria Mark's field studies found it took an average of 23 minutes to fully return to a task after interruption (Mark et al., 2008). Even brief interruptions (2.8 seconds) in task performance can double error rates (Trafton et al., 2003; replicated by Altmann et al., 2014).

Accumulation of shallow work displaces deep work: survey data from knowledge workers finds that, contrary to perception, most reported "productive" time involves fragmented, reactive activities (email, meetings, messaging) with very little sustained cognitively demanding work (Perlow & Porter, 2009; Gloria Mark's work on knowledge worker time allocation).

Deliberate practice requires uninterrupted sessions: Ericsson's deliberate practice framework requires full attention on stretch goals with immediate feedback — structurally incompatible with interrupted work (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

The practical upshot is consistent with the evidence: sustained, high-quality cognitive output requires deliberate structuring of focused work sessions with protective boundaries around interruption. Newport's contribution is synthesizing this into a usable practice framework — but the causal claims rest on the cited primary studies, not on the book itself.

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4. Flow States: Real Phenomenon, Limited Control

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (1990) describes a state of complete absorption in an intrinsically motivated activity, characterized by effortless attention, time distortion, and intrinsic reward. Flow has been documented across creative work, sports, surgery, programming, and music.

4.1 What the Evidence Shows

Flow is correlated with: higher subjective performance quality, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The flow state shows neurological signatures: reduced activity in default mode network (DMN) and self-referential processing, increased prefrontal deactivation consistent with effortless skilled performance (Ulrich et al., 2016).

The challenge/skill balance is the core structural condition: flow requires that task challenge and individual skill are both high and matched. Tasks too easy produce boredom; too difficult produce anxiety.

4.2 Limits of the Research

Flow is mostly studied via self-report experience sampling, creating measurement confounds. The direction of causality between flow and performance is unclear — the experience may partly be a retrospective attribution rather than a contemporaneous state. Experimentally inducing flow reliably is difficult; most "flow interventions" produce modest effects.

What practitioners can rely on: the structural conditions (high challenge, high skill, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, intrinsic motivation, absence of interruption) are individually well-supported even if the unified "flow state" is more complex than the popular narrative suggests.

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5. Attention Restoration Theory: The Value of Breaks

Attention Restoration Theory (ART; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995) proposes that directed attention — the voluntary, effort-ful attention used for focused work — fatigues over time, and that restoration requires environments with “fascination” (effortless engagement), “extent” (immersive scope), “coherence,” and “compatibility” with the person’s needs.

Natural environments (parks, water, trees) reliably produce attention restoration compared to urban environments (Berto, 2005; Berman et al., 2008). Even brief exposures to nature imagery can partially restore directed attention.

5.1 Microbreaks and Ultradian Rhythms

The body operates on ultradian rhythms (~90–110 minute cycles) that influence alertness, cognitive performance, and physiological state throughout the day (Kleitman, 1982; Peretz Lavie’s work on “sleep gates”). Research suggests performance degradation becomes measurable after 45–90 minutes of continuous focused work.

Microbreak research (10–20 minute breaks) finds recovery of sustained attention, reduction of fatigue-related errors, and improved mood — but break content matters. Breaks involving social media or passive scrolling do not restore directed attention; breaks involving physical movement, nature exposure, or even quiet rest do (Kim et al., 2022).

5.2 The Nap Evidence

Napping of 10–30 minutes produces significant cognitive benefits: improved alertness, reduced subjective fatigue, and enhanced procedural memory consolidation. The “NASA nap” (10–26 minutes) improved alertness by 54% and performance by 34% in pilots (Rosekind et al., 1995). Effects are largest for alertness and sustained attention — directly relevant to focused work capacity.

Naps longer than 30 minutes risk sleep inertia (temporary performance impairment on waking) and may disrupt nocturnal sleep. The optimal nap for cognitive performance is 10–20 minutes, ideally before 3pm.

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6. Cognitive Load Theory: Managing Mental Resources

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT; Sweller, 1988; 2011) distinguishes: - **Intrinsic load**: complexity inherent in the material - **Extraneous load**: unnecessary cognitive processing caused by poor design/presentation - **Germane load**: processing that contributes to learning and schema formation

The practical implications for platform design are significant: every unnecessary interface element, every notification, every decision required of the user adds extraneous cognitive load that competes with the user's primary cognitive task (whether that's health tracking, learning, or focused work).

Principle: minimize extraneous cognitive load on users so more working memory capacity is available for the meaningful cognitive work.

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7. What Reliably Improves Cognitive Performance

7.1 Sleep (Largest Effect, Best Evidence)

Sleep is the single most evidence-supported intervention for cognitive performance (see SP-3 for full treatment). Even one night of modest sleep restriction (6 hours vs. 8 hours) produces measurable impairment in sustained attention, WM, and executive function — with subjects often unaware of their deficit (Van Dongen et al., 2003).

Chronic restriction accumulates a cumulative deficit that is not subjectively apparent. A week of 6-hour nights produces impairment equivalent to 24 hours of total sleep deprivation. Recovery requires multiple full nights, not a single "sleep debt repayment."

7.2 Aerobic Exercise (Robust, Acute and Chronic)

Acute aerobic exercise (20–40 minutes, moderate intensity) produces reliable improvements in executive function, attention, and information processing speed lasting 1–4 hours post-exercise. The effect is largest in EF tasks (inhibition, shifting, updating) relative to simple reaction time (Chang et al., 2012; meta-analysis: $d = 0.52$).

Chronic exercise produces structural brain changes (hippocampal neurogenesis, increased gray matter in PFC) that correspond to improved memory and executive function, particularly in older adults (Erickson et al., 2011; Colcombe & Kramer, 2003 meta-analysis: d = 0.5).

Timing matters: pre-cognitive-work exercise appears to produce the most direct benefit for attention and WM.

7.3 Mindfulness Training (Moderate Effect on Attention)

(Cross-reference: SP-5 Mindfulness Survey for full treatment)

Mindfulness training improves attentional control, sustained attention, and cognitive flexibility with medium effect sizes (d ≈ 0.4–0.6) across controlled trials (Chiesa et al., 2011). Effects are largest for selective and sustained attention. The mechanism is training meta-awareness and reorienting capacity — noticing when attention has wandered and returning it.

Brief daily practice (10–15 minutes) over 8 weeks produces reliable attention improvements that persist at follow-up (Jha et al., 2007; Zeidan et al., 2010).

7.4 Environmental Design

Noise: open-plan offices with ambient noise at ~65 dB modestly impair cognitive performance relative to quiet environments. "Creativity-optimizing" noise (~70 dB ambient with sufficient variability) may enhance creative (but not analytical) tasks (Mehta et al., 2012). For analytical work, quiet environments or noise-masking (white/brown noise) consistently outperform intermittent conversation noise.

Temperature: cognitive performance is stable across a wide range but degrades at thermal extremes. Slightly cool (21–22°C) environments favor sustained attention; warm environments (>26°C) impair sustained attention in prolonged tasks (Witterseh et al., 2004).

Lighting: bright, blue-enriched light suppresses melatonin and increases alertness during the day. Evening blue light is detrimental to sleep and the next day's cognitive performance. f.lux / screen blue-light filtering in evenings has a rational evidence base.

Clutter and visual complexity: high visual complexity reduces focused attention capacity; clean, organized environments modestly improve sustained attention (McMains & Kastner, 2011).

7.5 Caffeine (Short-Term, Well-Evidenced)

Caffeine is the most widely studied psychoactive cognitive enhancer. At doses of 50–400 mg, it reliably improves sustained attention, alertness, and simple reaction time, with moderate effects on WM ($d \approx 0.3$–0.5; Einöther & Giesbrecht, 2013).

Mechanisms: adenosine receptor antagonism, reducing subjective fatigue; dopaminergic enhancement in PFC, improving attention.

Critical nuances: tolerance develops rapidly with daily use (2–5 days), largely eliminating performance enhancement and leaving only withdrawal prevention. The peak cognitive benefit from caffeine occurs when used intermittently (3–4 days/week). Optimal timing: 90–120 minutes after waking avoids interference with cortisol awakening response (Lovallo et al., 2006).

7.6 Time-of-Day Effects

Cognitive performance is not constant across the day. Most people show: - Peak alertness and analytical performance in the late morning (for morning chronotypes) - A post-lunch dip in alertness and performance (independent of lunch size) - Secondary alertness rise in late afternoon

The morning peak is when EF, WM, and analytical reasoning are sharpest; early afternoon is best for routine or social tasks; late afternoon is a secondary window for creative or flexible thinking (Anderson et al., 2014; Christodoulou et al., 2022).

Chronotype matters: evening types have their analytical peak 4–6 hours later. Generic "do deep work in the morning" advice is wrong for ~25% of the population.

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8. Evidence-Thin Cognitive Interventions

8.1 Brain Training Apps

The "brain training" industry (Lumosity, CogniFit, etc.) claims generalized cognitive improvement from game-based training. The scientific consensus is negative: trained tasks improve dramatically, but transfer to untrained cognitive domains is minimal to absent (Owen et al., 2010; Simons et al., 2016 consensus statement by 75 scientists). Brain training improves brain training; it does not meaningfully improve memory, attention, or executive function in daily life.

8.2 "Nootropics" (See SP-13)

Most marketed cognitive enhancers have weak or no evidence for healthy adults. Exceptions: caffeine (above), L-theanine in combination with caffeine (moderate evidence), omega-3 in older adults or those with deficiency. Stimulant medications (modafinil, Adderall) show effects in ADHD populations; effects in neurotypical healthy adults are modest and come with dependency and ethical concerns.

8.3 Music and Performance

Background music effects are task-dependent, but the practical advice in this space often outruns the evidence. For simple, repetitive tasks, moderate-tempo music improves arousal and performance (Lesiuk, 2005) — this is reasonably well-supported. For complex analytical tasks requiring phonological working memory (writing, reading), lyrical music reliably impairs performance; instrumental music has smaller but still detectable interference effects. The "Mozart effect" — the claim that listening to Mozart improves spatial reasoning — has largely failed to replicate beyond transient arousal changes (Chabris, 1999); it is a productivity myth.

The honest summary: music can help with boring or repetitive tasks; it reliably hurts with language-intensive deep work. "Lo-fi beats to study to" culture exists for social and mood reasons, not because it is cognitively optimal for most knowledge work. Individual variation is real, but claims of general cognitive enhancement from background music are not well-supported.

9. Individual Variation in Cognitive Performance

Cognitive performance is highly variable across individuals — and within individuals across time. This individual variation is the reason population-level research on cognitive interventions is often a poor guide to individual outcomes.

9.1 Between-Person Variation

Working memory capacity varies 2–3× across healthy adults and is moderately heritable ($h^2 \approx 0.50$). Sleep deprivation sensitivity varies substantially: Van Dongen et al. (2003) identified stable "vulnerable" and "resilient" phenotypes that diverge dramatically at 6-hour restriction. Caffeine response is genotype-dependent (CYP1A2 fast vs. slow metabolizers), affecting both magnitude of benefit and duration of effect. Chronotype shifts peak cognitive performance by up to 6 hours — making time-of-day the largest practically modifiable variable for most knowledge workers.

9.2 Within-Person Variation

Day-to-day fluctuations in cognitive performance are substantial and largely predicted by: sleep quality and duration (strongest predictor), acute exercise in the preceding few hours, nutritional state (hypoglycemia impairs WM and attention), hydration (even mild dehydration of 1–2% reduces attention and WM), time of day relative to chronotype, and cumulative stress load.

This within-person variability means cognitive performance is an excellent personal science outcome: it is sensitive to interventions, it varies in ways that are trackable, and its predictors differ meaningfully between individuals. The optimal sleep duration for your cognitive performance, the caffeine timing that maximizes your afternoon focus, and your personal peak cognitive hours are all N=1 questions with N=1 answers.

9.3 Cognitive Performance as a Self-Experiment Outcome

For personal science experimentation, cognitive performance has specific advantages as an outcome measure: - Sensitive to manipulation (sleep, caffeine, exercise all produce measurable within-person effects within days) - Can be tracked with brief validated tasks (3-minute Psychomotor Vigilance Task) or simple subjective ratings - Has a clear mechanistic link to the major behavioral levers (sleep → EF and WM; exercise → EF; caffeine → sustained attention) - The individual variation is large enough that personalizing these levers is genuinely valuable

The most tractable N=1 cognitive experiment for most users: establish a 2-week baseline of daily subjective focus ratings + consistent wake time; then systematically vary one variable (sleep duration, caffeine timing, exercise timing) for 2 weeks and compare.

HRV as a Cognitive Readiness Biomarker

Heart rate variability provides a daily, objective biomarker of cognitive readiness that bridges physiological and cognitive measurement — and makes it possible to predict cognitive performance before the cognitive task begins.

The neurovisceral integration model (Thayer et al., 2009) proposes that resting HRV reflects the activity of a prefrontal cortex-mediated inhibitory network that regulates both autonomic function and top-down cognitive control. Prefrontal cortex activity suppresses subcortical arousal circuits — the same circuits that generate cardiovascular output. Higher HRV indicates stronger prefrontal inhibitory tone, which should simultaneously predict better parasympathetic regulation and better executive function. The cognitive and cardiac signals share a common upstream source.

Thayer et al. (2009) meta-analyzed 21 studies testing this prediction: resting HRV was significantly positively correlated with executive function performance across populations (weighted r = 0.23–0.34). The relationship was strongest for inhibitory control (suppressing prepotent responses) and working memory updating — precisely the functions most sensitive to sleep, stress, and fatigue.

Within-person evidence is directly relevant for personal science application. Luft et al. (2009) showed that day-to-day HRV variation predicted next-morning reaction time performance (r = 0.41) within individuals. Hansen et al. (2004) demonstrated that athletes with higher morning HRV showed better sustained attention performance on that same day, compared to their own lower-HRV days. These within-person correlations — not cross-sectional population comparisons — are what enable HRV-guided cognitive scheduling.

Using HRV to Schedule Cognitively Demanding Work

The practical application is using morning resting HRV as a daily readiness signal:

- **High-HRV days** (top tertile of personal 4-week baseline): prioritize novel analytical tasks, decisions requiring inhibitory control, and work requiring sustained attention. The prefrontal regulatory system is well-coupled to the task demands.
- **Low-HRV days** (bottom tertile): reserve high-complexity deep work; favor routine tasks, creative brainstorming, and meetings. Protect against major decisions under sub-optimal executive function.
- **Medium-HRV days**: normal scheduling. The signal is most actionable at the extremes.

This protocol requires an established personal baseline of 2–4 weeks before meaningful interpretation (as established in SP-4 §3.2 for exercise applications). The HRV threshold for "high" and "low" is individual: population norms are not useful for day-to-day cognitive scheduling; within-person trending is.

N=1 Protocol: HRV + Cognitive Performance Tracking

The most informative personal experiment combines daily HRV with a brief cognitive performance measure:

1. **Measure**: Morning resting HRV (5-minute seated) + 3-minute Psychomotor Vigilance Task or daily subjective focus rating (0–10 scale)
2. **Baseline**: 14–21 days without intervention changes — captures natural HRV-cognition covariation
3. **Analysis**: Within-person correlation between morning HRV and same-day or next-day cognitive performance; identify personal HRV thresholds for high vs. low cognitive days
4. **Intervention test**: systematically vary known HRV predictors (sleep timing, evening alcohol, exercise type and timing, stress load) and observe downstream cognitive effects
5. **Outcome**: a personalized map of which interventions shift both HRV and cognitive performance, and by how much — with HRV providing the physiological bridge between intervention and outcome

This approach is more powerful than cognitive performance tracking alone. HRV provides the mechanistic link between intervention and cognitive outcome, enabling causal pathway decomposition not possible from cognitive measurement in isolation. When sleep extension improves both HRV and focus ratings, the HRV data confirms that the mechanism (autonomic recovery and prefrontal regulatory tone) matches the expected path — distinguishing a genuine sleep effect from placebo or regression to the mean.

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10. Cognitive Performance as a Measurable Outcome

For a self-tracking platform, cognitive performance is both an outcome variable and a mediating variable. It can be measured:

Objectively: validated tasks — Continuous Performance Task (sustained attention), n-back (WM updating), Trail Making Test B (shifting), Stroop (inhibition). Burdensome; better for research than daily use.

Reactively: brief validated daily tasks (1–3 minutes) — Psychomotor Vigilance Task (PVT, 3-minute version), symbol-digit coding, serial subtraction. Low burden, high sensitivity to sleep and fatigue.

Subjectively: daily cognitive performance scales — NASA-TLX (cognitive load), single-item ratings of focus quality, attention lapses counts. Correlated with objective measures at the between-person level; weaker within-person correspondence.

Ecologically: typing speed, response latency on phone, keystroke variability. Passively captured proxies with a growing but still limited validation literature (Torous et al., 2017). *Caution*: ecological digital phenotyping metrics have primarily been validated as markers of psychiatric symptom severity, not as measures of healthy-range cognitive performance variation — the extrapolation to cognitive optimization contexts should be treated with appropriate skepticism until within-person validation evidence in healthy adults exists.

The most practical approach for a personal science platform: combine a brief daily subjective focus rating (1–10) with weekly or monthly objective task performance, and use sleep quality and exercise as known predictors to disentangle causal pathways.

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11. Platform Design Principles

Treat sleep as cognitive infrastructure: present sleep quality as the leading predictor of next-day cognitive performance; make the relationship visible in personal data

Surface chronotype-aware scheduling: ask about sleep/wake preferences and suggest "peak performance windows" for deep work accordingly

Support deliberate break scheduling: prompt micro-breaks after 45–90 minute work sessions; suggest break activities (short walk, nature exposure) that restore directed attention

Track cognitive performance as a first-class metric: add daily focus quality to standard tracking alongside mood, energy, HRV

Protect from notification-induced fragmentation: where possible, help users design phone/notification environments that minimize task-switching costs

Make exercise-cognition link visible: show users the empirical relationship between their exercise data and subsequent focus/performance ratings in their own data

Avoid brain-training hype: do not promise generalized cognitive improvement from task-based games without evidence; focus on evidence-based levers (sleep, exercise, mindfulness, environmental design)

N=1 Experiment Protocols

These protocols are designed for individual self-experimentation. Each uses a within-person design to generate personalized evidence that population averages cannot provide.

Chronotype peak-hours crossover (2 weeks). Week 1: schedule hardest cognitive work in your natural peak window (test with a 5-minute arithmetic or working memory task each hour for 3 days first — find your daily high); Week 2: schedule the same work in off-peak hours. Measure: output quality rating (1–10), subjective focus rating, tasks completed. Decision: $\geq$1.5-point output difference = realign schedule to peak window.

Caffeine timing crossover (4 weeks). Weeks 1–2: first caffeine immediately on waking; Weeks 3–4: delay first caffeine 90 minutes. Same total dose. Measure: afternoon energy rating

(2–4pm), sleep onset time. Decision criterion: ≥1.0-point afternoon energy improvement or ≥15 min earlier sleep onset in delay condition = adopt delay.

Creatine cognitive experiment (8 weeks). 5g creatine monohydrate daily for 4 weeks, then 4-week washout. Measure working memory weekly with a standardized task (dual n-back or digit span). Decision: ≥10% improvement in working memory score sustained to week 4 = responder.

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12. Conclusion

Cognitive performance is a tractable target for behavioral intervention — but the effective levers are not the ones the "productivity optimization" industry typically sells. Brain training apps don't work. Most nootropics have weak evidence. But sleep, aerobic exercise, structured focus sessions with appropriate breaks, mindfulness training for attention control, and strategic caffeine use all have robust evidence behind them.

For a personal science platform, the most valuable contribution is helping users track their own cognitive performance variation, identify its predictors in their own data, and run controlled N=1 experiments on interventions that have a plausible mechanism. The science provides the priors; the data provides the individual calibration.

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