

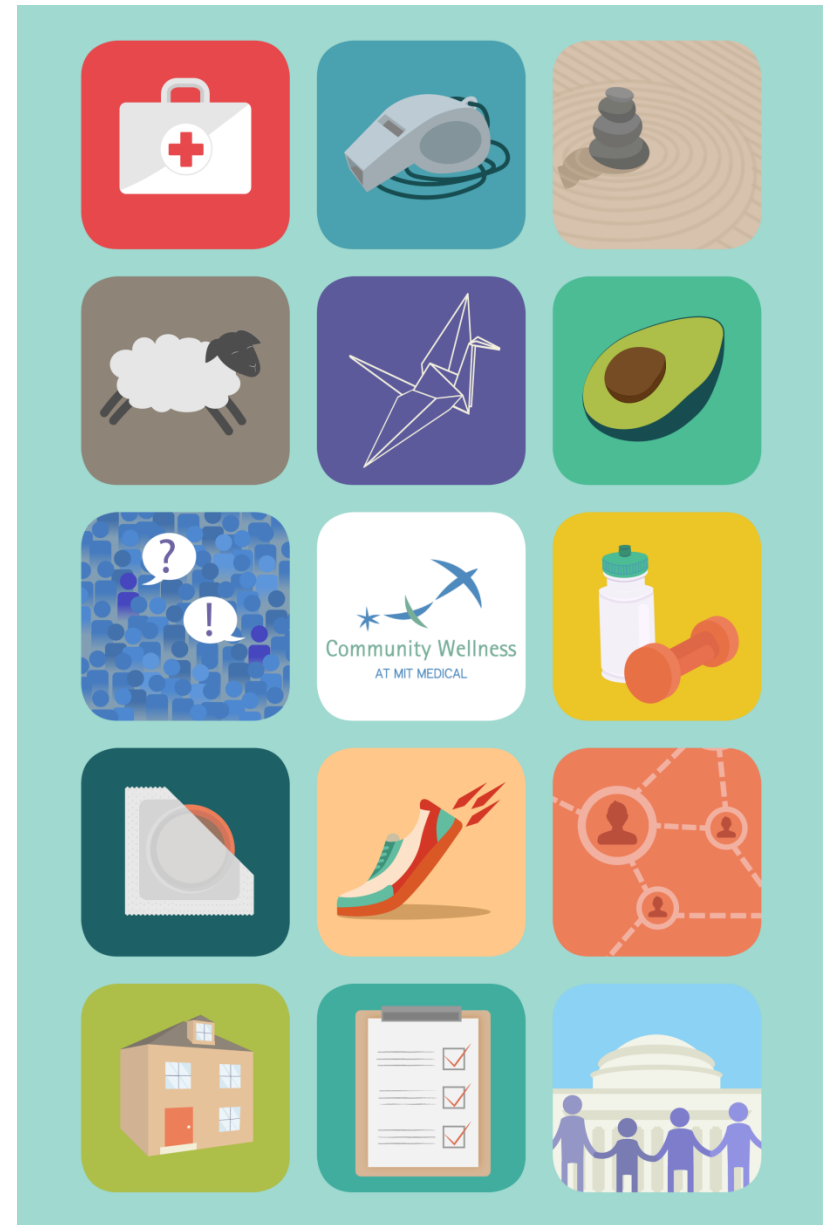
# Hacks for a Successful Semester

Susanna (Zan) Barry

Community Wellness at MIT Medical



1. Assess your semester
2. Review your time pie
3. What is your best-energy time?
4. Make decisions once
5. Your brain can only take so much focus
6. Plan of action



# 1. assess your semester

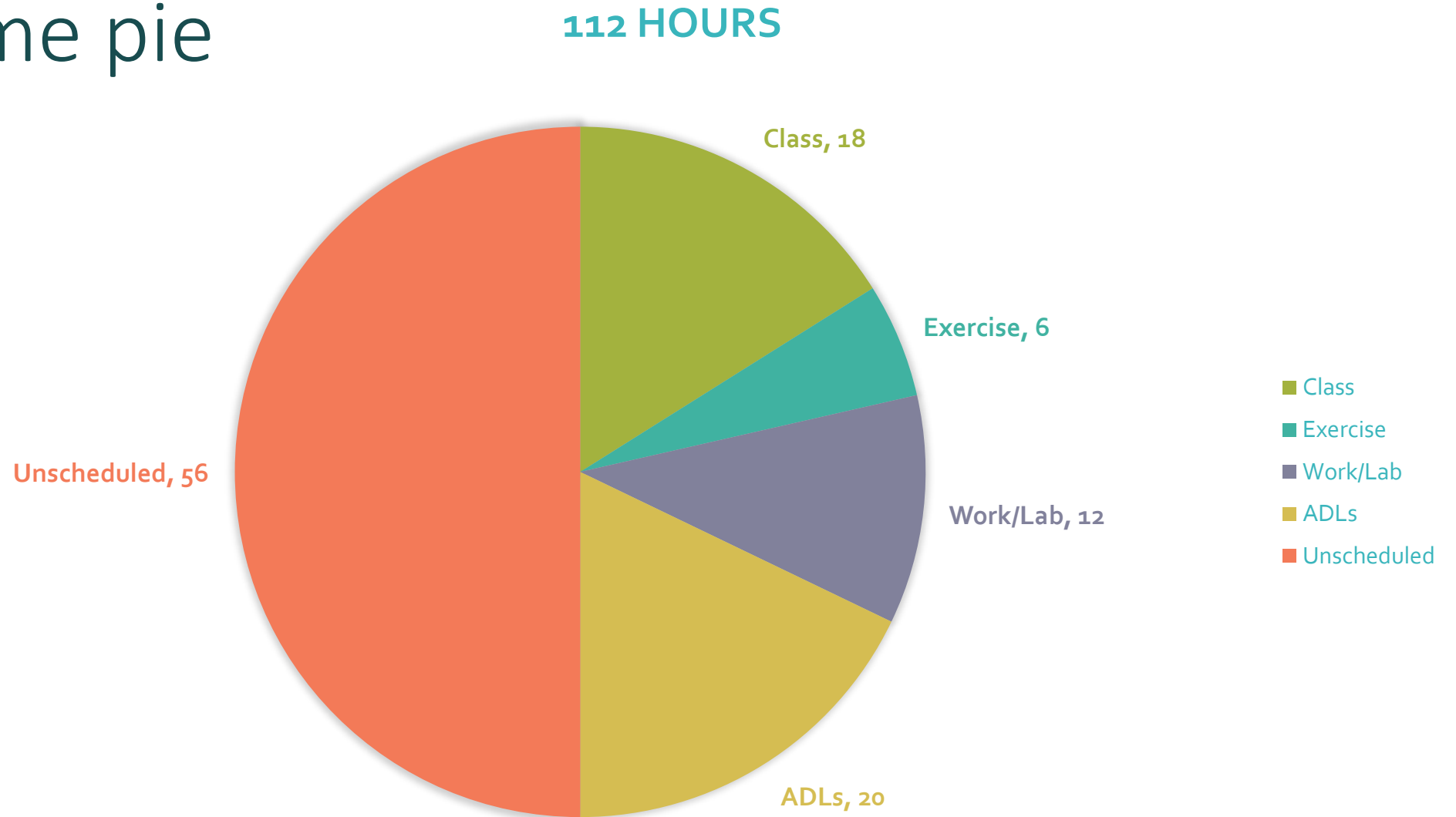
# Honest appraisal

- What is my *most time-consuming or intimidating* academic work this semester?
- Are there activities that I feel should consume *less* of my time? (When did I last “waste time”?)



# 2. review your time pie

# Fall time pie



3. what is your  
“best-energy” time?

You wish to be at your peak performance  
for a two-hour test which you know is  
going to be mentally challenging.  
What testing time would you choose?



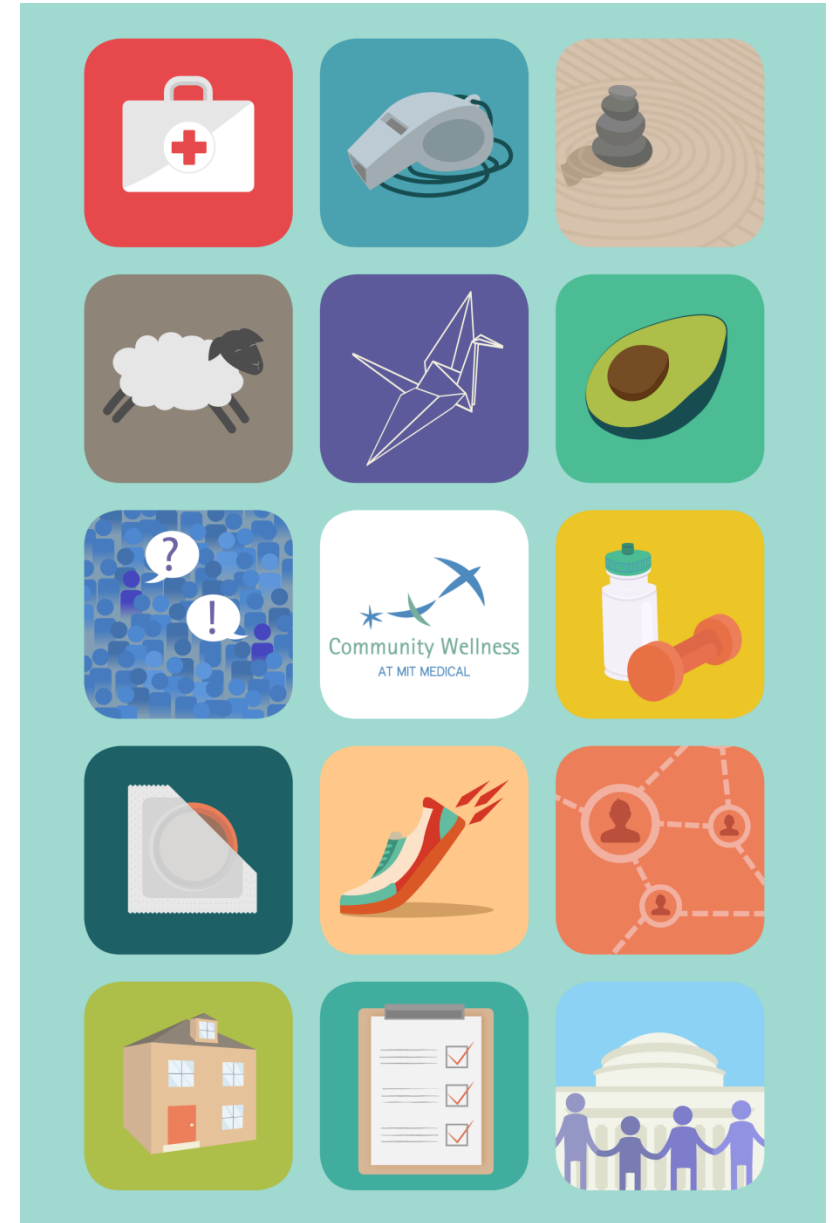
# Managing Energy: High

- Only 1 or 2 per day: Schedule large projects; things that should not be interrupted; creative projects; material that is most difficult, intimidating, or boring.



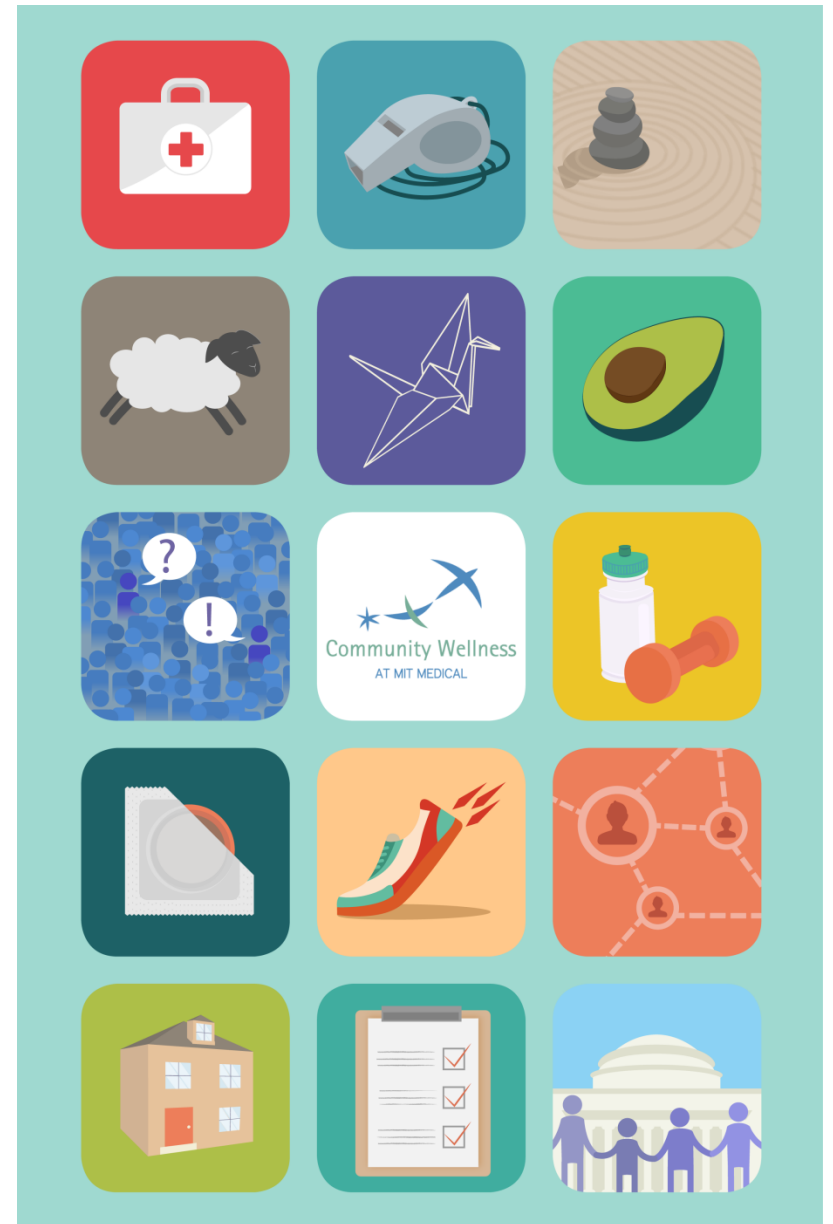
# Managing Energy: Medium

- 2 or 3 per day: Schedule team projects; moderately interesting reading or math; relatively easy writing.



# Managing Energy: Low

- Do a variety of brief tasks; physical movement where concentration is not critical; return calls or messages to friends.



make the best-  
energy times better:  
sprint and recover

finish the workday  
“parked downhill”

rewards at the end  
are most rewarding

# 4. make decisions once

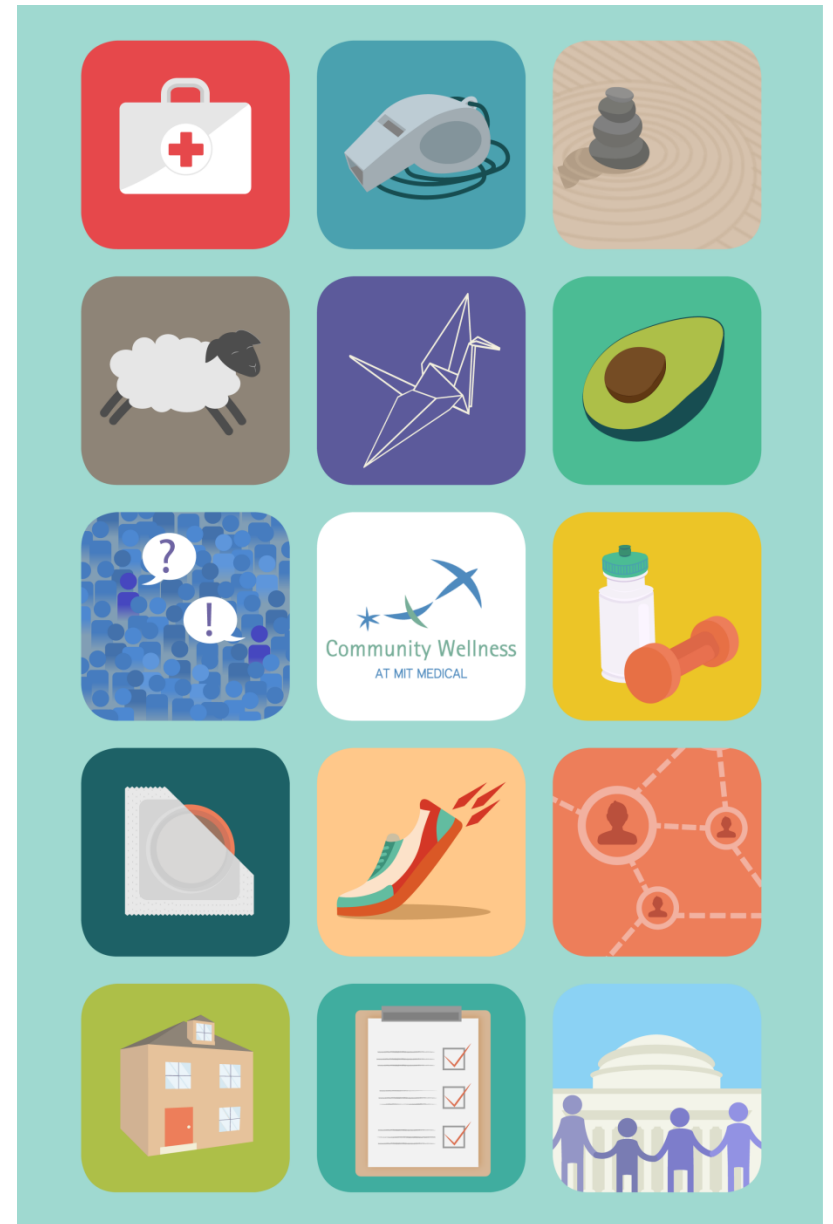
*Get It Done*  
Fishbach, 2022

this is how we  
make habits



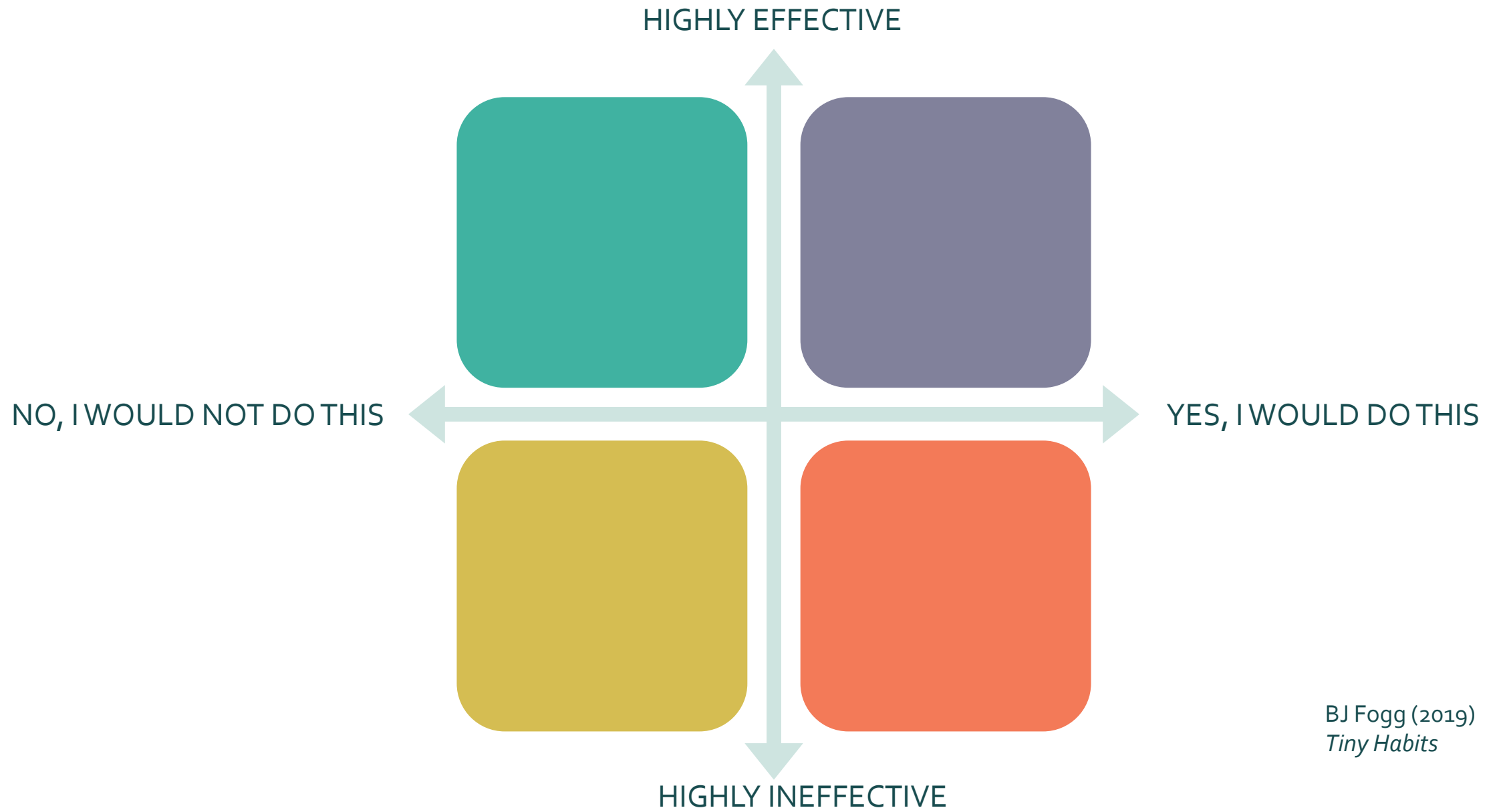
# Self-assessment

- Name 1-2 habits you are glad you have.
- How often do you do it?
- How do you know it's a habit?



# new habits: give yourself 66 days

*Lally, P., Van Jaarsveld, C. H., Potts, H. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. European journal of social psychology, 40(6), 998-1009.*



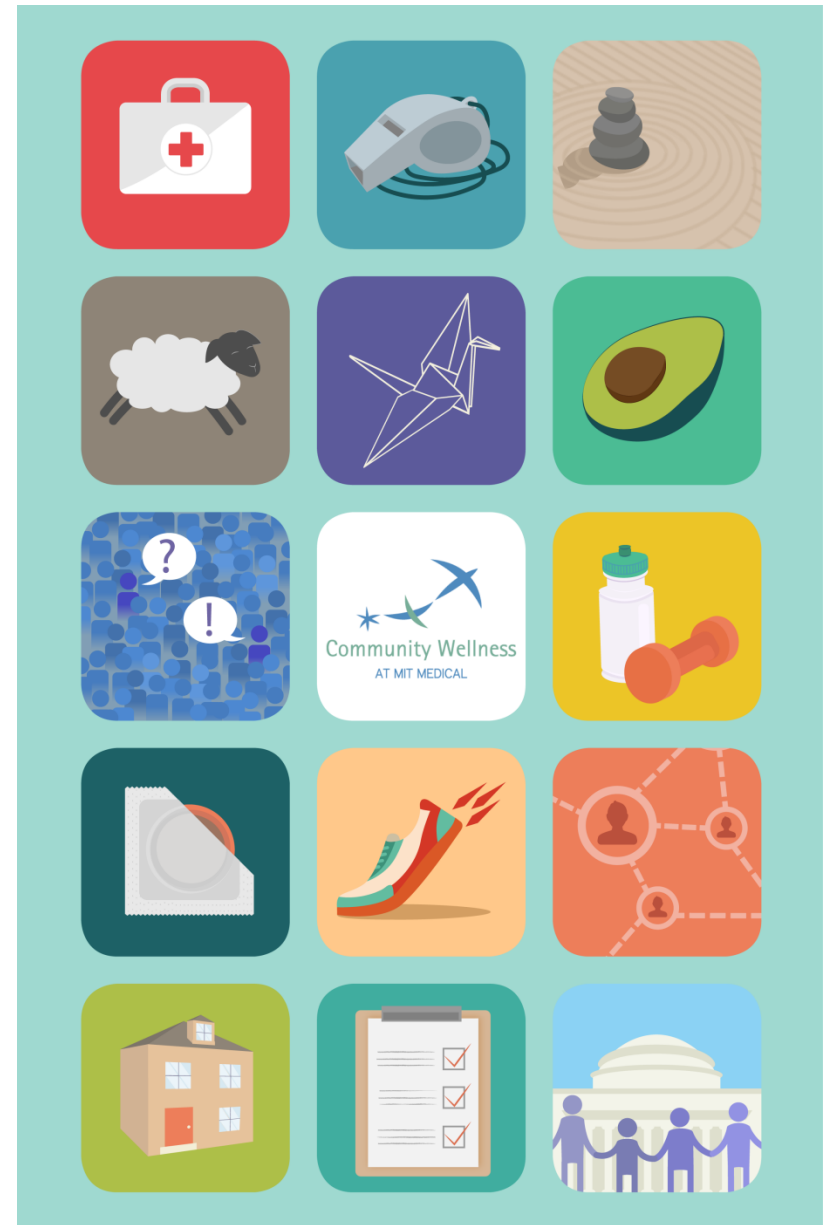
BJ Fogg (2019)  
*Tiny Habits*

making decisions is  
expensive

keeping habits is  
cheap

# Pre-commit as much as possible

- Keep a regular calendar
- Make a rule (I go to all my classes unless I'm sick)
- Social commitment can greatly increase motivation

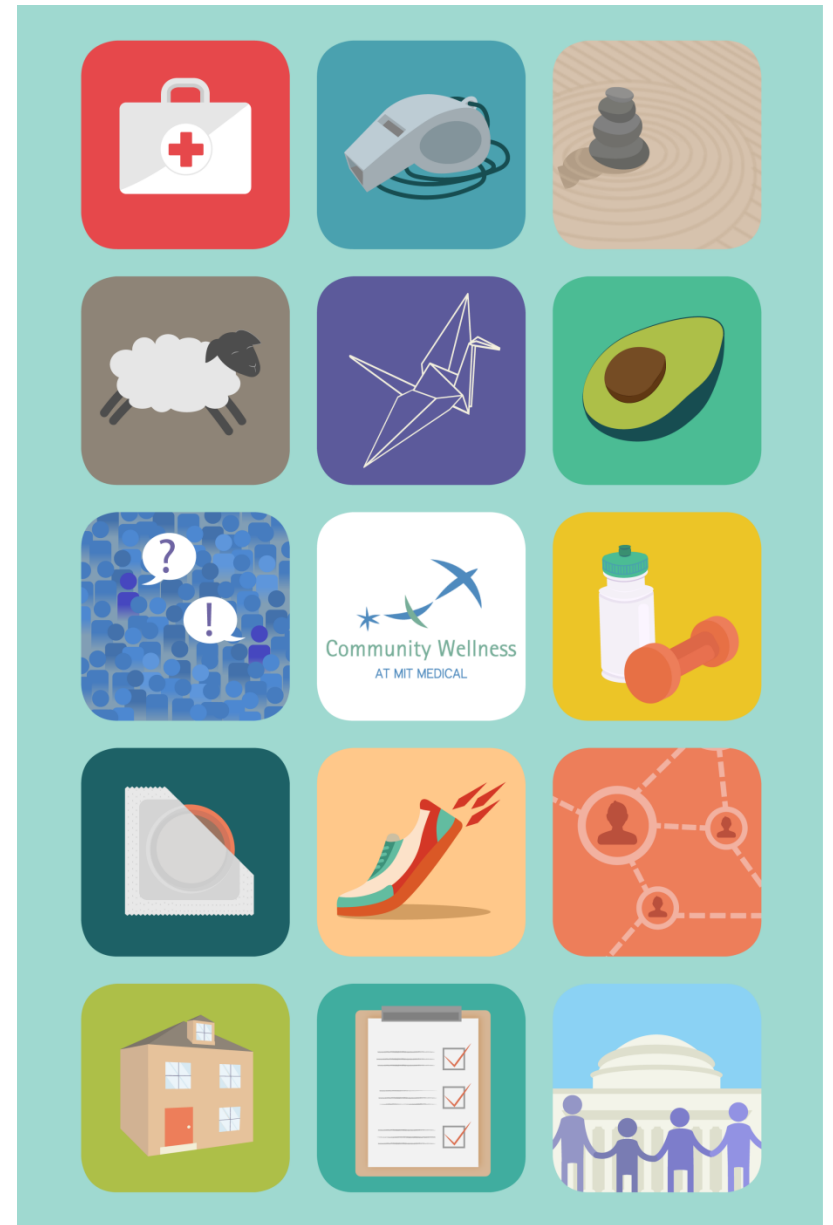


you'll always want  
more than one thing  
at a time

*Get It Done*  
Fishbach, 2022

# Multiple goal efficiencies

- Can they facilitate each other?
- Can they be combined?



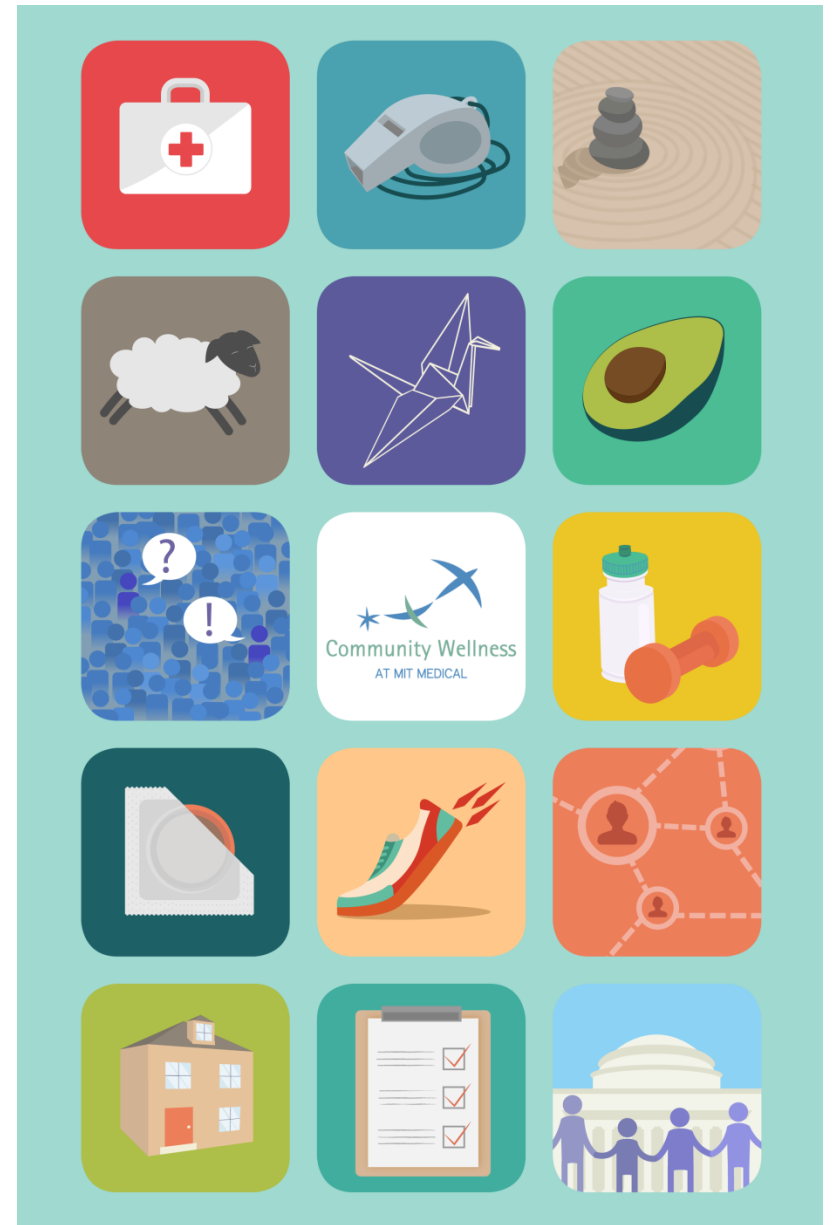


the middle is the  
hardest – keep it  
short

*Get It Done*  
Fishbach, 2022

# Keep middles short

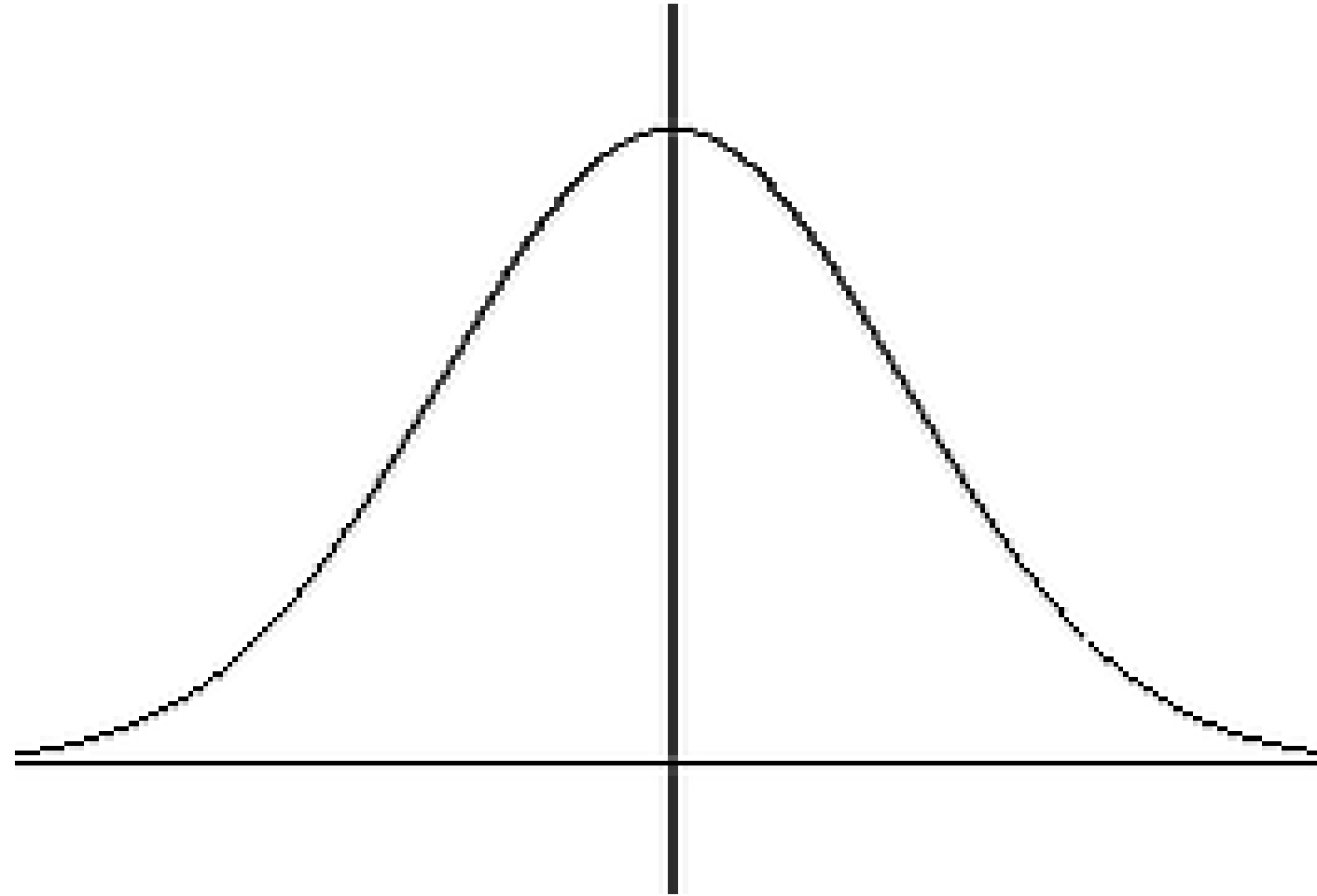
- Break long-term goals into weekly plans
- Break days into segments



# 5. your brain can only take so much focus

Pillay (2017)  
*Harvard Business Review*

# The law of diminishing returns



like a muscle, self-  
regulation gets  
fatigued

Heatherton & Wagner,  
*Cognitive neuroscience of  
self-regulation failure*  
(2011)

# What eats self-regulation?

Low  
sleep

Low  
mood

Low  
glucose

Heatherton & Wagner, *Cognitive neuroscience of self-regulation failure* (2011)

What do I need  
more of?:  
food, sleep, mood lifts

# What strengthens self-regulation?

Low  
temptation

Clear  
priorities

PRACTICE

Heatherton & Wagner, *Cognitive neuroscience of self-regulation failure* (2011)



What do I need

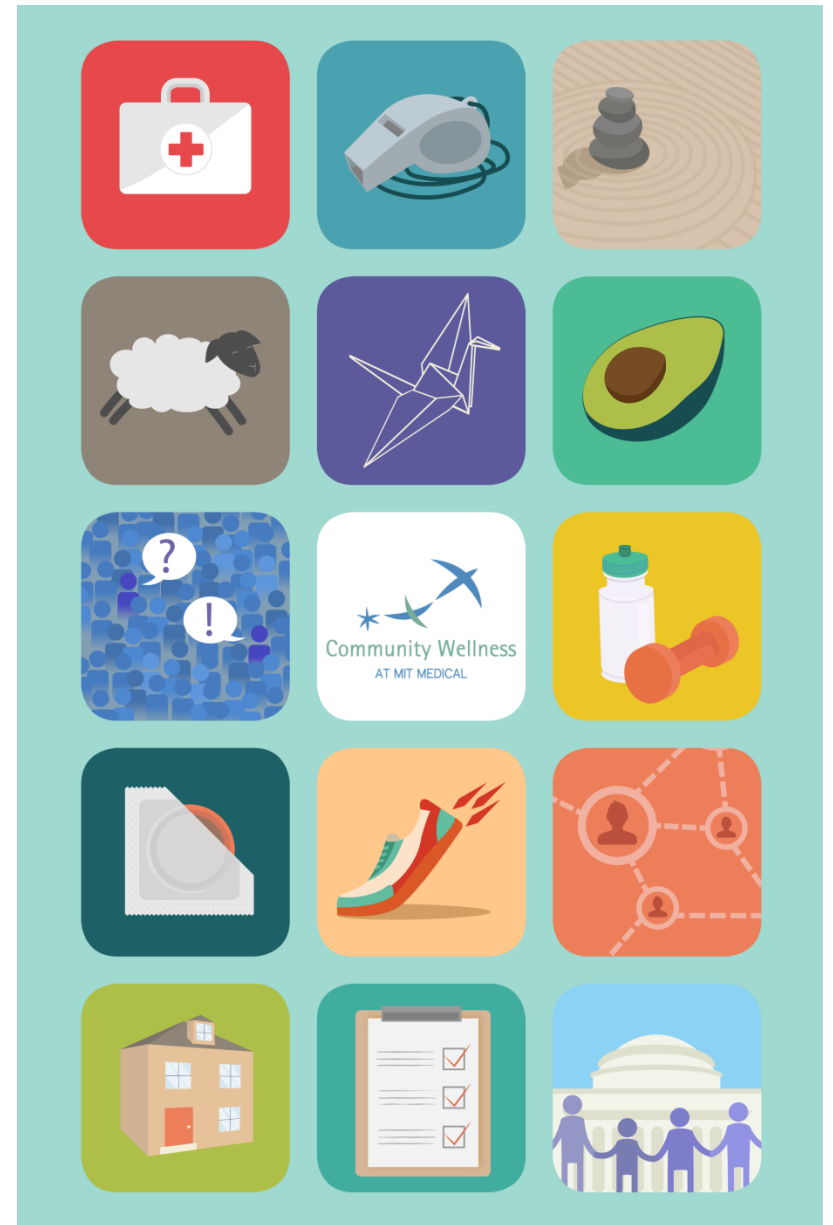
less of?:

temptations, first priorities

avoid the “what the  
hell” effect

# “What the hell” effect (Polivy 2010)

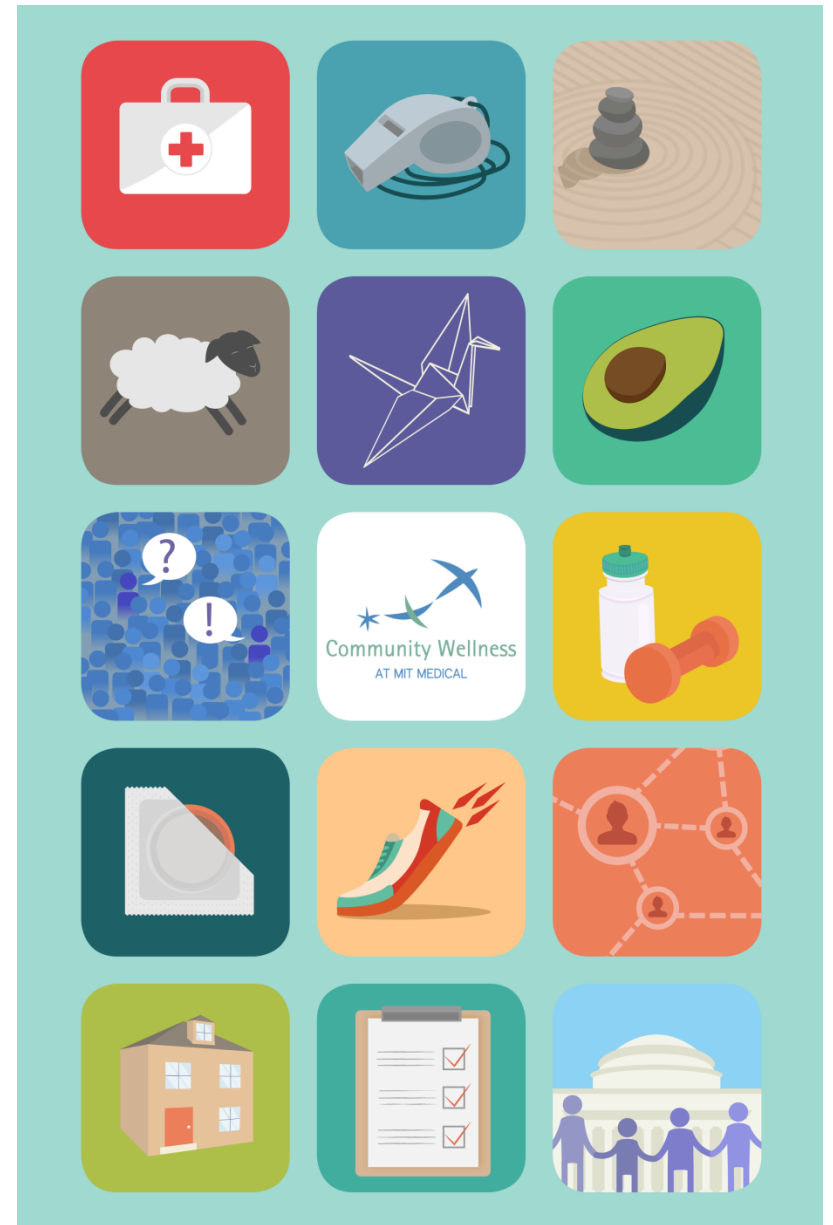
- A few lapses are inconsequential to the ultimate goal
- The 80-20 rule
- Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good



avoid “bedtime  
revenge  
procrastination”

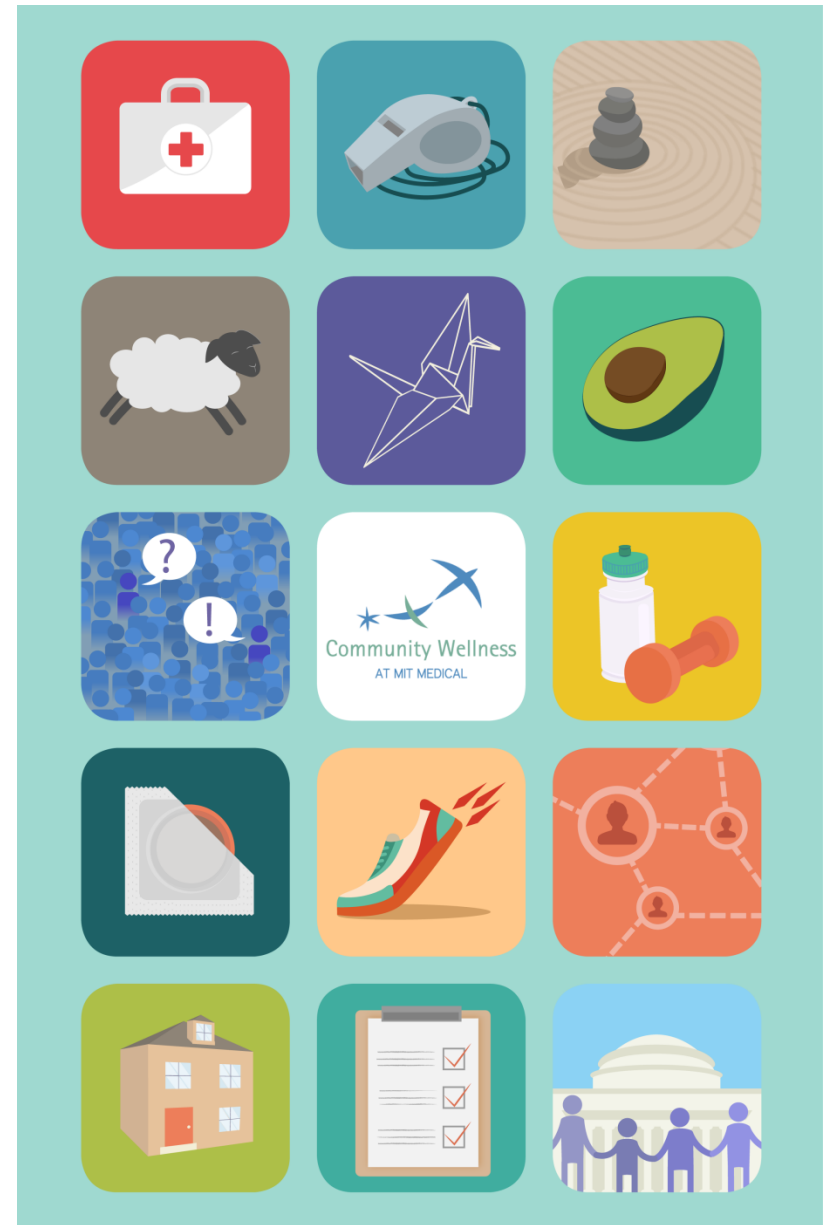
# Recovering from setbacks

- Do not take it as a sign of low ability or commitment
- Caveperson brain took over
- Distance yourself: picture it happening to a friend



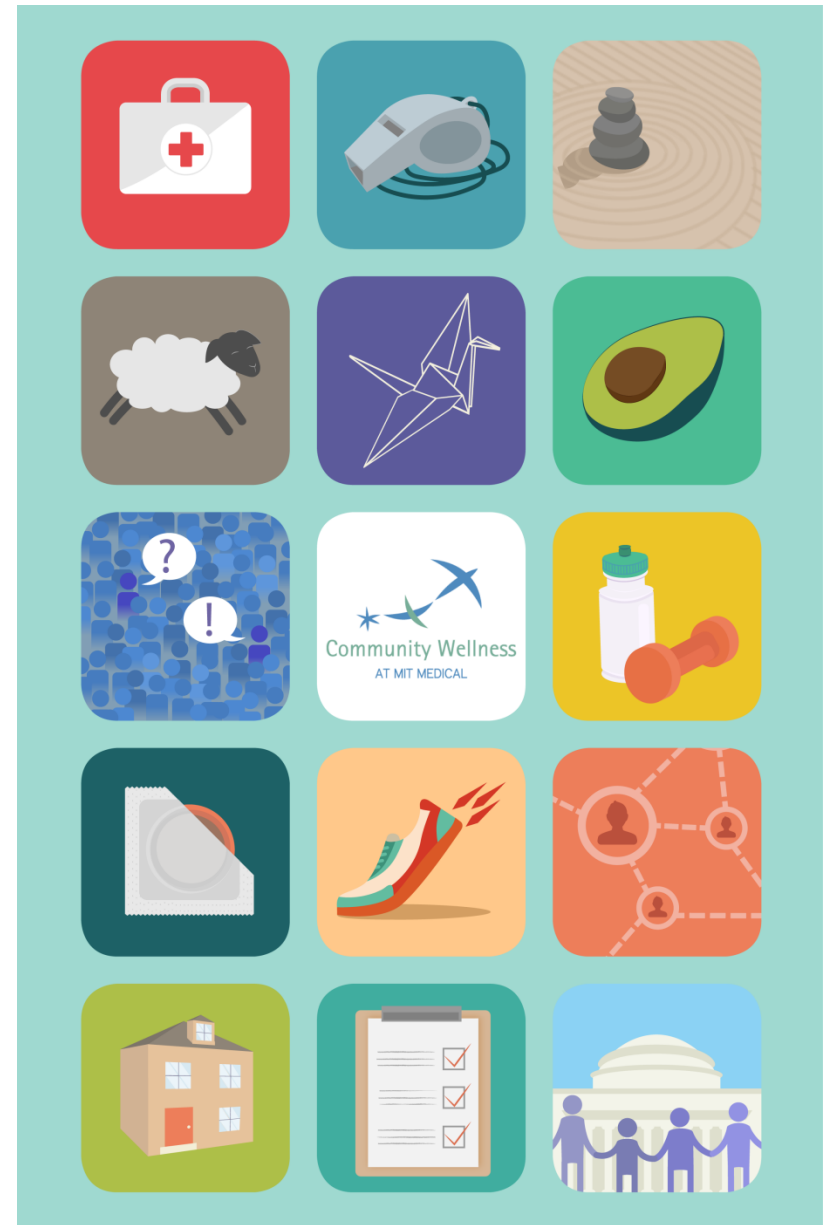
# Productivity warm-ups:

- What is one concrete task I can do right now?
- Start with 10-15 minutes
- Press pause



Remember:  
everyone has been  
in this situation.

1. Assess your semester
2. Review your time pie
3. What is your best-energy time?
4. Make decisions once
5. Your brain can only take so much focus
6. Plan of action





# 6. plan of action

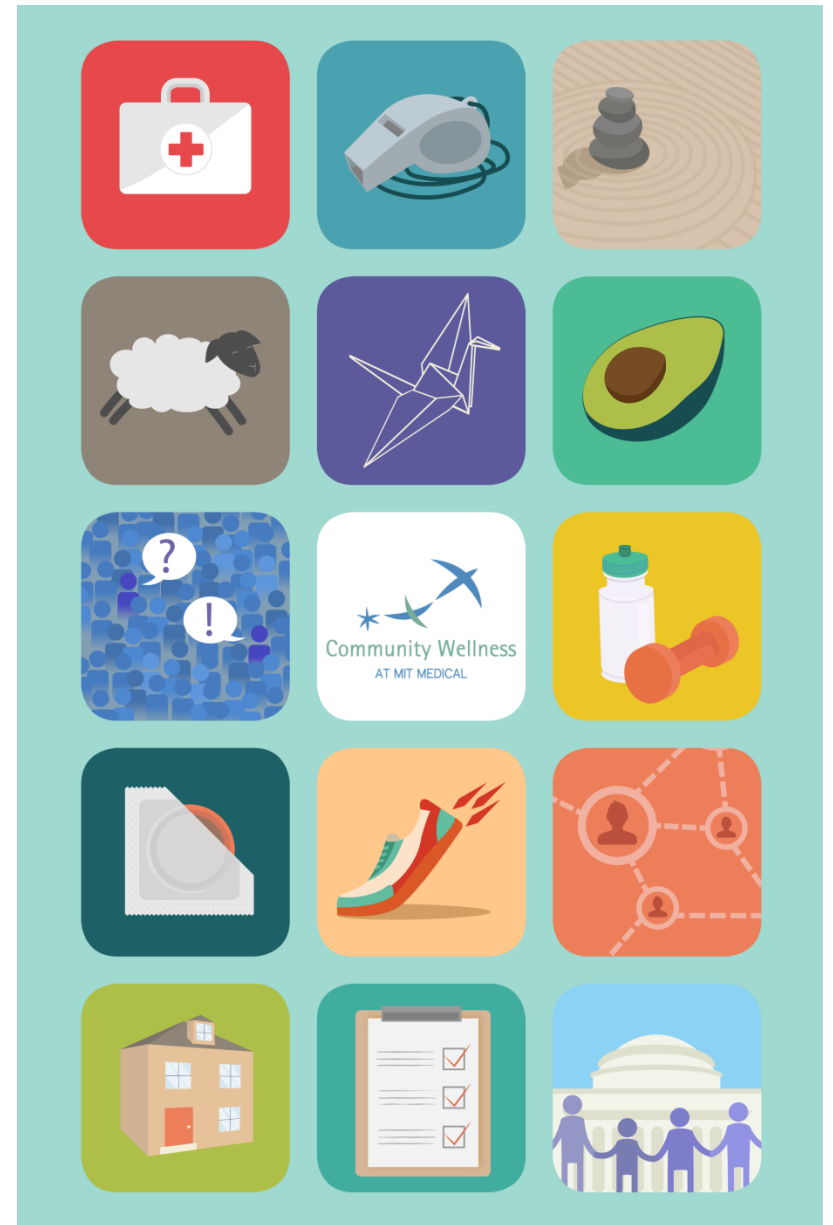
# What is my next step?

- Construct your time pie
- Identify task for your best-energy time
- Cut out a low-value activity
- Get support (accountability partner, mental health, academic)



# What is my next step?

- Clarify my priorities / temptations
- Turn decisions into habits: pre-commit
- Get better sleep or food



[wellnessclasses.mit.edu](https://wellnessclasses.mit.edu)



**CALL  
253-CALM  
AND  
CARRY  
ON**

**performance coaching  
meditation classes  
wellness workshops**

# Thank you!

Susanna (Zan) Barry,  
Community Wellness at MIT Medical  
bars@med.mit.edu

