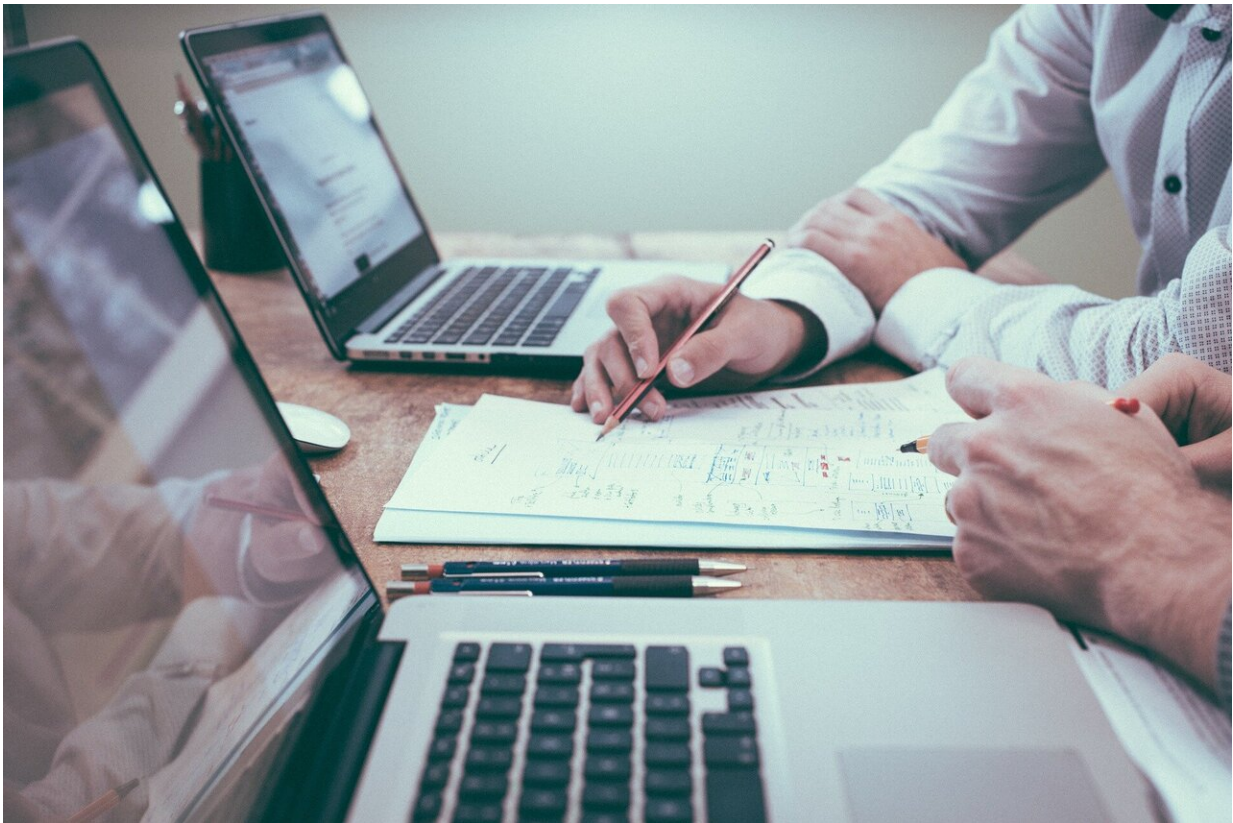


Mindfulness: Tips to reclaim some control in your life-work balance

August 23 2019, by From Mayo Clinic News Network



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There was a time when the boundaries between work and home were fairly clear. Today, however, work is likely to invade your personal life—and maintaining work-life balance is no simple task. When your

work life and personal life are out of balance, your stress level is likely to soar.

This might be especially true if you're concerned about losing your job due to restructuring, layoffs or other factors. Technology that enables constant connection to work can eat into time at home. Work-life balance can be especially difficult for parents of young children; almost 60% of employed first-time mothers in the United States return to work within 12 weeks after childbirth.

Still, [work-life balance](#) isn't out of reach. Start by evaluating your relationship to work. Then apply specific strategies to help you strike a healthier balance.

Married To Your Work? Consider The Cost

It can be tempting to rack up hours at work, especially if you're trying to earn a promotion or manage an ever-increasing workload—or simply keeping your head above water. If you're spending most of your time working, though, your home life will take a hit.

Consider the consequences of poor [work-life](#) balance:

- **Fatigue.** When you're tired, your ability to work productively and think clearly might suffer—which could take a toll on your professional reputation or lead to dangerous or costly mistakes.
- **Poor health.** Stress is associated with adverse effects on the immune system and can worsen the symptoms you experience from any medical condition. Stress also puts you at risk of substance abuse.
- **Lost time with friends and loved ones.** If you're working too much, you might miss important family events or milestones. This can leave you feeling left out and might harm relationships

with your loved ones. It's also difficult to nurture friendships if you're always working.

- Increased expectations. If you regularly work extra hours, you might be given more responsibility—which could lead to additional concerns and challenges.

Strike A Better Balance

As long as you're working, juggling the demands of career and [personal life](#) will probably be an ongoing challenge. But if you can learn both to set limits and look after yourself, you can achieve the work-life balance that's best for you.

Setting Limits

You can't manufacture time. If you don't set limits, then work or other obligations can leave you with no time for the activities and relationships you enjoy. Consider these ideas:

- Manage your time. Cut or delegate activities you don't enjoy or can't handle—or share your concerns and possible solutions with your employer or others. Organize household tasks efficiently, such as running errands in batches or doing a load of laundry every day; don't save all the laundry for your day off. Do what needs to be done and let the rest go.
- Make a list. Put family events on a weekly calendar, and keep a daily to-do list at home and at work. Having a plan helps you maintain focus. When you don't have a plan, it's easy to be sucked into the plans and priorities of others.
- Learn to say no. Whether it's a co-worker asking you to spearhead an extra project or your child's teacher asking you to organize a class party, remember that it's OK to respectfully say

no. When you quit accepting tasks out of guilt or a false sense of obligation, you'll have more time for activities that are meaningful to you.

- Leave work at work. With the technology to connect to anyone at any time from virtually anywhere, there might be no boundary between work and home—unless you create it. Make a conscious decision to separate work time from personal time.
- Reduce email access. Check emails no more than three times a day—late morning, early afternoon and late in the day. If you access email first thing in the morning, you tend to focus on and respond to other people's issues rather than being proactive about your own needs.
- Take advantage of your options. Ask your employer about flex hours, a compressed workweek, job sharing, telecommuting or other scheduling flexibility. The more control you have over your hours, the less stressed you're likely to be.
- Try to shorten commitments and minimize interruptions. Most people can sustain a maximum level of concentration for no more than 90 minutes. After that, the ability to retain information decreases dramatically. When interrupted during a task, you need double or triple the time of the interruption to regain full concentration on your task.

Caring For Yourself

A [healthy lifestyle](#) is essential to coping with stress and to achieving work-life balance. Try to:

- Eat a [healthy diet](#). The Mediterranean diet—which emphasizes fresh fruits and vegetables and lean protein—enhances the ability to retain knowledge as well as stamina and well-being.
- Get enough sleep. Lack of sleep increases stress. It's also important to avoid using personal electronic devices, such as

tablets, just before bedtime. The blue light emitted by these devices decreases your level of melatonin, the hormone associated with sleep.

- **Make time for fun and relaxation.** Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as practicing yoga or reading. Better yet, discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends—such as hiking, dancing or taking cooking classes.
- **Volunteer.** It's important not to overschedule yourself. But research indicates that volunteering can contribute to a greater sense of work-life balance. Selective volunteering might lower your levels of burnout and stress and boost your emotional and social well-being.
- **Bolster your support system.** At work, join forces with co-workers who can cover for you—and vice versa—when family conflicts arise. At home, enlist trusted friends and loved ones to pitch in with child care or household responsibilities when you need to work overtime or travel.

Know When To Seek Professional Help

Everyone needs help from time to time. If your life feels too chaotic to manage and you're spinning your wheels worrying about it, talk with a professional—such as a counselor or other mental health provider. If your employer offers an employee assistance program, take advantage of available services.

Remember, striking a healthy work-life balance isn't a one-shot deal. Creating work-life balance is a continuous process as your family, interests and work life change. Periodically examine your priorities—and make changes, if necessary—to make sure you're keeping on track.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Mindfulness: Tips to reclaim some control in your life-work balance (2019, August 23)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-08-mindfulness-reclaim-life-work.html>

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