

Psychologist recommends five ways to improve your work habits in the new year

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

You've feasted with family and friends, taken a little time off to recharge, and toasted to the new year. Now, it's time to get back to the grind—but before automatically settling into the same old habits, take a moment to reevaluate how you approach your work after the challenges of the last few years.

That's the advice of Debra Lerner, a Tufts University School of Medicine faculty member in the departments of medicine and psychiatry and the founder and director of the Program on Health, Work and Productivity at Tufts Medical Center. "Because of COVID, a lot of changes have taken place for many people," such as new work arrangements, major moves in location, or personal or family health struggles, says Lerner. "We are finding ourselves in situations that call upon our ability to adapt."

With this significant, ongoing demand for change, working people often are resorting either to ad hoc measures to keep going or old habits that may not work well, rather than stopping and thinking about taking a new or [proactive approach](#).

This new year, "find ways to identify or change old habits that may not be effective for you anymore and replace them with ones that are more functional," advises Lerner, who has more than 30 years of experience in addressing workplace [mental health issues](#) and employee health and work productivity.

She has dedicated her career to understanding the struggles of people who need and/or want to work but are challenged with common mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, or experiencing stress due to family caregiving for an ill, elderly or disabled loved one, and developing ways to get them both to feel better and to function more effectively at work, such as through her Be Well at Work program.

These people are not outliers. [One in four adults in the United States has a diagnosable mental health disorder](#), and family caregivers make up about one-fifth of the labor market, according to Lerner's research.

While her strategies are honed for those populations, anyone can benefit.

If you're feeling stressed or unproductive, she offers the following tips to

make [positive changes](#) in your work habits for 2023 and beyond.

Understand that change is a process. Try taking these steps, says Lerner: Diagnose your work problem, brainstorm solutions, put your ideas to the test, evaluate, and keep the good ones on a self-care plan document. "Be a detective and look at yourself critically, from a distance." Lerner suggests writing down or dictating voice notes throughout the day to recognize where you're facing roadblocks.

... And don't forget the workspace

That approach to modifying your routine? It can help resolve issues related to your [physical space](#), too.

Maybe you started off the pandemic working at the kitchen table—but the lack of privacy or ability to change locations when the workday is over could be keeping you from separating your job and personal life. If you're having problems with concentration, interruptions, or distractions at home, consider noise-canceling headphones or white-noise machines. Or give yourself quick breaks to attend to the distraction and re-orient to your work. And without the physical boundaries separating work and home, remember to try to put things away at the end of the day so you're not tempted to continue working.

Modify your work routine. Lerner recognizes that not everyone has this flexibility, but for those who do, try to think, "Where's the wiggle room?"

If you're not making progress on a big project, breaking it down into components may help you get more done. You might also decide that you could use more training and could explore how to get it. If you are battling low motivation, loss of interest, low energy or frustration, think about building in a few minutes to grab yourself a snack, or going for a

quick walk outside.

Taking micro-breaks coupled with deep breathing may also help when you get stuck. And don't be afraid to ask for help. See what techniques colleagues use to manage the work, such as shortcuts for shared tasks or ways to approach weekly meetings with the boss and adapt these to your needs.

Use technology to stay on track. Lerner advises setting timers or "do not disturb" messages on your calendar for set periods to focus. Technology is a double-edged sword—great for automating schedules, but it can also be a big distraction. If you know you're prone to check [social media](#) or texts, download an app to block Instagram or TikTok for a chunk of time, set one or two times a day for you to browse and get the itch out of your system, or simply put your favorite device out of reach.

Connect with coworkers. "Don't become invisible and isolated. Plug into the work culture," says Lerner. "The new normal of remote or hybrid work means you no longer bump into folks at the coffee machine or as you're walking to a meeting. Get out of your bubble and proactively seek feedback on projects. Don't get stuck in your own head."

And remember that contacts do not have to always be task-focused—grabbing a coffee or having an informal chat even online can re-energize you. "We forget how nice it is to sit and have lunch with somebody," Lerner says.

Learn your peak energy times. For those with the flexibility to schedule your workdays, start tracking what you're getting done and when to determine your "peak energy" periods. "Keep a journal, write down what you're doing at different times and how you feel," she says. Cross-reference that with your deliverables for the day or week, and you'll soon see a pattern in when you're getting the most done. Then you can shift

your focus time to become more productive.

As you test out all of these changes to your work routine, make sure you're writing down the ones that work, Lerner says. Keep a running list of them to refer to when you're getting stuck in a rut.

Bonus: Take advantage of work benefits and mental health resources. "Self-awareness of your distress and discomfort can go a long way and is a good step towards finding solutions," she says. "It's important to remember that you're not the only person having difficulty coping with work and family life demands."

As you start the [new year](#), make sure you know what supports are available to you. In addition to mental health care through your primary care provider, your employer may offer behavioral health benefits. Check to see if you have an Employee Assistance Program that offers referrals or free or reduced cost counselors or therapists. Companies may also offer caregiver benefits, such as financial or legal assistance. Taking the time to understand what you're entitled to before a crisis hits could save you time when you're in a bind later.

In the United States, Lerner observes, we are behind in terms of workplace support for workers. While Americans focus on individual responsibility and work ethic, European Union nations (especially the countries in Scandinavia) place more of an emphasis on work-life balance and reducing work stress through smart job design and comprehensive benefits. For example, they have more liberal leave policies.

"Here in the U.S., employers and employees will need to work together to manage and thrive in the new world of work," Lerner says.

Provided by Tufts University

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