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Surprising Ways You Can Improve Your Work-Life Balance

For many, improving work-life balance is an elusive goal. Our always-on culture means employers expect employees to take more work home. Children need rides to activities and help with homework. Friends get put off when you have to cancel again. Then there's the commute. And movie night with your partner. And TPS reports. And dinner. And exercise. And good luck fitting a little you-time in there.

It's no wonder 89 percent of Americans say work-life balance is a problem. How can we improve our work-life balance when there is so much work and life in need of balancing?

Small Starts for Big Improvements

When people decide to improve their lives, they can fall into the trap of trying to fix everything at once. Don't. Attempting too much change will ultimately lead to setbacks, which will lead to discouragement, which will make you feel like your life has been thrown even more out of whack.

For example, it is often said that decluttering your work and living spaces will improve your work-life balance. It's good advice. A tidy office streamlines work and increases productivity, while a clean home will actually help you relax during your relaxation time. But if you try to simplify your space in a single weekend, you can become overwhelmed, causing you to rush the project and merely shift the

disorganization around in your haste to finish.

Instead, create an improvement strategy that acclimates you to change through small steps. If your aim is to organize your life, schedule a weekend day to sort out a single place: first a closet, then your desk, and so on. The result? It may be slow going, but your successes will build on themselves, giving you the encouragement and momentum to see it through.

Rituals Create Balance

Rituals prevent you from over-committing in your life, a major source of work-life imbalance. We've all been there: trying to schedule a friends' night out but no one's schedule is matching up. Rather than trying to synergize your many tasks as they arise, create rituals for the important things in your life. At the end of friends' night, schedule the next evening out. Once it becomes a ritual, you won't have to worry about fitting it in because it will already be a part of the schedule.

Rituals also help reinforce the small starts advice above. Once your declutter odyssey becomes habit, you can introduce a new work-life improvement goal.

Stop. Drop. Relax.

It may seem counterintuitive to stop and relax with so much to do, but when we are overworked, we can fall into the trap of trying to get it all done before we allow ourselves the luxury of rest. Don't try to fight mental exhaustion. Mental exhaustion will win. Instead, take small breaks throughout the day to rejuvenate.

A classic example is the habit of eating lunch at the desk while trying to pound through a workload. This can lead to a host of work-life imbalances, such as lethargy, mindless eating, and a sense of isolation. And the amount of work completed is rarely worth these types of setbacks.

Don't fall for the trap. Eat a light lunch and go for a walk, do a little socializing or enjoy some breathing exercises (more on that below). Studies have shown that office workers who socialize are more productive. It's a two-for-one: a rejuvenated mind will allow you to complete your tasks more easily, which will help improve your work-life balance.



Mindful Breathing

Life imbalances such as money concerns and too many deadlines are mental triggers that flood your body with stress hormones. An endless stream of these hormones can lead to mental illnesses like anxiety and depression, as well as physical ailments like high blood pressure and a lower immune response. It's a negative feedback loop: stress causes problems, which causes a work-life imbalance, which causes more stress, which causes more problems.

Breathing exercises break the loop by evoking a relaxation response that helps limit those stress hormones. The result is a calmer mind that keeps focus on the task at hand, and some research suggests that it may help reduce anxiety, blood pressure, and a host of stress-induced sicknesses. All of this for a

mere 10 minutes of your day.

In addition to the above, you shouldn't forego those work-life balance rules you've probably heard so many times before: eat healthy, exercise often and get plenty of sleep. The reason they are preached so often is because they work, and by combining these surprising ways to improve your work-life balance with those tried-and-true methods, you'll be able to take your first (and preferably small) steps towards a more structured, fulfilling life and career.

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