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# Me-Time: Managing Stress and Finding Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is an individual measurement and may vary daily, monthly, and over extended periods of time. The right balance will differ as your lifestyle changes.

Your needs and wants evolve throughout the various stages of life, from single life, to being married, to the possible addition of children or new career aspirations, and to nearing retirement. There is no perfect formula or ideal balance. The right equation differs because each individual has different priorities, goals and influences that shape our needs at home and at work.

A common and perhaps familiar narrative unfolds across the country week to week. Your work colleagues arrive early, stay late, they're on the way to successful careers, or so it seems. To keep up, you do the same. You perform and extend your working day without notice of the cumulative toll being placed on you and your surroundings. Out of gas and out of time, you realize the impact on family, work, and yourself. If you feel you need a 36-hour day to do it all, then you might need to make better use of your day. In fact, it might be you need to integrate more hours of the kind at the end of your daily to-do list. Hours of Me-time.

When social worker Carroll Wilson welcomes an overworked, overstressed, overwhelmed patient at her office, she often shares one of her key metaphors: "On a plane, you're instructed to put on your oxygen mask first, because if you don't, you'll run out of oxygen and won't be able to help others around put on theirs. So it is with time management in the context of self-care", she says. "Not giving oneself quality time is like running on empty. Ultimately, everyone needs Me-time."

In this article, we'll be looking at:

- why we need time for ourselves and what the cost is if we don't find it;
- how to get additional free time for ourselves;
- time-management tips;

- environmental tips; and
- psychological tips.

### **Why do we need Me-time?**

Without quality personal time, not only will you run out of energy, slow down and be less productive, but soon you'll find yourself underachieving in every life department, personal and professional, and your anxiety may increase exponentially. Myths around human invincibility are hard to debunk. Perceived superwomen and supermen are still valued role models. But for most if not all, the model is unsustainable. Several studies have shown that working long hours for extended periods of time have led to occurrences of physical and mental ailments including cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression.(1) As a result, fatigue, absenteeism, lower productivity and organizational turnover rates tend to increase. According to Statistics Canada, a lack of work-life balance cost Canadian businesses a combined 20 billion dollars a year in health claims, lost productivity and absenteeism. (2)

### **Are you at risk of job burnout?**

You may be more likely to experience job burnout if:

- you identify so strongly with work that you lack a reasonable balance between your work-life and your personal life;
- you try to be everything to everyone;
- you work in a helping profession, such as health care, counselling or teaching;
- you feel you have little or no control over your work; and/or
- you feel that some aspects of your job have become monotonous.

A national study on balancing work and care-giving in Canada reported one quarter of the population works 50 hours or more per week, a rise of 50% as compared to a decade prior. One third of Canadians feel they have more work to accomplish than time allows. That figure rises to 40% when family roles are taken into consideration. More than half of the survey's respondents took work home with them, putting in an average of seven extra hours a week from home. Nearly two thirds spent more than an hour a day catching up on e-mails and one third spent more than an hour emailing on their days off.(3)

### **Preventing burnout:**

Obviously when what you're doing is no longer fueling your passion and/or commitment to your career, it's time to seriously assess your situation. Evaluate how you can change your current situation to re-ignite your enthusiasm.

- **Discuss your options with your supervisor and HR.** What are the options for professional development within your company? Is there a way to explore careers in other departments? Perhaps your supervisor can help in giving you new challenges or changing expectations?
- **What gives you joy outside the workplace?** If you love to sing or play an instrument, join a choir or band. Pursue your interests by taking courses, getting involved in the community and meeting people with similar interests.
- **Volunteer.** Helping others is a great way to get a better perspective on life. There are many ways to have your talents, interests and experience make a big difference in the lives of others.
- **Make a bucket list.** Having and pursuing personal goals, no matter how trivial they may seem, can reignite your enthusiasm and that can spill over into all areas of your life.
- **Seek support.** If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of poor work-life balance including but not limited to trouble concentrating, irritability, weakened coping skills, headaches and muscle stiffness, don't ignore these potential warning signs. See your family doctor to rule out any underlying physical issues. Reach out to friends, loved ones or co-workers.

What about those days off? Only about one third of Canadians use their earned vacation days, and of those vacationers, 28% of them took less than one half of their allotted time?(4)

Learn to combat those assumed pressures, because, in the end, it's also work that suffers. It has been proven that getting personal quality time and achieving work-life equilibrium reboots the brain, increases concentration, improves creativity allowing outside the box problem solving, and ultimately helps us to feel more engaged at work. Moreover, personal time is very effective for stress management, and provides room for reflection and self-growth, contributing to better relationships. (5)

#### **How to get additional free time for ourselves**

If you experience prolonged periods of time without work-life balance, it may have adverse effects on your mental and physical health. Several studies have shown that working long hours for extended periods of time have led to occurrences of physical and mental ailments including but not limited to fatigue and stress.

The good news is that you don't have to find hours of daily Me-time to reap the benefits. Analysis showed that those who experienced high quality, rather than the most Me-time enjoyed better work-life balance, well-being and were more engaged at work.(6)

#### **Time-management tips**

- Wake up 30 minutes before the rest of your household to exercise, meditate or do something you enjoy.
- Make weekly or monthly dates with yourself: cinema night, driving golf balls, a couple of hours at the spa, etc.
- This one is not easy. Track, prioritize and respect your personal time as if it were on par with the importance you give to time allotted to work or devoted to family and people close to you.

#### **Environmental tips**

- Allow yourself to avoid the physical ‘to-do checklist’ environments of your life (home office, kitchen, shed, etc.). You don’t have to travel far away or wait for a special occasion. Seek outdoor activities, contemplate beautiful scenery nearby and breathe some fresh air.
- Ditch technology! At least disconnect from email, social media, chat rooms, work-related communications and stressful news.
- Delimit and protect your time and space.

On the topic of clearer boundaries, communicate your need for alone time to people around you. It is okay to go for a walk and to eat alone in a park close to the workplace, even if it means breaking the habit of the usual cafeteria/café gathering with colleagues. It is okay to have a room to yourself at home with a closed door, and without interruptions when you find time to read or pursue your hobby.

### Psychological tips

Of course, the first person to negotiate with and convince is...yourself!

- Learn to say yes to yourself and no to others.
- Remove guilt! It helps to remember that taking care of yourself through some Me-time will increase your energy, availability and patience when you come back to either the workplace or family. It enables you to be the best partner, parent and colleague you can be.
- Get rid of perfectionism! When you spend time on something you have to do but is not very important, go for good enough instead of seeking perfection. It will afford you time for things that matter to you.

It might also be useful to use some re-framing techniques to improve one’s perception of quality time. For example, Me-time doesn’t have to always mean alone-time. One study found that Me-time can attain the same benefits to yourself if it includes freely chosen activities involving people you love.<sup>(6)</sup> For a parent, it might mean to re-frame a common statement such as “I have to spend time with my kids” and turn it into “I get to play with my kids”. Some caretaking and nurturing activities like cooking, for example, can thus switch from “task” to “hobby” status in no time.

Achieving work-life balance takes effort. It is important to practice work-life balance regularly to keep yourself on track with what is important in your life at that moment. With continued practice, you can create a roadmap to a life with less stress and more focus on what’s important to you.

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