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Work-Life Balance

Don't Feel Guilty for Prioritizing Yourself Over Work

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Summary. When we're starting out in the work world, we often equate the hours spent at work to our productivity. But it's simple untrue. Not taking care of yourself early on can be a recipe for burnout. The author mentions four ways to prioritize yourself in a way that doesn't hurt... [more](#)

When you're young and just entering the workforce, it's natural to feel anticipation, eagerness, and even anxiety. You're likely to place specific expectations on yourself about what you want to achieve and how you want to grow. It's very easy to believe that hard work and long hours are what you need to do to get noticed and succeed in your career.

But, here's the thing: That's not true. Prioritizing your work over your physical, mental, and emotional self is a recipe for burnout, regardless of where you are in your career. The more you fall into the spiral of working long hours at the cost of your health, the harder it will become to recover from the long-term effects of overwork.

Why do we feel guilty about prioritizing life over work?

As a society, many of us still equate the hours we work to our level of productivity. More generally, we equate "doing things" to being productive. How often have you reprimanded yourself for "wasting a weekend" because you spent it resting instead of making plans? It's this false notion of busyness that makes us feel ashamed for choosing respite over action, and a quick look at the history of work can explain why.

During the Industrial Revolution, the average employee was expected to work close to 14 hours a day for six to seven days a week. It wasn't until the early 1900s when Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motor Company, implemented the first 40-hour workweek. His decision wasn't benevolent. He believed he could sell more cars to his employees if they had more time off.

The idea of "hustle culture" became popular in the Great Recession of 2008. The global economic crash pushed people to take on multiple jobs to survive. High unemployment rates and tough monetary conditions promoted overwork as a badge of honor that ultimately leads to success.

It took a global pandemic for companies and workers to shift this mentality. Today, employers have embraced remote or hybrid models of work, and are beginning to recognize engagement and

motivation as the key to employee well-being. There's even been talk about flexibility and trust as the main ingredients to productivity.

The point is: Our definition of "productivity" has evolved. In the last two years, companies have begun to emphasize making more impact over working more hours. You can choose to stay on that path. History has shown us, during hard economic times, we are pressured to shift back into a dangerous mindset, one that prioritizes work over well-being. But that doesn't need to be the case.

Your worth, talent, or value as an employee can be defined by the value your output creates, not how long it takes you to create it. But to do your best work — your most impactful work — you need to build a sustainable work-life balance that prioritizes you, your health, and your happiness.

How can you prioritize yourself?

Despite the demands of an ever-changing world, one thing is clear: Taking care of your health, regardless of what the culture tells you, is critical to your growth and success. You don't have to prove yourself before prioritizing yourself. In fact, the opposite is true: You need to prioritize yourself to perform at your best. The earlier you start to build healthy habits, the happier and more fulfilled you will be.

While this work is not easy, taking small, deliberate steps is key to building a holistic, sustainable, and empowering identity. Here are four things you can do to make time for yourself without hampering your professional growth.

1) Build in time to do nothing.

No, really. Nothing. Can you think back to a time when you just sat on the sofa, daydreaming, without the TV on or your phone nearby? How did that feel? With so many things vying for our attention, it's hard to get a few moments to ourselves. But cultivating this skill will teach you how to stay in the present moment without dwelling on the past or ruminating about the

future. Sometimes, sitting with your thoughts can feel overwhelming, but there are ways to manage the hard feelings that arise.

One way to build a moment of genuine disconnect is to write things down as you think or feel them. Use a journal or a diary to honestly, and without much effort, scribble or doodle whatever crosses your mind or shows up in your body. Think of this like a daily “brain dump.” It can help you literally wipe things off your mind and release the pressure to dwell, ruminate, or catastrophize.

For instance, if you’re worried about a client meeting tomorrow, write about it. Putting your thoughts or fears on paper can take away their power and make them easier to acknowledge and manage. Words on a page are far less ominous than dark clouds floating in your mind.

Try to start or end your day with this practice.

Pro tip: You can also use this practice to record things that require your attention, that need organizing, or that you want immediate access to: client meetings, shopping lists, a big idea that randomly came to you, a business strategy, a new habit you’re trying to build, or even a quote you like.



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2) Learn to say “no.”

When you’re starting out in the workforce, everything feels important. A new project. A meeting. A stretch task. Each new opportunity may be your gateway to establish your credibility and

prove yourself at work. Often, this pressure makes us want to say “yes” more than we say “no.”

While that feeling is normal, and a healthy flow of work will keep you motivated and engaged, you need to understand your limits. To get better at declining requests without feeling guilty, reframe saying no as setting boundaries. To set healthy boundaries, you need to determine your physical and emotional bandwidth for doing things. Ask yourself:

- Who am I willing (or not willing) to give time to?
- What do I want (or not want) to do or achieve?
- When do I need to protect time, and when do I want to make myself available?
- Why would I give one person or activity my attention over another?
- What tasks or activities will (or will not) help me reach the outcomes I want?

Answering these questions will help you understand what energizes and drains you, and ultimately, where you’d like to focus your time. Becoming aware of your own interests and disinterests, and what tasks will help you reach your goals, is a part of the process. You need to acknowledge your limitations and be honest about them with yourself and others. This practice will make you a better team member, colleague, friend, and partner. It will give you the confidence to politely turn down requests.

Pro tip: When a senior colleague makes a request, we assume that we have no choice but to say “yes.” Instead, assume that they’re a reasonable person who is willing to have a conversation with you about your priorities and reach a compromise. If you need to tell someone “no,” just explain why. Offer an alternative and ask them if the work can be done at a later time, or clarify that if the work is urgent, you can adjust your priorities based on the needs of the team and business.

Sample language: “Thank you for thinking of me. Unfortunately, I don’t have the bandwidth to take on an additional assignment this week, but if this task is an urgent one, I’m happy to discuss the timeline of my other projects, and see how we can accommodate it.”

3) Keep your work and life separate. Literally.

This is a hard one, especially if you’re working in a hybrid or remote environment. The side effect of WFH has been that our spaces of sanctuary and relaxation now double as our offices, making it harder to draw clear physical boundaries between our different identities.

The solution? Become intentional about how you use different spaces within your home. When we work from the same space every day, our brain forms an association and develops specific cues that allow us to focus and become more productive. The consistency makes it easier for us to separate our work from the rest of our home. If it’s a shared space, like a dining room or kitchen table, put all your work gear away at the end of the day. Turning off your laptop and moving your work notes away will allow your brain to switch off more easily. Similarly, you can carve out a space where you never work, like your bed or couch.

Pro tip: Once you’re done with work, try to turn off alerts or notifications on your phone. Even if you like scrolling through social media, learn to mute your emails, Slack, or other work applications to help you actually disconnect.

4) Understand what work really means to you.

What do you want out of your career? While this may seem like a daunting question, gaining clarity around what you want right now and in the long term is necessary to build the right habits — habits that will help you reach that goal. The answer might not be obvious when you’re just starting out, but as a first step, ask yourself a few questions:

- How do I want to be remembered in my work life? What legacy do I want to create?
- What about my job (outside of the actual work) energizes me?
- What work would I do if I knew there were no restrictions?
- Outside of work, what do I enjoy? Does my job allow me time to do those things?
- How would I spend my days if I didn't have to work?

Through this self-reflection, you may gain a better understanding of your long-term career vision, as well as discover and explore passions and interests outside of your job. The more time you spend introspecting about what a career means to you, the more you'll realize that your work life is merely a part of your identity — not the entirety of it. This will help you get crystal clear about what is the best use of your time and stops you from wasting time on things, people, or activities that don't move you in the right direction.

Pro tip: This is not a one-time exercise. Your career vision will likely change over time, at different stages in your life, and that's okay. Try to re-evaluate your values and goals every year, a couple of times in a year. As you grow, consider setting specific goals around what you want from a job or an employer. This could look like a healthy work culture, better work-life balance, supportive colleagues, an inspiring boss or mentor, better compensation, or more equitable pay packages.

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Know that there is no “right time” to look after yourself. The earlier you learn to prioritize your health and well-being, the better you will begin to feel about your work and your professional identity.

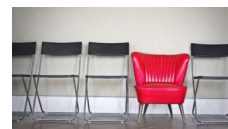
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Donna McGeorge is a best-selling author and global authority on productivity. Her book

series, It's About Time, covers meetings, structuring your day, and doing more with less. The books are available in bookstores around Australia or can be ordered online on Donna's website.

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