

# Work Life Balance

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With so many of us torn between juggling heavy workloads, managing relationships and family responsibilities, and squeezing in outside interests, it's no surprise that more than one in four Americans describe themselves as “super stressed.” And that’s not balanced—or healthy.

In our rush to “get it all done” at the office and at home, it’s easy to forget that as our stress levels spike, our productivity plummets. Stress can zap our concentration, make us irritable or depressed, and harm our personal and professional relationships.

Over time, stress also weakens our immune systems, and makes us susceptible to a variety of ailments from colds to backaches to heart disease. The newest research shows that chronic stress can actually double our risk of having a heart attack. That statistic alone is enough to raise your blood pressure!

While we all need a certain amount of stress to spur us on and help us perform at our best, the key to managing stress lies in that one magic word: balance. Not only is achieving a healthy work/life balance an attainable goal but workers and businesses alike see the rewards. When workers are balanced and happy, they are more productive, take fewer sick days, and are more likely to stay in their jobs.

Here are a few practical steps we can all take to loosen the grip that stress has on us and win back the balance in our lives. Read on and reap the benefits.

## At Work

- **Set manageable goals each day.** Being able to meet priorities helps us feel a sense of accomplishment and control. The latest research shows that the more control we have over our work, the less stressed we get. So be realistic about workloads and deadlines. Make a “to do” list, and take care of important tasks first and eliminate unessential ones. Ask for help when necessary.
- **Be efficient with your time at work.** When we procrastinate, the task often grows in our minds until it seems insurmountable. So when you face a big project at work or home, start by dividing it into smaller tasks. Complete the first one before moving on to the next. Give yourself small rewards upon each completion, whether it’s a five minute break or a walk to the coffee shop. If you feel overwhelmed by routines that seem unnecessary, tell your boss. The less time you spend doing busy work or procrastinating, the more time you can spend productively, or with friends or family.
- **Ask for flexibility.** Flex time and telecommuting are quickly becoming established as necessities in today’s business world, and many companies are drafting work/life policies. If you ask, they might allow you to work flexible hours or from home a day a week. Research shows that employees who work flexible schedules are more productive and loyal to their employers.
- **Take five.** Taking a break at work isn’t only acceptable, it’s often encouraged by many employers. Small breaks at work—or on any project—will help clear your head, and improve your ability to deal with stress and make good decisions when you jump back into the grind.
- **Tune in.** Listen to your favorite music at work to foster concentration, reduce stress and anxiety, and stimulate creativity. Studies dating back more than 30 years show the benefits of music in everyday life, including lowered blood pressure. Be sure to wear headphones on the job, and then pump up the volume—and your productivity.

- **Communicate effectively.** Be honest with colleagues or your boss when you feel you're in a bind. Chances are, you're not alone. But don't just complain—suggest practical alternatives. Looking at a situation from someone else's viewpoint can also reduce your stress. In a tense situation, either rethink your strategy or stand your ground, calmly and rationally. Make allowances for other opinions, and compromise. Retreat before you lose control, and allow time for all involved to cool off. You'll be better equipped to handle the problem constructively later.
- **Give yourself a break.** No one's perfect! Allow yourself to be human and just do the best you can.

## At Home

- **Unplug.** The same technology that makes it so easy for workers to do their jobs flexibly can also burn us out if we use them 24/7. By all means, make yourself available—especially if you've earned the right to “flex” your hours—but recognize the need for personal time, too.
- **Divide and conquer.** Make sure responsibilities at home are evenly distributed and clearly outlined—you'll avoid confusion and problems later.
- **Don't over commit.** Do you feel stressed when you just glance at your calendar? If you're overscheduled with activities, learn to say, “no.” Shed the superman/superwoman urge!
- **Get support.** Chatting with friends and family can be important to your success at home—or at work—and can even improve your health. People with stronger support systems have more aggressive immune responses to illnesses than those who lack such support.
- **Take advantage of your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Many organizations offer resources through an EAP, which can save you precious time by providing guidance on issues like where to find a daycare center and caretaking for an elderly parent, as well as referrals to mental health and other services.
- **Stay active.** Aside from its well-known physical benefits, regular exercise reduces stress, depression and anxiety, and enables people to better cope with adversity, according to researchers. It'll also boost your immune system and keep you out of the doctor's office. Make time in your schedule for the gym or to take a walk during lunch—and have some fun!
- **Treat your body right.** Being in good shape physically increases your tolerance to stress and reduces sick days. Eat right, exercise and get adequate rest. Don't rely on drugs, alcohol or cigarettes to cope with stress; they'll only lead to more problems.
- **Get help if you need it.** Don't let stress stand in the way of your health and happiness. If you are persistently overwhelmed, it may be time to seek help from a mental health professional. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness—taking care of yourself is a sign of strength.

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