Harvard
Business
Review

Managing Yourself

Don't Underestimate the Power of Small Breaks During a Busy Workday

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March 11, 2024

Illustration by Carl Godfrey

Summary.   Many people operate from the belief that there's too much to do and they can't afford to pause during their workday. But taking effective breaks is essential to preventing burnout. In this article, the author outlines eight strategies to try to build more breaks into your day.   **close**

When we think about optimizing our work capacity to produce desired outcomes, it is not solely a question of available time, but available energy, that matters. You may find that when you finally have some time to focus on an important project or task, you are too spent or burned out to actually do it.

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Taking regular breaks is an essential part of managing our energy to maintain sufficient capacity — not only to be productive, but also to prevent burnout, as well as be able to maintain healthy self-regulation of our emotions and behaviors so we can have positive interactions with others. When we are fully depleted (or close to being depleted), we are more likely to be reactive, brusque, or irritable and take our frustrations out on others, which is not only unpleasant for those involved but can be counterproductive. Breaks are also particularly important when doing creative work.

Creating a number of short micro-breaks throughout the day can help us to manage our energy and maintain cognitive, emotional, and even physical capacity. These short respites can be as brief as one minute or five to 10 minutes in duration. Just as microstresses can accumulate at work, micro-breaks throughout the day can help counter their effects.

How to Create Moments to Pause During a Busy Workday

Instead of leaving it solely to chance when you can find a few minutes to take a short break, be intentional and disciplined in creating (and taking) these moments to pause throughout the day by trying the following strategies:

1. Give yourself permission to take breaks.

Many people operate from the belief that there's too much to do and they can't afford to take a break. Challenge this assumption, whether it is self-imposed or imposed by others in your organization (or both). Remember that you are a human and not a machine. Developing a sense of agency and self-direction for how you spend your time during the workday is a key part of developing not only as a leader, but as an adult. Flip the script to recognize that you can't afford *not* to take breaks — even small moments to pause — at various points in the day. Role modeling taking these regular pauses will also give implicit permission for others around you to do the same.

2. Batch email and other communications.

It can be tempting to use a few spare minutes when you have them to quickly respond to email or Slack messages to make the ever-growing mountain of communications more manageable or be as responsive as possible. However, research shows that work takes 50% longer when we're constantly switching tasks. This same research also shows that people typically try to make up for this loss in productivity by working faster. However, doing so only creates more stress, time pressure, and frustration. Blocking out specific times when you will respond to email will allow you to use the much smaller blocks of time that you may have for actual breaks.

3. Reset the default meeting duration.

Most people have a default meeting duration of 30 or 60 minutes. Change your default to either 15–25 minutes for shorter meetings or 45–50 minutes for longer meetings. If given more time, people will invariably find ways to fill it. Having a more limited time window encourages everyone to manage meetings more efficiently to fit the available time. You can always make exceptions when warranted.

Use the remaining five- to 15-minute window before your next meeting to get up from your desk and stretch or get a coffee or snack. You might even email or text a friend to put weekend plans

in motion so you have something to look forward to. Research shows that when you have something positive to anticipate, it can boost your mood and reduce stress.

4. Communicate and enforce hard stops.

If at all possible, do not go over allotted meeting durations. To be sure, this is easier to enforce when you are the one leading the meeting. Nevertheless, communicating up front that you have a hard stop at the end of the booked time period (particularly when there is a power dynamic in the meeting) sets the expectation from the start that you'll be leaving on time. In doing so, everyone attending can try to attain the goal of ending promptly. Most people will appreciate it since it benefits everyone. It's another way of demonstrating agency over your time. When meetings run over and cause you to join another meeting late, it has a ripple effect and adds more stress to your day. In the event that you are running late to your next meeting, taking just 15 seconds to take three deep breaths can help you get centered so you can be present for your next meeting.

5. Build on bathroom breaks.

The one short break everyone needs to take is a bathroom break. "Stacking" a new habit onto an existing habit or behavior is way to pair something you want to do with something you need to do (such as take a bathroom break). For example, after visiting the

restroom, you might create a new mini-habit and take 5–10 minutes to practice mindfulness, meditate, or climb a set of stairs or walk around the block to get some exercise.

6. Schedule breaks and set reminders.

Schedule short breaks in your day when you know your energy is at its lowest — perhaps mid-to-late afternoon. Research shows that our energy is typically lowest around 3 P.M. It's usually around that time that I'll get up from my desk, feed my dog (a benefit of working at home), make an espresso, and enjoy it with a square of chocolate. It's a treat I look forward to — a time that I can just sit for a few minutes away from my laptop. Having a reminder pop up on your computer or phone can also help you to remember to take a short break, and there are several apps designed around this.

7. Have a visual cue.

Having some type of visual cue on your desk, computer, or workspace can also serve as a reminder to take short pauses. It could be your coffee mug or water bottle on your desk, a picture of a yoga pose, or a post-it that just says "breathe." These casual reminders can help you take a few moments every now and then for an impromptu pause.

8. Have a go-to routine for unexpected breaks.

You can still take advantage opportunistically when you have an unexpected break, such as when a meeting happens to end early. Whether it's listening to music, texting a friend, or stopping by someone's desk to say hi, knowing in advance how you plan to use any unanticipated breaks will help you get the most out of them. Likewise, if someone else is running late to a meeting with you, while you are waiting for them, use the time to do some breathing exercises while sitting in your chair to help reduce stress and restore your capacity.

The above strategies can help you create several moments to pause over the course of your workday. By doing so, there will be a cumulative benefit, as you'll be able to more effectively manage your energy and capacity, helping you to be more resilient.

Rebecca Zucker is an executive coach and a founding partner at Next Step Partners, a leadership development firm. Her clients have included Amazon, Clorox, Morrison Foerster, Norwest Venture Partners, The James Irvine Foundation, and high-growth technology companies like DocuSign and Dropbox. You can follow her on LinkedIn.

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