

Work-life Balance

How to improve your work-life balance

Whether we like it or not, stress is a part of our working lives. But for an increasing number of people, too much stress is becoming common in the workplace.

According to research commissioned by the mental health charity Mind, work is the most stressful thing in our lives today - even more than debt or health problems. The same report suggests one in five people develops anxiety as a result of workplace stress, with many using alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs to help them cope.

The Mental Health Foundation goes as far as saying the pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in this country is perhaps the biggest and most pressing challenge to the mental health of the general population. Increased working hours, it claims, is having an important effect on our lifestyles. But having a healthy work-life balance can protect against the potential detrimental effects of work-related stress, the charity adds.

Those who work in the licensed trade aren't immune to this issue. Indeed, many work long - and often unsociable - hours, which can make it difficult for them to switch off. Having access to

your work email on your mobile phone or home laptop can make it more difficult for you to get away from work completely too.

But while you may not be able to change when or even how many hours you work, there are some things you can do to make your work-life balance better.

Did you know?

Just over half of full-time workers in Britain say they have suffered burnout or anxiety at work, leaving them feeling emotional or physically exhausted. (Source: YouGov/Virgin)

Is your work-life balance unhealthy?

There are lots of ways to determine whether your work-life balance is healthy or not so healthy. If you're not sure, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you find it hard to relax when you're not working?
- Do you frequently neglect other aspects of your life such as your family, hobbies or other interests outside your job because of work commitments?
- Has your physical or mental health suffered because of your job?

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- Do your friends and family complain that they hardly ever see you or that you're always preoccupied with work outside office hours?
- Do you feel your personal relationships are suffering because of the work you do?
- When at work, do you rarely take breaks (including lunch or other meal breaks)?
- Do you struggle to take all your holiday entitlement in any given year?

If you've answered 'yes' to one or more of these questions, there's a good chance your work-life balance could do with some improvement.

Taking time off

Figures from the Office for National Statistics suggest British people work some of the longest hours in Europe. Other surveys suggest many British workers make a habit of working through their holidays. There may be little you can do about working long and unsociable hours, but you can make sure you take all your holiday entitlement.

According to the government, almost all workers in this country who work a five-day week are legally entitled to 5.6 weeks' paid holiday per year (bank holidays may or may not be included, it depends on your employer). This is your statutory holiday entitlement.

Part-time workers are also entitled to paid holiday, based on the number of days a week they work (if you work three days a week, for instance, you're entitled to 16.8 days of annual paid leave, which is three multiplied by 5.6). Shift workers can calculate their holiday entitlement for working irregular hours by using the holiday entitlement calculator at gov.uk.

If you don't have an agreement with your employer about how much notice you have to give before taking a holiday, the following may apply:

- Your notice must be at least twice as long as the holiday you want to take (so for two weeks off, you have to give four weeks' notice).
- Your employer can make you take all or any of your holiday if they give you notice, which must be at least twice as long as the holiday they want you to take.
- Your employer can refuse to let you take your holiday when you want to take it if they give you notice equal to the length of the holiday you want to take (if you've given four weeks' notice to take a fortnight's holiday, your employer has to give you notice that you cannot take the holiday two weeks before the holiday starts). However, they can't refuse to let you take your holiday at all.

Untaken holiday

Your annual leave year can start at different times, depending on your employer (some start the year on January 1st while others often start in April). If you didn't agree when your leave year should start and finish, it starts on the day you started work if you started your job after October 1st 1998 (or November 23rd in Northern Ireland).

According to Citizen's Advice, you're not generally allowed to carry over statutory holiday from one year to the next. This means if you don't use your holiday, you lose it. If, however, your contract states that you have contractual holiday on top of statutory holiday, you may be allowed to

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carry some contractual holiday days over to your next leave year.

- If you can't use up all your holiday entitlement because your employer won't let you take your holiday before your leave year ends - or if your employer refuses to let you have any holiday at any time - you can get advice on what you can do about it from your local Citizen's Advice branch.

Taking breaks at work

It's also advisable to take breaks when you're at work too. Aim to take at least 20 minutes for your main break and get out of the workplace if you can (workers in the UK have the right to one uninterrupted 20-minute rest break during their working day if they work more than six hours a day). Not only will this give you time to eat properly and get some fresh air, it could also improve your focus and productivity throughout the rest of the day.

Outside the work environment

According to the government, workers over the age of 18 have the right to 11 hours rest between working days as well as either an uninterrupted 24 hours without any work each week or an uninterrupted 48 hours without any work each fortnight. So when you're not at work, you don't have to take calls or deal with emails from your boss or co-workers. In fact, if you make it clear that you cannot be contacted outside working hours, you'll have a much better chance of improving your work-life balance - and your friends and family will be happier too.

How to cope with work overload

There's no getting away from the fact that most working people have an increasingly high work load these days. Many of us find it hard to say 'no' to our employer and are unable to resist taking on more work than we can cope with. The result is even more stress, which can actually make you less productive.

But being more assertive and learning to say 'no' when you're already working flat out could help to boost your life outside work and make you more effective during office hours. According to the Mental Health Foundation, it's important to take personal responsibility for your work-life balance. This includes speaking up when work expectations and demands are too high rather than soldiering on and hoping nobody will notice how overwhelmed you are.

If you've made a habit of taking on more and more tasks at work, your boss may not even realise how much pressure you're under. But by letting them know you're struggling, they can do something about it.

Managing your time

Effective time management can improve work-life balance in just about any job (though some types of job may benefit more than others). Here are a few things you could try to reduce stress during work hours and make you healthier and happier when you're not working too:

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Avoid putting things off

Everyone has things to do at work that they would rather avoid. But not getting on with something doesn't make it any easier. And the longer you keep avoiding it, the guiltier you feel - and before you know it, your stress levels will start going through the roof, both in and out of work. Try tackling those things you'd rather avoid first thing in the day, rather than leaving them until the last minute before clocking off. And if they seem too difficult, try dividing them into smaller, more manageable chunks.

Make a list

Depending on the type of job you do, you may have an endless list of things to do at work. Sometimes, the sheer volume of tasks can be so daunting, you don't know where to begin. The best way to conquer this is to start each day by writing a to-do list, with each entry prioritised as high, medium or low. Try not to switch between tasks before they've been finished. Decide what to do first and tick each task off when they're completed before moving on to the next.

Limit distractions

Even if you have the most interesting and enjoyable job in the world, it's all too easy to become distracted by things like emails, texts and social media. The more these things take up your time at work, the less time you have to do your job - which, depending on what you do, can lead to working late or taking work home with you (not to mention irritate your boss).

Try to put aside set times during the day to check your work emails rather than going through your in-box every five minutes - you could, for instance, limit yourself to checking your work emails just once an hour. Most importantly, avoid checking personal texts, emails and social media

unless you're on a break, especially if you want to keep your employer happy.

Stay healthy

Working long hours isn't good for your health. According to University College London experts, adults who work for more than 11 hours a day are around 67 per cent more likely to develop coronary heart disease than eight-hour-a-day workers. Burnt-out workers are also thought to have a higher risk of depression and anxiety.

That's why, if you work long hours, it's important to stay as healthy as you can. This means eating a healthy diet with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day (snacking on fatty or sugary foods instead of having a healthy main meal isn't going to do your heart - or any other part of you - any favours).

There are also many studies to suggest physical activity may help relieve stress because of the way exercise releases feel-good hormones called endorphins in the brain. So try to take the recommended 150 minutes of moderate-activity exercise every week (for instance, this could be a brisk half-hour walk, five times a week).

Relaxing with mindfulness

Relaxation is a practical way to relieve your stress levels. There are lots of relaxing things you can do, from soaking in a hot bubble bath to practising meditation or yoga. But an increasingly popular way of managing stress is to use a technique called mindfulness.

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Mindfulness is thought to help protect against a number of mental health issues including anxiety and depression. It is simply to be aware of your thoughts, feelings and surroundings; awareness of the here and now, the present moment. You don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor, you can practice mindfulness whatever you're doing, wherever you are. The result could be lower stress levels - which means you can perform more effectively at work and enjoy your life outside work too.

Here are a couple of things you can try:

Eat with mindfulness

The next time you sit down to a meal, switch off any distractions such as the TV, radio and your mobile phone. Then pay full attention to your food and the act of eating. What does your food smell like? Does it look delicious? How does it taste? What are the textures like? Is it warm or cold? How does it make you feel? Try not to pay attention to anything else other than eating.

Walk with mindfulness

After a long day at work, go for a quick walk outside and, if it's safe to do so, concentrate fully on your environment - the sights, sounds, sensations and smells around you - and your movement. Notice how the ground feels under your feet as you transfer weight from one foot to the other, and how the rest of your body feels as you move. Breathe naturally and fully, notice how the air feels in your nose and lungs. Try to take in everything that's around you. Just five minutes may be enough to make you feel calm and centred.

- Find out more about mindfulness by visiting bemindful.co.uk

Useful links

If you are experiencing any of the issues covered in this guide, in the first instance call our free helpline on 0808 801 0550. Our Advisors will listen without judging and will work with you as best they can to achieve a positive outcome. If you prefer you can email: helpline@ltcharity.org.uk. Visit our website: www.licensedtradecharity.org.uk It's full of useful information about the kind of issues we know people who work in the licensed trade face.

Other sources of information:

Mental Health Foundation

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Information and advice about improving your mental health.

Mind

www.mind.org.uk

Information about mental health issues, including how to manage stress.

Change4Life

www.nhs.uk/change4life-beta

Lots of help and suggestions for eating healthily and staying physically active.

Citizens Advice

www.citizensadvice.org.uk