

Keeping work in its place

Work is one of the biggest parts of most people's lives. This is no less true of people with depression or other difficulties, though some are in school, some are retired, some are unemployed, and some are on disability.

The quality of your work life can have a profound effect on your mental health. Much of this effect can be positive. Work imposes structure on our lives, which can be an enormous benefit. Work involves us in productive activity, opens an avenue for us to contribute, and provides us with feedback on our efforts.

At its best, work can also access our unique talents and abilities, provide us with a source of respect and esteem, and impart a powerful sense of meaning in our lives. On a more practical level, work can help pay the bills, and while money may not buy happiness, financial strain can certainly contribute to misery.

Unfortunately, work can also have negative effects.

- Long hours and shiftwork can be exhausting and detract from other life-giving activities.
- Working with the public can be demanding and, at times, thankless – particularly if people see you as the visible face of an organization they dislike.
- Insensitive supervisors can consciously or unconsciously launch a relentless attack on the self-esteem of workers, often by commenting only on deficiencies and ignoring strengths.
- Involvement in work that seems meaningless or, worse, destructive in its effects can sap interest, will, and motivation.
- Organizations that encourage an unhealthy approach to work (excessive hours, relentless competition, a preoccupation with obtaining the maximum effort from employees for the lowest price) can reinforce self-destructive tendencies already present in many workers.

Entire books have been devoted to creating a healthy work life. In this section we will consider just a few issues: balancing work and the rest of your life, avoiding burnout, and strategies for returning to work successfully after time off for depression or stress leave.

Achieving balance

It is in your employer's best interests for you to achieve a healthy balance between work and home life. With balance you will be happier, more productive, and less likely to leave for another firm. But don't rely on your employer to encourage you to achieve balance. Too many employers worry that an involving, fulfilling home life will distract you from your job. Balance will never be handed to you as a job benefit. You have to create balance for yourself.

Some tips:

- **Avoid overwork.** A reasonable amount of overtime is not necessarily problematic. Some employers, however, expect relentless overtime to the exclusion of everything else. Many people are capable of this type of intensity for a time; some thrive on it. Recognize this ability for what it is: temporary. Most people cannot lead a well-balanced, healthy life in the long run this way. Feel free to work overtime, but seriously consider setting firm limits if it prevents you from living the rest of your life.
- **Be cautious about shiftwork.** Some people are perfectly capable of working rotating shifts without ill effects. Others are not. This is a classic case of a person-environment fit problem. It could be that you are simply one of the many people who are incapable of working shifts without ill effects. If so, recognize the signs (exhaustion, sleep difficulties, inability to enjoy life), try some problem-solving (such as light therapy or changing the shift schedule), and if nothing works, admit it: This is not for you. Time to try something else.
- **Consider a career change.** Some people simply are not suited to their careers. They suffer too much from the stress, their skills and interests don't match the job, or the nature of the work conflicts with their values. No matter how much time they have spent trying to build the career, at some point they may have to recognize that they are in a personal dead end, turn around, and try something else. This is not uncommon for people who experience depression or stress-related problems. Sometimes they realize that they just can't (and don't want to) handle the stress. Perhaps more often, they realize that something else would be more interesting (even if there's less money in it). Once recovered, relatively few seem to mourn the loss of the old career. More often they regard the need for a career change as one of the messages that their mood problem was trying to give them.

Avoiding burnout

If you are able to achieve balance between your work and home life, you are much less likely to burn out on the job.

Burnout is typically described as a mood- and stress-related problem in which a person frantically tries to maintain a standard of work or reach a goal at work (no backlog, approval for the big project, everyone feeling satisfied), cannot do so (often because of organizational factors), becomes overanxious and frustrated, and experiences a decline in work functioning (exhaustion, apathy, inefficiency).

Some people lose their ability to cope quite suddenly (one day they simply can't force themselves into the office); others have a more gradual decline (steadily increasing absenteeism, slowly waning productivity). Avoiding burnout is easier said than done, but here are a few tips:

- **Learn appropriate assertiveness skills.** It is important to be able to set and maintain appropriate boundaries between yourself, coworkers, your employer, and your employees. The alternatives to assertive communication are: 1) being passive, in which case you will be taken advantage of, 2) being aggressive, in which case your behavior will poison the work environment, or 3) being passive-aggressive, in which case you will feel helpless at the same time as you undermine others' self-esteem.
- **Set reasonable expectations.** Idealists are the first to crumble because they have impossibly high aspirations and reality smacks them between the eyes in short order. Unrealistic therapists imagine that they will eliminate distress from their communities; idealistic environmentalists hope to eradicate all pollution through their own efforts. Because the goal is never reached there is never a feeling of accomplishment. A constant sense of failure kills motivation and interest.
- **Uncover your secret inadequacy.** Unrealistic personal expectations may stem from underlying feelings of inadequacy. *"I'm so worthless that I have to achieve twice as much as anyone else to be acceptable."* Because work achievements don't really change your inner worth, this striving becomes like the running of a hamster in a wheel. You never achieve contentment despite a gnawing feeling that it must be just out of reach (if only you could work a little faster or get one more promotion, you could relax and enjoy life).
- **Don't skip breaks.** You are entirely capable of working through lunch, taking no breaks, and even getting through a year without a vacation. In the long run, however, none of these strategies is a good idea. You need time to pull back, rest, and refocus. If you tend toward burnout, ensure that you take regular breaks, eat your lunch away from your work station, and take your vacation time. If this fills you with anxiety that you might never get all your work done, remind yourself that if you burn out you won't get it done anyway.

Returning to work

Some people get depressed during a period of unemployment. Others take time off or go on disability during depression, or lose their jobs due to the performance impairments that depression can bring. In most cases, a return to work is the eventual goal.

Unfortunately, the stress of returning to work can strain your recovery. Here are some suggestions to smooth the transition.

- **Gradual return.** If you are returning to work after time off, see if you can return a step at a time. Perhaps you can go a day a week at first, or half-days only, and gradually edge your way back to full-time. Historically, disability insurers have been reluctant to support such a strategy: either you're off work or you're back at work. These days, most insurers are adopting gradual return options because it's cheaper: if gradual return helps you readapt to the workplace, you are less likely to return to disability and the insurers will have less of a payout. Check your own policy.
- **Volunteer work.** Don't feel ready for your old job, or not sure what kind of work you want? Volunteer work is an excellent option. You get to choose something you actually want to do, training requirements are generally lower than in paid work, the hours are typically part-time, the pace is generally less pressured, and the commitment is less onerous. Volunteer work also gets you out of the house, imposes some structure, and helps you adapt to the idea of working on a schedule again.
- **Impose changes gradually.** The return to work may involve multiple transitions: coping with coworkers, struggling with traffic, waking and getting yourself organized early in the morning, reducing the time available for other tasks, and so on. Rather than imposing all of these changes the same day, it's worthwhile to stretch them out. Begin getting up early a week before you go back. Drive to your workplace a few times then drive home again. Make and freeze dinners in advance so that you won't have to cook the first week. Give yourself permission to lighten up on your housekeeping for a while once you go back.
- **Vocational rehabilitation.** Many communities offer vocational rehabilitation programs to help people prepare to re-enter the workplace. Some of these programs offer retraining options, others are designed to help you adapt to the structure and interaction of the workplace. Many have work placement components in which you help out in an actual workplace without the pressure of a full-time job. If the return to work seems daunting, a vocational rehabilitation program may be an excellent idea.

- **Employment counseling.** Want to find a line of work that suits your interests and abilities better than your last job? Hoping to find a less stressful workplace? Employment counseling is almost entirely focused on the idea of person-environment fit: finding a setting and type of work that suits your personality, training, and style. Many postsecondary institutions offer employment counseling to their students, and some vocational rehabilitation programs offer employment counseling as a sideline. It may take some looking to find, but employment counseling can be invaluable in finding not just work, but work that suits you.



Of the work-related strategies covered in this section, which one speaks most directly to your own situation? Which, if any, seems like the best idea?

If you want to somehow implement this idea in your own life, how will you do it? Try to move from what might start out as a vague goal (*“Consider volunteer work”*) to a specific plan for at least the first step (*“Call the local volunteer bureau tomorrow morning and ask how to get a list of possible positions”*).
