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# Breaking the Busy Habit

by GAYNOR PARKIN

*I'm always in meetings... The pace here is frantic, it's hard to slow it down.... If we can just get through this next busy patch...*

How many of these comments sound familiar? We hear them often. Even the best and most effective time management and smart working strategies get wiped out when we are frantic. We also know that the brain chemistry that occurs with being busy is both compelling, and hard to resist. Being busy drives a surge of both dopamine and adrenaline into our system. These hormones create something like an addictive effect — it feels great and so we crave more of it. That's all good in the short term. Long term, though, that rush of dopamine and adrenaline leaves us feeling depleted. In direct contrast to this depletion affect, the work of Professor Sabine Sonnentag (at the University of Konstanz, Germany) has shown that detaching from work, slowing down, and engaging in enjoyable off-job activities greatly improved people's moods and productivity the following day.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that breaking the busy habit is not an easy habit to break. In no particular order here are some of the ideas, innovations and strategies we know can make a real difference:

## FOR YOURSELF

- Deliberately move more slowly — notice the urge to rush and resist it. Give yourself permission to pause and slow down.
- Pay attention to your breathing — check you are breathing from your diaphragm (belly breathing) not your chest.

- This helps to keep your body and mind in a calm state rather than a frantic one.
- Disconnect — take regular “no technology” breaks — even five minutes.
- Sleep well. Quality sleep helps to “reset” our brains so we can look at challenges and problems from different perspectives and generate more creative solutions. The functions of learning and memory are also improved while we sleep, because the connections between the neural pathways that help us perform these tasks are strengthened as we sleep.
- Reduce distractions, try and focus on one task at a time.
- Keep track of what you are accomplishing, include small wins as well as major successes.
- Take breaks — if you feel like you can't it's a sign you need one!
- Plan and take holidays, days off and long weekends. Even if it feels like there's more to do when you get back you will tackle the backlog more efficiently and with a clearer head.
- Keep a log of where you are spending your time — include work and the rest of your life. If this feels overwhelming do it in chunks — maybe in 2 hour blocks. Once you know where your time goes— is there anything that can be dropped or traded?
- Harness your other happy chemicals. Oxytocin, the social/trust chemical, has been shown to reduce cortisol levels (a biomarker of chronic stress). Take 5 minutes and reflect on a recent moment where you felt completely connected to a friend or someone close to you. Better still, plan to see them.

## WITH YOUR TEAM



- Set up **team challenges** — get everyone in the team competing to come up with the best strategies to reduce busyness. Celebrate and reward great ideas. Lead your teams to put the ideas into practice.



- Make **time off predictable and required**: <http://hbr.org/2009/10/making-time-off-predictable-and-required>.



- Set up **regular habits and routines** to support physical and mental recovery — doing the stuff quiz everyday or a weekly walking meeting.



- Have a conversation with your team(s) about **barriers to time off** (e.g., checking emails at home; strategising for meetings while watching TV;) and agree to experimenting with reducing or even stopping one of these behaviours.



- Use meaning to prioritise competing demands on your time. How? Start your day with a standing team meeting where you (a) celebrate yesterday's successes — **positive emotion is energising** and will help you see the big picture, (b) agree to priorities for the day ahead and (c) ensure everyone understands how their work adds value.



- In your next coaching session **reflect on your most restorative break at work**. What made this so good? How did you make it happen? What strengths did you bring to this situation to effect the outcome? How did you feel afterwards? How can you make this happen again?



- **Keep revisiting systems** for prioritising



- Consider **making a review of time off** an agenda item in meetings (what happened when Mark took a break this week)? How did the team manage, how did people feel about him not being here?). Discussion such as this can be useful if people have unhelpful and inaccurate thoughts about time off (e.g, "it puts too much pressure on the rest of the team").



- **Keep asking** — is this important? What happens if this doesn't get done?