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CLASSIC BE WELL

Power Down After Day at Work

By Debbie DeAngelo
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Editor's note: Following is a "Be Well Classic" by Debbie DeAngelo. The Jefferson first published it in October 2022.

There is a reason why America is referred to as the "No Vacation Nation." We don't take off much time from work. Of the industrialized countries, we receive the least amount of vacation time, and perhaps worse, only half of us use what we've accrued.

Our workaholic attitude spills over into evenings and weekends. Despite the proven physical and mental benefits of downtime, we aren't taking note. It's as if we feel being "busy" is a badge of honor. The reality is that inadequate downtime contributes to mood disorders, inability to concentrate, decreased productivity, fatigue, heart disease, and relationship problems.

Work-life balance isn't easy. It requires time and attention. It also doesn't mean it will be an equal balance every day. Some days and times in your life may require more or less downtime. The right balance between achievement and enjoyment differs for all of us. The most important aspect is that you recognize it's needed and take steps to accomplish it.

Here are a few ways to maintain a work-life balance during your off hours.

Prepare to leave work. Give yourself enough time before leaving work to wrap up what you're doing and prepare for the next day. Review what you have accomplished, what remains to be done, and what the next day holds. Try your best not to take work home from the office. If it's absolutely necessary, limit working at home to one to two days per week for only one to two hours. Also, establish an "unplug" time for work-related emails, texts, and calls. If you work remotely, then it's even more essential to delineate work hours from off-hours.

Replenish yourself. If you arrive home starving, with an urgent need to use the bathroom, then you aren't setting the stage for a relaxing evening. Fortify yourself before heading home and tending to others by addressing your personal needs. This is particularly helpful if you will be shuttling children to and from activities after work. After a chaotic day you may even need to sit in silence for five minutes to collect yourself before starting the second shift at home.

Decompress during your commute. Whether using public or private transportation, this time can be used to mentally separate from work. Listening to music, a podcast, or an audio book eases the transition into your personal mindset. Developing a commuting routine ensures your shift into your home mode as quickly as possible.

Organize the home front. If you're greeted by disorganization the minute you cross the threshold, your nerves will be on edge and your mind will be reeling with a checklist of all the chores that need to be done. Try to create a simple routine for maintaining a smooth flow for the evening. This could include meal planning and prepping on the weekend, posting a written schedule of the family's activities and chores in a place visible to all, and keeping clutter under control.

Set the stage. Believe it or not, the way you begin your day sets the stage for the way you handle the events of that day. Place yourself in the proper mindset to greet whatever the day has in store ... both the good and the not-so-good. Get a sound night's sleep, allow enough time in the morning so you aren't feeling habitually rushed and harried, and devote a few minutes to going outside and communing with nature or doing something relaxing and centering. It makes a difference.

Unplugging from work will make you more mentally present when you're with your family and friends and actually more productive when you're at work. If you're waiting to be caught up on your work or for your inbox to be empty before powering down, then you probably won't be relaxing much. Don't expect your employer to notice that you're slaving away and sacrificing your work-life balance. It's up to you to establish those priorities and boundaries. After all, when you look back on your life, I doubt you'll say, "I wish I'd spent more time at work."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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