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Work-life balance

Work pressure demands more downtime than a fleeting week off

Sabbaticals are one sign of a need for respite but even they can be too busy, writes Herminia Ibarra

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The month of August, that hallowed time when Latin Europe grinds to a sunny halt, concludes with September's good intentions to sustain the summer's healthier habits. Rapidly we revert to form.

Finnish researcher [Jessica de Bloom's analysis](#)

(http://www.academia.edu/2969197/De_Bloom_J._2012_.How_do_vacations_affect_workers_health_being_Vacation_after-effects_and_the_role_of_vacation_activities_and_experiences._s_Hertogenbosch)

shows the feelings of renewal that people report after a seven-day holiday fade within one to four weeks of returning to work. A short break, concludes a Scientific American article, "is like a cool shower on an oppressively muggy summer day — a refreshing yet fleeting escape".

On a continuum from the mini-sabbatical to the French month-long pause to the incredible shrinking US vacation, how much time is enough to not just recover physically but also to motivate a personal course correction?

In keeping with our "[smarter, faster, better \(http://charlesduhigg.com/\)](http://charlesduhigg.com/)" culture, Ms de Bloom advises meting out our allotted rest and restoration into shorter, more frequent vacations. But what if we need bigger chunks of downtime to recharge our batteries fully

and gain adequate mental distance from our often-toxic work environments?

Unfortunately, there is scant research to enlighten us.

A [13-year study](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/679306) (<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/679306>) of four cohorts of investment bankers illustrates the long-term costs of ignoring our bodies' need for respite. The bankers followed by Alexandra Michel, a Wharton business school professor, pushed the limits of their young bodies with impunity in their first three years as associates. Around year four, they started to break down from overwork.

Eating disorders, tics, sleep disturbances, anxiety and depression were commonplace. Most of them responded by pushing harder to maintain performance.

Eighty per cent strongly agreed with the statement: "I am trying harder to control my body but with less success than before." Starting at year six, 40 per cent had breakdowns so severe they were forced to stop working.

Responses to the breakdowns fell into two camps. One group treated their bodies as "antagonists", escalating efforts to exert control. They talked about "letting your body know who is in charge" and submitted to extreme regimes such as lemon-juice only cleanses and boot-camp training.

A second group learnt to treat their bodies as "insightful advisers", heeding even subtle signs such as low energy as cues: "I learnt to differentiate between being tired and drained. When I am drained, my body says that something isn't right and I stop and try to figure it out," said one in this camp.

The longer intermissions their maladies imposed allowed them to step back for long enough to recognise and reject their companies' unwritten rules. "Once your body forces you to stop certain behaviour, you ask why you engaged in them and whether there are alternatives," said one director.

As Prof Michel followed her participants into new and [different careers](#) (http://www.ft.com/topics/themes/Career_Change) at middle age, from the ninth to the 13th year of the study, she also found that avoiding unsustainable work habits takes more than changing jobs or even occupations.

Many of them relapsed after moving into organisations that were supposedly less work intensive. Even among those who had learnt to treat their bodies as insightful advisers, a significant number experienced a second breakdown within the first year at their new jobs.

Not only had they chosen similarly demanding positions but, still weakened from their tenure at the banks, they also failed to take sufficient time in between roles to convalesce and gain psychological distance from their hard-driving selves. Needless to say, they also intensified the pace of work for everyone else, role-modelling behaviours they were then forced to sustain.

A spate of neurological studies show that downtime is not only crucial for replenishing the brain's stores of attention and motivation, but also for [sustaining the cognitive processes](#) (<http://pps.sagepub.com/content/7/4/352.abstract%20Rest%20Is%20Not%20Idleness:%20Implications%20of%20the%20Brain%e2%80%99s%20Default%20Mode%20for%20Human%20Development%20and%20Education>) that make us human. The "time to think" so many of us naively pine for allows us to consolidate memories, integrate what we have learnt, plan for the future, maintain our moral compass and construct a sense of self.

The popularity of [sabbaticals \(http://next.ft.com/content/d316dc38-28d2-11e6-8ba3-cdd781do2d89\)](http://next.ft.com/content/d316dc38-28d2-11e6-8ba3-cdd781do2d89) and adult “gap-years” (<http://next.ft.com/content/3b78f43c-23ec-11e6-9d4d-c11776a5124d>) is but one indication of our desire for respite. Yet, people cram them full of languages to learn and mountains to trek in a manic attempt to increase the yield on our decreasing amount of leisure time, while their organisations claw back time at the front and back end of a hard-negotiated, and often too-short, time period.

Still, for those of us who need it most, withdrawal from the fray is rarely voluntary. More often than not our recalcitrant bodies drag us into repose. Maybe it is time to give the way we work a rest.

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