

How You Can Bring Balance To Your Work Week



By Dr. Josep Mercola | mercola.com

If you are an American working 50 to 60 hours a week, a study¹ out of Australia may give you pause. Researchers at the Australian National University (ANU) suggest 39 hours to be the ideal work week to ensure you maintain life balance and good health. The study asserts working those who have domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities should trim their work schedules back to just 34 hours a week. The upper limit for those spending less time on domestic work was suggested as 47 hours.

According to USA Today,² Americans spend about 47 hours a week, on average, working. Brits clock in at 37.5 hours and French employees a little less, at 35 hours a week. While it's well known Americans work longer hours than many of our counterparts around the world, how often do you stop to

consider the effects those extra hours are likely having on your health and well-being?

Long Work Hours Drain Your Mental and Physical Health

The research³ mentioned above was based on data drawn from about 8,000 adults, ages 24 to 65, as part of the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia survey. Lead researcher Huong Dinh, research fellow at ANU's research school of population health, asserts, "Long work hours erode a person's mental and physical health, because it leaves [them] less time to eat well and look after themselves properly." According to Dinh, reducing the number of work hours seems particularly important for women. She says:

"They spend much more time on care and domestic work. Given the extra demands placed on women, it's impossible for women to work long hours often expected by employers unless they compromise their health. Despite the fact that women, on average, are as skilled as men, women ... have lower paid jobs and less autonomy than men, and they spend much more time on care[giving] and domestic work."

Some of the study highlights published by Dinh and her team are as follows:

- While longer work hours are not necessarily bad and do not have a uniformly negative impact on your mental health, there is a distinct tipping point when the hours worked do begin to affect your mental health
- Due to constraints related to caregiving and domestic chores, if you are a woman, you are perceived to have a lower threshold when it comes to achieving work/health balance
- Australia's current system of work-hour regulations and expectations appears to be negatively affecting women's

health in that country

- To encourage men and women to equally share caregiving responsibilities, work hours would need to be reduced

Working More Than 55 Hours a Week May Negatively Affect Your Heart

Research⁴ conducted by the European Society of Cardiology suggests it might actually be possible to work your heart out. Based on a study of 85,500 men and women over a 10-year period, researchers observed a negative tendency with respect to the relationship between work hours and heart health.

Specifically, individuals who worked more than 55 hours a week were 40 percent more likely than those working a normal workweek (35 to 40 hours) to develop an irregular heartbeat, or atrial fibrillation (AFib). The correlation between longer work hours and increased risk of AFib remained even after scientists adjusted for risk factors such as age, alcohol use, gender, obesity and [smoking](#). Lead researcher Mika Kivimaki, a professor in the department of epidemiology and public health at University College London, said:⁵

“Nine out of 10 of the atrial fibrillation cases occurred in people who were free of pre-existing or concurrent cardiovascular disease. This suggests the increased risk is likely to reflect the effect of long working hours, rather than the effect of any pre-existing or concurrent cardiovascular disease.”

The current study seems to support previous research linking long work hours to an increased risk of [stroke](#). Kivimaki states:⁶ *“These findings ... could be one of the mechanisms that explain the previously observed increased risk of stroke among those working long hours. Atrial fibrillation is known to contribute to the development of stroke, but also other*

adverse health outcomes, such as heart failure and stroke-related dementia.”

Another very important factor to consider with atrial fibrillation, though, is [exposure to EMF](#), just as cell phones, Wi-Fi, portable phones and sleeping in a bedroom that has the electrical power turned on to it. The heart has a high density of voltage gated calcium channels and is highly susceptible to EMF and one of the primary symptoms are cardiac arrhythmias like atrial fibrillation.

Other Reasons You Might Want to Cut Back on Your Work Hours

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics⁷ reveal nearly 15 million Americans work full time on the evening shift, night shift, rotating shifts or other employer-arranged work schedules considered “irregular.” According to 2010 U.S. health interview data, nearly 19 percent of working adults are on the job 48 hours or more per week.

More than 7 percent logged 60 hours or more each week. The risk of [heart disease](#) and stroke are not the only reasons you might want to cut back on your work hours. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest when your work overtime, you put yourself at risk for:⁸

- [Alcohol use](#)
- Higher rates of illness, injury and death
- Smoking
- [Weight gain](#)

Edward Hitchcock, Ph.D., supervisory research psychologist and deputy chief of the organizational science and human factors branch, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, stated:⁹ *“There is currently a lot of scientific evidence*

showing that shift work and long hours of work are associated with significant health and safety risks. Scientists believe these risks occur due to disruptions in sleep and circadian rhythms associated with these demanding schedules and strains on social life.”

Hitchcock also noted the disruptive effects [lack of sleep](#) and inconsistent sleeping hours can have on your body. He said:¹⁰ *“The human body cannot naturally adjust to sleeping during the day or at irregular hours ... consequently, many shift workers do not get the seven to eight hours of good quality, restorative sleep that most of us need.”* A nearly two-year-long experiment in Sweden involving nurses working six-hour days instead of traditional eight-hour days at an elder-care facility revealed several benefits of shortened work days, including:¹¹

- Being less tired and retaining more energy for home-based and free-time activities
- Demonstrating better attitudes and work behavior while on the job
- Getting an average of seven hours of sleep a night versus the less-than-six hours of sleep nurses working a traditional schedule achieved
- Providing higher quality care to their patients
- Taking fewer sick days than nurses working a longer shift

Five Tips to Help You Create a More Balanced Life

If you are in a job situation that is upsetting your work-life balance and detracting from the overall quality of your life, it may be time for a change. I believe you will find it worth your time to talk to your employer about possible options to help you reduce stress, be more productive and achieve greater

job satisfaction. It's important to remember that working longer hours does not necessarily mean you will be able to get more work done.

In fact, I imagine if you are routinely unhappy or stressed while on the job, you will actually be less productive and the quality of your work may suffer. Everyone wins when you feel good about the work you do, there is balance in your schedule and your stress level feels manageable.

Regardless of whether you are able to make changes related to your job, there are several areas you can address in and outside of work that will go a long way in helping you create a more balanced life. I recommend you choose at least one of these areas to begin working on today. (Over time, I believe you will be helped by addressing all five areas.) Some tips to help you create a more balanced life are as follows:

1. Create a support network: Isolation and [loneliness](#) can be a major source of stress, so it is important that you make a point to connect personally with people around you. Particularly if your work environment is filled with difficult, or even toxic, people, you'll need to create a support network outside of your job.

Even a quick chat while you are sitting in a waiting room or standing in line at the grocery store can help you feel connected to the world around you. You might also consider attending community events, meeting friends for coffee, taking a class or volunteering.

While you may think you are connected to others through email, [social media](#) and texting, that type of connection is not the same as personal, face-to-face contact. If you are unsure of the extent to which you use technology as your interface to other human beings, keep track of how much "face time" you have during the next week. The results may surprise you.

2. Learn to say “no:” Sometimes the stress and strain on your life comes from your inability or unwillingness to set boundaries and limits. When asked to take on yet another responsibility at work, for your children or on a volunteer project, you may feel guilty for saying “no.” If you were raised to say “yes” to almost everything that comes along, particularly because this is the only way you think people will like or accept you, it’s time to rethink the powerful word “no.”

Especially if you feel you are continually busy – racing from one activity or commitment to the next, all day long – from the time you get up until you fall into bed at night, you are a prime candidate for change. Start this week to re-establish some balance in your life by saying “no” to any new request or activity you know will only serve to cause additional stress and imbalance.

3. Look inward: Because you cannot separate your physical health from your emotional well-being, it is important you take time on a regular basis to look inward. Every feeling you have affects some part of your body, so it is important to notice and address the feelings that come up in the context of your everyday circumstances and relationships.

When left unchecked, lingering negative feelings and the emotional stress that often accompanies them can wreak havoc on your health. This is true even if you are doing everything else – diet, exercise and sleep, for instance – “right.” Some tools you can use to look inward and explore your emotions include:

Coloring, drawing or painting	<u>Relaxation exercises</u> , such as deep breathing and positive visualization	<u>Yoga</u>
Journaling	<u>Meditation</u>	Prayer

My personal favorite tool to manage emotional stress is

the [Emotional Freedom Techniques \(EFT\)](#), which involves light tapping over the major energy meridians of your body. It is a handy tool you can use as often as you need to unload emotional baggage. EFT is quick and painless, and so easy even children can learn it.

4.Nurture yourself: If you live a hectic, fast-paced life, the idea of nurturing and caring for yourself may be a foreign concept. It is a rare person who knows how to practice self-care on an ongoing basis. Sure, you may take an annual vacation or visit a spa occasionally, but do you have a daily practice of nurturing that contributes to feelings of balance, tranquility and wholeness?

If not, it's never too late to start thinking about ways you can practice healthy self-care. I challenge you to create a list of at least 25 things you can do to nurture yourself.

For example, you might choose to prepare one of your favorite meals, get a massage, go for a bike ride, listen to music, spend time with a friend or take an exercise class. Some of the ways I nurture myself include eating healthy food, doing [peak fitness](#), reading a book, walking on the beach and enjoying an occasional [chocolate fat bomb truffle](#).

I caution you from falling into the all-too-common trap of adopting habits that start out under the guise of self-care but inevitably decline into unhealthy, self-destructive practices. Some of them may include drinking alcohol, eating out frequently, indulging in junk food or sugary treats, spending hours on social media and [watching TV](#). Reliance on these and other unhealthy coping mechanisms will only increase the stress and imbalance in your life.

5.Prioritize activities: Being frequently late or constantly feeling hurried are significant stressors, making it important for you to carefully prioritize your activities. By focusing on the aspects of your day that are truly "must do"

activities, you put your energy and time where they will garner the most positive effects.

Prioritizing also helps you identify possible responsibilities and tasks that can be delegated. Furthermore, prioritizing gives you permission to temporarily set aside any task standing between you and some much-needed self-care, because you don't really need to have a certain task done until next week.

Finally, by making lists of your important activities, you can more easily schedule them into your day and time them conveniently and efficiently. For example, one of the easiest methods to reduce your stress level related to running errands is to group them together by geography. In doing so, you can more effectively run a series of errands on a single day with a prioritized focus.

Final Thoughts About Balancing Your Work Week

Life is short. Time flies. Upon [retirement](#), very few people, if any, say they wished they would have worked longer hours during the many years they spent on the job. In fact, it's often the people you work alongside and the relationships you forged that make the most impact on you. That said, no matter how close or far you are to retirement, your health and well-being simply will not self-manage.

You need to take active steps every day to balance the needs and expectations of your job with your life outside work and the people in it. Even if you cannot imagine working as few as 39 hours a week, as suggested by the ANU researchers, any reduction at all will be an improvement if you currently work more than 40 hours.

Particularly if you are working upward of 50 hours a week, it

will be nearly impossible to optimize your health until you find a way to cut back your work hours and rebalance your life. Start today. You won't regret it.

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