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# BALANCING ACT

In an overstressed working world, mindfulness can help curb destructive thought patterns and behaviours

BY RACHEL MCGREGOR

**B**usy is the new stupid – an expression coined by US Human Resources strategist and consultant Ed Baldwin that's caught on because it's catchy, it's partly true, and it speaks to something many working professionals are experiencing: a feeling of being stuck in a cycle of busyness and stress that is seemingly inescapable.

Being busy doesn't make you stupid, however. You could be busy solving quantum physics equations or composing a sonata, for example. Rather, it's being chronically stressed that makes you 'stupid': we're more likely to take reckless risks, our ability to make decisions is impaired, as is our ability to work collaboratively, and our equilibrium (and our ability to plan) goes out the window. When we're stressed, we're in 'survival' mode, which means all bets are off in terms of rational, reasoned, productivity-supporting business as usual. Unfortunately, stress has become business as usual.

Profmed's 2017 Stress Index, which surveyed 3 000 SA graduate professionals across a range of industries, found that work was the leading source of stress – more than half of the respondents claimed that stress had an emotional and physical impact on them, and 29.15% felt they were not managing their stress.

But you don't need research to tell you that. We're all familiar with the 'busyness' phenomenon, the constantly overloaded schedules, and the 'I don't

have time' refrains that are such a part of our daily lexicon that we barely think to stop and question them. We may even get a boost of worthiness, self-importance and status gratification from having a packed diary, and letting others know about it.

Until, of course, something goes wrong. The busyness begins to spread its tentacles into every aspect of our lives, and pretty soon we find we're tired, demotivated, feeling trapped and unable to find time for the things that really bring us joy, and our relationships and/or our health suffer the consequences.

Hopefully, this is when the search for that elusive work-life balance begins, because it's relatively easy to correct when the symptoms are mild. On the extreme end is full-scale burnout: depression, anger, a sense of worthlessness, feeling isolated, mistrustful, panic attacks, an inability to focus, chronic fatigue, insomnia, chest pains or difficulty breathing.

'Stage four burnout is a little bit more than another bad day at the office,' says executive coach and human performance specialist Caroline Ravenall, who suffered from debilitating burnout herself after helping in the launch of Virgin Atlantic airlines in SA more than a decade ago.

'It's a state of complete physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. Despite the thousand volts of electricity that are coursing through your veins from a nervous system that is in overdrive and adrenal glands that are on the verge of collapse, you feel like a burnt-out, hollow shell, and rest

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and sleep become impossible because the system is so wired that you cannot switch off. Recovery can take years. But sadly, recovery doesn't always happen, because stage four burnout can end in death from cardiovascular collapse or stroke – sometimes, even suicide – because in stage four, you are afflicted with feeling absolutely hopeless and caught in a state of depression or despair, believing that you are a complete and utter failure.'

According to a 2018 study by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, more than 40% of all work-related illness is the result of work-related stress, major depression, burnout and anxiety disorders. So what's the solution? Yoga? Meditation? A holiday? Yes – and no.

If you've been temporarily overloaded at work, then a week on a beach, regular sun salutations, and putting some boundaries in place (such as resisting checking emails at home), will probably do the trick. But if high work-stress levels last longer than six months and are impacting negatively on your health, your ability to function and your relationships, chances are good that the solution goes deeper, because the source of the imbalance is more likely to lie in your psyche than in your situation.

'Hysterical industriousness', a phrase conceived by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, refers to our tendency 'to be habituated to a continual fast pace of life, endeavouring to cope with demands and pressures with no time for casual idleness'.

'Our neural pathways have become habituated to busyness,' says Ravenall. 'We learn this from our childhood family situations and our culture, and it becomes hard to pull back. The nervous system learns all the time, not just the brain. What we say to ourselves, the emotions we live in and our habitual responses to external triggers drive 95% of our day-to-day behaviour. We have to stop thinking of our body as just another way to get our head to a meeting and start seeing ourselves as complete biological systems.'

A multifaceted solution is called for, one that addresses our biology (the habituation – some have called it addiction – of the nervous system to the stress response), our thought processes (which requires self-awareness) and practical prioritisation. Touch therapy (regular massage, for example) or practices such as yoga, t'ai chi and qi gong can all help to encourage the body to move from the sympathetic nervous system (fight, freeze or flight) to the parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation, healing and creativity), and can significantly reduce the effects of stress on your body and help calm the mind. However, if the core imbalance isn't addressed, this is just damage control.

Mindfulness is a key tool to help us become aware of the thought patterns and behaviours that are exacerbating stress – and meditation is the most effective tool to build your mindfulness muscle. Mindfulness helps you become aware that you are not your thoughts – that you can choose

them, instead of identifying with habituated thought patterns.

If you have unproductive worries, says assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School Elizabeth Hoge, you can train yourself to experience those thoughts differently.

'You might think "I'm late. I might lose my job if I don't get there on time, and it will be a disaster!" Mindfulness teaches you to recognise, "Oh, there's that thought again. I've been here before. But it's just that – a thought, and not a part of my core self",' says Hoge. The same applies to the countless assumptions we may make about 'falling behind' if we aren't constantly busy, being negatively compared to others, and attaching value to the mood of busyness.

Busyness doesn't necessarily equal productivity – nor does stress. Yet we conflate busyness and stress with productivity, with value. Stress and busyness without purpose and passion drain our energy and lead to burnout. Instead, we should be looking at what makes us feel truly energised: what are we passionate about; what makes us truly productive?

'Being busy can sometimes be an excuse for not doing what needs doing,' says executive business coach Jason Bernic of Successcoaching.co.za. 'Being productive is about taking action to achieve results. People often find easy things to do that keep them busy, because it makes them feel productive, but the outcome is zero.' He doesn't mince his words. 'If you're brave enough to be honest, ask yourself, throughout the day: "Am I doing what needs to be done, or just inventing things to avoid what needs to be done?"'

'We live in a fast-paced, connected world and we're inundated with noise, most of which is irrelevant to our priorities. Take a step back, consider what is important to you and ignore everything else. List your priorities and place them in order of importance. Then delete the bottom 80%, because no one gets to them anyway. Channel all your energy into the top 20%: these are the most important and you don't want to dilute the attention that you give them.'

There are no quick fixes for creating harmony when our lives feel out of balance – like life, the solution is multifaceted. In this light, is it even helpful to think in terms of a work-life balance? 'Work-life balance is a thing of the past,' says Ravenall. 'If we do something we love and don't need a break from that – do we really need a balance? Balance is about our attitude or the "mood" in which we approach our work.' ■