

HEALTH CARE & WELLNESS



Rebalancing well-being and work

Area wellness professionals share tips for managing the stresses of modern work

BY LAURA BENGIS, for BizTimes

A SWIFT MOVE to the virtual world enabled many businesses to stay afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic, but virtual work may be eating away at the wellness of today's workforce.

Dr. Himanshu Agrawal, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin, says one of the worst side effects of virtual work is "a complete obliteration of any boundaries."

"There is this illusion that (virtual work) has led to more autonomy, but it's actually the opposite," Agrawal says. "There are no work hours anymore. The status quo has become: You need to work even harder to maintain balance."

Pushing to this degree often comes at the cost of neglecting one's own needs, according to Susan Lubar, president and founder of Milwaukee-based Growing Minds, an organization that trains schools, organizations and businesses in mindfulness practices.

"Many of us feel like we need to push through as hard as we can to achieve," Lubar says. "When we push through and override our own needs and the needs of certain relationships, we begin to feel depleted, empty and really overall disconnected."

These negative feelings could also be products of the body's response to continued stress, says

Dr. Tiffany Mullen, chief executive officer and founder of Milwaukee-based Vytal Health – a telehealth-based platform for functional and integrative medicine.

When faced with stress, Mullen says our bodies produce two hormones: adrenaline and cortisol. The production of adrenaline protects against physical danger by creating the "butterflies in the stomach" feeling that motivates fight-or-flight responses. The production of cortisol is intended to offer anti-inflammatory support in the event of an injury.

However, the body can't distinguish between the stress it's designed to respond to, things like physical danger, and modern-day work stressors like full email inboxes and challenging interactions. The body, therefore, ends up producing levels of cortisol well beyond its need, resulting in difficulties with sleep, a lowered immune system, unexpected weight gain and feelings of anxiety, depression or hopelessness.

Fortunately, Lubar says the brain has what is called neuroplasticity – the ability to reform itself moment by moment.

"Every experience rewires your brain in that direction," said Lubar. She says mindfulness can be a helpful tool to start steering our brains in the right direction.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS WITH MOMENTS OF PAUSE

Practicing mindfulness involves taking brief moments throughout the day to check in on thoughts, moods and feelings, both physical and emotional, Lubar says. After using a moment of self-awareness to become grounded, Lubar says mindfulness entails setting new intentions for how you'd like to show up in any moment or situation. Mindfulness can be used in the moment when responding to stress or proactively at planned intervals throughout the day.

Lubar says mindfulness can also reframe the quest for better work-life balance. Rather than focusing on a division between these parts of life, mindfulness can help establish an overall sense of balance – at work, at home or wherever you are. This sense of balance can be especially beneficial when working with others, especially for those in leadership roles, Lubar says.

"If you can stay grounded in your executive functions – your highest level of thinking – you can hold the space for other people until they have a chance to ground themselves again," Lubar said. One way she facilitates mindfulness among her own team is by starting meetings with two minutes of silence, allowing time for attendees to pause and set deliberate intentions

for the meeting.

Agrawal says in his experience, being open about his own mindfulness practice sometimes inspires others to exercise more self-care. He says if taking time to practice mindfulness puts him a few minutes behind schedule, he finds his students and colleagues respond with messages like, "Good for you," and, "I should really do that more."

Engaging in mindfulness is a good starting point for finding balance, Agrawal says. The next step – making changes to reach your ideal state – can be more challenging, and it looks different for everyone.

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT WHERE YOU'RE PUTTING YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION

One way to manage the impact of stress is by being intentional about where you're putting your focus, says Lubar. A consistent focus on negative thoughts and problems produces negative feelings, yet an intentional focus on gratefulness or positive attributes produces more positive feelings.

Agrawal also recommends being intentional with your time. He's found success with "leasing" his time – a technique introduced by Sigmund Freud. This practice involves scheduling the day with dedicated periods of time in which you are available to others and those that are off limits, fiercely protected for time with family or individual pursuits. Agrawal says his wife was an incredible mentor and supporter for him as he applied this framework to his own life.

TALK ABOUT YOUR STRUGGLES

Discussing stressors with a spouse, a friend, a loved one or a professional can be incredibly helpful in coping with stress and realizing we're not alone, Mullen says.

"We don't talk to each other about this stuff," Mullen says. "We're not vulnerable with each other. Really leaning on friends and family who you trust and feel safe with to explain your situation goes a long way. Let's not be isolated anymore."

If symptoms of stress reach a point that they're greatly impacting

interactions with people you love, involvement with something that's important to you or carrying out daily functions, Agrawal says mental health support can be a valuable resource to guide rebalancing efforts. He says it's important for people to accept that they don't need to overextend themselves to be a successful worker, parent or student. Because it can be difficult to recognize symptoms of stress and burnout while wading through the thick of it, Agrawal recommends scheduling monthly wellness self-checks – much like routine scheduled medical care – to check in on the emotional and spiritual self. He says this can be done informally, or using a variety of available online resources.

PRIORITIZE SIMPLE PERSONAL HEALTH PRACTICES

Taking time throughout the day to check in with basic physical needs – like eating healthy foods, drinking water or finding opportunities to be active – can also positively impact wellness, Mullen says.

She says paying attention to your sleep schedule is one of the best ways to improve overall wellness. It can bring "great perspective, more resiliency and more energy," she said.

Strategically creating a workspace that tends to the stressors of work is another important step, according to Tonya Dybdahl, space planning and design manager at National Business Furniture.

She says a current trend among businesses is designing a mix of different spaces for different types of work. For remote workers, designing home workspaces with lighter-colored paints, artwork, plants, ergonomic furniture and natural lighting can help accommodate both the emotional and physical demands of work.

Mullen says it's important not to feel pressured to change everything at once. Adding wellness practices may feel like adding more to the plate, but even just changing one thing at a time can positively impact our overall sense of well-being. Agrawal adds that simply including wellness in your routine can sometimes make all the difference. ■



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