

Are you too hard on yourself?



Experts say it's possible—and necessary!—to slow down without feeling guilty, lazy or inadequate. Here's how

You can multitask while multitasking without batting an eye. Tomorrow's problems? You solved them yesterday. Hustling is your base pace. But when you close your eyes at night still thinking, *Go, go, go!* you wish your work ethic could be a little less punishing and twitch-inducing.

"Women have deeply held beliefs about what success should look like: *I have to be perfect. I can handle it all on my own. It's right to put others first. I can't be perceived as weak,*" observes Paula Davis-Laack, author of the e-book *Addicted to Busy: Your Blueprint for Burnout Prevention*. "These beliefs can be very rigid and don't allow for a lot of flexibility to feel, say or do something different." Sure, that voice in our head is rigid... but isn't it *also* our secret sauce, prodding us toward excellence and away from the couch?

Quite the opposite: "If the mechanism you're using to motivate yourself—the engine that drives you—is excessive perfectionism, self-criticism and impossibly high standards, that becomes counterproductive," warns Leah Weiss, Ph.D., a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and author of *How We Work: Live Your Purpose, Reclaim Your Sanity, and Embrace the Daily Grind*. "You start beating up on yourself, your anxiety increases, procrastination goes up and you're exhausted and less able to focus."

Happily, firing your inner taskmaster doesn't have to be yet another item on your to-do list. Just find the feeling you identify with most and discover expert strategies for getting into a kinder groove.

TENSE?

You don't need an alarm clock because anxiety reliably jolts you at the crack of dawn. "The anxiety could be in response to excessive self-criticism," says Weiss. That includes the kind of stern self-talk you'd never direct at a friend or colleague: "If you have a huge list of things to do and think the best way to get through it is saying things like, *Get your stuff done, you idiot!* you actually experience those thoughts as a threat, as if someone else were yelling at you."

Undermine anxiety's authority

Show stress who's boss by deliberately downshifting: "Swing your legs over the bed, but instead of launching into your day, close your eyes and pause," says Sarah Brassard, author of *Inside: A Guide to the Resources Within to Stay Connected to Your Truth, Even in Trying Times*. "Lengthen your spine, keep your hands on your knees, take deep breaths, then open your eyes and carry on." Why it works: "These ingrained habits are like, *Keep moving*, and when you say, *Nope*, it builds new neuro pathways and reprograms your brain to break out of the busyness."

SAD?

You got promoted and got a raise, a pat on the back from the boss and sweet cards from coworkers, but you couldn't be more miserable. What gives? "You've looked so long and hard for the outer circumstances of your life to fill you up," explains Brassard. "However, when you depend on ever-changing things like other people's validation to heal you, there's disappointment and sadness when it doesn't work."

Travel forward in time

To figure out what *will* fill you up, visualize yourself 10 years from now, says Weiss: "What do you want your life to look like? Then reverse-engineer that mental model and use it to make decisions about organizing your life today." Maybe you picture yourself making time for stuff that's long been on the back burner, like volunteer work, so you block off an afternoon to explore that outlet. Says Weiss, "This exercise gives you a direction to move toward what resonates so you can achieve *your* version of having it all."

IRRITABLE?

You're snapping at your husband, getting angry at other drivers during your commute and losing it when you find mistakes in your team's work. "Things are triggered in us because there's something that's waiting to be healed in us," explains Brassard. However, in the heat of the moment, it can seem impossible to see anything but red, let alone have insights about a deeper wound: "When we're in these states, we're contracted and our world becomes very small and limited."

Make a deposit in your spiritual savings account

"When you're feeling weakened or threatened or overcome, imagine putting your back against the trunk of a magnificent ancient tree, visualizing roots growing out of you and around the tree," suggests Brassard. She encourages tapping into a sense of security from being near this quiet giant. "You're planted and strong, associating yourself with this old tree, like, 'Will you share your roots?'" Moments of self-care like this add a deposit to what Brassard calls your "spiritual savings account," providing resources to draw on the next time you're upset.

CAN'T FOCUS?

Between a wandering mind, a constantly ping-pong cell phone and a general lack of interest in your current task list, you've been reading the same paragraph over and over for the past hour. "Exhaustion from work overload or a combo of work and life stuff drives cynicism, which then leads to a sense of chronic ineffectiveness," explains Davis-Laack. "This can manifest as an inability to concentrate on even simple tasks, whipping up frustration and anxiety."

Choose a new narrative

A mental reframe can cut through a lot of this cascading distress, says Davis-Laack: "Ask yourself, 'How can I think about this situation in a different, more productive way?'" For example, perhaps you've been beating yourself up for feeling unfocused and panicking that the emails in your inbox have quadrupled since you got to work this morning. "You could think to yourself, *This is an indicator that I'm really busy and therefore people are really valuing my work,*" she suggests. Whereas self-flagellation further distracts you and saps energy, putting a positive spin on your reality boosts confidence, making you feel more in control and on the ball.

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