



Resisting the Pressure to Overwork

By Alice Boyes

Few of us want to overwork. Even when our jobs feel meaningful, we'd prefer to work to live, not live to work. We benefit from also devoting time to other interests and hobbies, family and friends, leisure, and learning not related to our professions. Those are meaningful to us too.

Still, it's easy get sucked (or suckered) into working too hard. To avoid this, you'll need well-articulated strategies. Try these.

Understand that overwork is not necessary for success.

If you buy into that thinking, even just a tiny bit, you won't be able to resist triggers, like others telling you about their overworking. This social pressure will activate your anxiety, with all the attendant emotional and physical reactions.

Here's an example. Another author recently told me how many podcasts interviews they'd done to support their book launch. It was far more than me, and this sent me into a spiral of worry. Even hours later, my heart rate remained elevated and my mind kept drifting back to it.

To avoid the temptation to keep up with vocal overworkers like that author you need to radically reject the idea that such behavior is required or even beneficial. In my

case, I literally had to say to myself, “That person believes overworking is necessary for success. I don’t believe that.”

If a situation continues to trigger you, consider using even more compassionate self-talk. For example, “I feel anxious that if I don’t buy into their assumptions, I’m going to fail. My success is important to me, so that’s scary. But I’m going to remind myself about how I can do my best work through methods that don’t involve overworking.”

Be clear on your values.

As that author talked about their many podcast appearances, the tone wasn’t “I’ve connected with so many amazing interviewers, and it’s been so interesting and enriching.” It was more like “I’m grinding it out. Isn’t it a pain to have to do that?”

I never want to feel that way going into interviews. I want to approach with curiosity, learn something from the interviewers, and be prompted to think about ideas differently or express my own thoughts in ways I haven’t before.

Beyond that, I also value efficiency. Yes, I could try to be a guest on 100 podcasts. But it seems far smarter to identify the 20 most likely to drive book sales and then another five to 10 that seem interesting, to introduce some randomness and serendipity into the process.

It’s important to specifically identify your values. Sure, most of us can agree that things like equality, justice, efficiency, generosity, bravery, autonomy, challenge, cooperation, adventure are good. However, we differ in our priorities — our most important values — and what makes us feel most like our lives and careers are meaningful and on track. For instance, if you highly value bravery, consider how you can approach your core tasks with more of it. Think not just about what you’d rather be doing than working but also your attitude and approach to finding fulfillment in work.

Also trust that this values-driven approach will lead to some of the outcomes that are important to you. With experience and experimentation, you'll learn to do "enough" in your work/career, instead of measuring achievement by the hours you're putting in.

Reject hustle culture. Instead focus on deeper goals and your craft.

Einstein wasn't trying to "crush it" or "kill it" at work. In fact, the behaviors and language associated with hustle culture don't typically lead to great accomplishments. What does is the pursuit of deeper, more personal goals like knowing and understanding important phenomena, solving complex problems, or making a positive impact in society. You might think about goals in more concrete terms, of course (for example, sales targets) but also consider the greater ambition that matters most to you and try to focus on the tasks and assignments that help you achieve it, jettisoning much of the rest.

Another way to step away from hustle culture — whether you're a teacher, accountant, or manager — is to reframe your job as a craft that you're trying to hone. This should make you more interested in facets of work like acquiring skills, getting feedback, and interacting with a wide range of people who can help you improve. All of these will propel you to, not more, but more important work that allows you to make good on your big goals.

Learn from role models.

Consider the people who have achieved the kind of success you want without overworking or constantly noting how "swamped" and "exhausted" they are like it's a badge of honor. (Note: this type of complaining has become normalized, but it not normal. If someone is truly exhausted by their work, that's a problem that needs to be addressed.)

To be clear, I'm not talking about identifying role models who are celebrities or CEOs you admire but don't know. A more effective strategy when trying to find role models is to simply look inside and outside your professional niche. Who inspires you by doing well without overwork, hustle, or burning themselves out? What are their approaches? Can you adapt any of them to fit your values, goals, personality, and circumstances?

Ignore requests to overwork.

Here's a very basic law of psychology: When behaviors are reinforced, they increase. When you ignore them, you might see an "extinction burst" — a short-term rise in the problematic behaviors — but then they will stop.

For example, if a colleague emails you after-hours and you reply, you're encouraging more work at night. The sender will ask for more — from you and everyone else. If you instead ignore inappropriate attempts to push you to overwork, the person may for a short period of time try frenetically and in more manipulative ways to get you to comply — the extinction burst — but then they'll adapt. People are wired to learn.

If your boss is the one pressing you to overwork, that's one of the most basic signs of an abusive work culture. Make your boundaries clear, and, if the behaviors don't stop, consider roles on different teams or in different organizations with managers who have more realistic expectations. As Adam Grant says, "It's not your job to fix a toxic workplace from the bottom."

We all face internal and external pressure to do more. But, in the pursuit of career success and fulfillment, overwork is your enemy, not your friend. These strategies can help you push back against it.

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