Why a fake commute could pave the way to work-from-home balance

Of all the things work-from-home employees might miss about pre-pandemic life, commuting wouldn't seem to register high on the attention meter. But nearly a year after being sent home from the office, some employees, such as Giza, have realized that losing that time in the car — or on the bus, train or street — has had some drawbacks.

Jon Jachimowicz, an assistant professor of business administration in the organizational behavior unit at Harvard Business School, says commuting provides "a temporal and spatial separation between all the different roles we play." It's a buffer that eases the transition from one identity to the next, a consistent dose of in-between time to reflect and reset.

Before the pandemic, the average commute was 38 minutes each way, Jachimowicz's research indicates. Not only have employees lost that buffer, but they have also taken on more work: about 48 extra minutes per day. They are also dealing with more meetings and more communication that spills into off hours, according to findings published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in July.

When we don't psychologically detach from work, we risk becoming exhausted and burned out, says Samantha Pieknik, a licensed clinical psychologist in Phoenix. "We've lost that time to sit with ourselves and shake everything off from the day," she says. "We're working at home and we're sleeping at work, and it's really confusing for our brains."

A fake commute, however, can help you reclaim that precious transition time and reestablish the boundaries that have been blurred from working from home, something that Giza has learned. He now "commutes" about 100 miles per week. Before adopting the practice, "I didn't have the usual time to clear my head," he says, which made it difficult to be focused while he was in work mode or fully present when he was in home mode.

Of course, a fake commute doesn't have to involve biking. You can walk, meditate, stretch or listen to an audiobook, though Jachimowicz notes the practice is a "luxury" and might not be possible for everyone, such as the parents of young children.

Pieknik, who now offers telehealth services from her home rather than commuting 10 minutes to her private practice, has added a fake commute to her mornings: She drives out to get

coffee. She recommends the habit to others. “It doesn’t have to be super elaborate,” she says. “It’s just a matter of tricking your brain into starting a new routine.”

Here are tips on how to incorporate a fake commute into your work-from-home day:

Find the ritual that’s right for you. There are many ways to reap the benefits of a fake commute. Like so much else, the important thing is choosing the method you’ll stick to.

Robin Gibson, a social work administrator in Oklahoma City, started working from home on March 16 and soon realized that it wasn’t a short-term situation. So she resumed her old commuting routine: listening to news podcasts, such as NPR’s “Up First” and the New York Times’s “The Daily.” “It’s about an hour and a half of listening that I start when I get in the shower,” she says. In the evening, she decompresses by tidying up, listening to more podcasts and writing down her plans for the next day. “I missed that time of getting myself right with the world,” she says. “I sort of have my own little commute in my head in order to take care of myself.”

Be strategic about timing — and strive for consistency. It’s best to engage in your chosen ritual when you’re easing into and out of the workday, Jachimowicz says. He suggests workers establish fake commutes that last at least five to 10 minutes each way and are repeated as many days of the workweek as possible.

Block out uninterrupted time on your calendar to help make it a priority. Some companies are embracing this idea: Microsoft, for example, recently announced that it was launching a “virtual commute” feature that allows employees using its Teams software to schedule commute time at the beginning and end of the day. In a news release, the company said it hopes to help boost workers’ well-being by encouraging them to take breaks to reflect and recharge.

Leave home if you can. Debbie Plotnick, vice president for mental health and systems advocacy at Mental Health America, believes that those who get the most out of fake commuting are the ones who physically leave their home-turned-office. But that doesn’t mean you have to go far: Doing yoga in the backyard or jogging around the block would suffice. Plotnick, who’s based in Colorado, likes to spend time in the nature surrounding her home. “I live in the mountains, and it’s spectacular,” she says. “I go outside and just revel in how fabulous it is.” Your time commuting doesn’t have to be solitary, she adds: Use part of it to call a friend or family member, which helps foster vital social connections.

Consider including your family. Kids who are learning virtually are missing out on their own commute time, Plotnick says. That means they’ve lost opportunities to socialize while walking, riding the school bus or having one-on-one conversations with the parent dropping them off.

"It's really hard for the young folks who are feeling so isolated now," she says, and a fake commute can help. "So maybe there's a restful time families spend together. Maybe it's a little bit of a family meditation or a family gentle yoga practice."

Practice role-clarifying prospection. Commuting is an opportunity to think about and plan for the role we're transitioning into, such as shifting from supervisor to parent, Jachimowicz says. Let work go at the end of the day by spending part of your fake commute reflecting on your upcoming role: what you want to make for dinner, which chores need to be done, what you'll watch on TV. Similarly, on a Sunday night, coax yourself out of weekend mode by making a list of what you'd like to accomplish in the week ahead.

Get serious about disconnecting. Fake commutes can help us transition between our roles — but the onus is on us to actually stay in them, rather than letting our minds drift back to other parts of the day. "It's not just, 'Great, all I need to do is go for a walk after work,' " Jachimowicz says. "How many of us, after we transition, continue checking emails or texting? We're like, 'Oh, this isn't working.' Of course it's working! We're continuously activating our work roles." He suggests turning off your phone or silencing notifications in the name of better physical, mental and emotional health.

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