

RECLAIM YOUR WEEKEND

IF YOUR TIME OFF IS DICTATED BY YOUR "TO-DO" LIST, YOU'RE MISSING OUT ON TIME TO SIMPLY WANDER AND WONDER. WE ALL NEED MORE MINI-BREAKS IN OUR LIVES, SAYS **SALLY BROWN**

EVER GET TO SUNDAY EVENING AND WONDER

where the weekend went, or arrive at work on a Monday morning and feel like you haven't had a break at all? What you probably had was a "workend". Over one in eleven of us now spends ten hours at weekends catching up on household chores, and, worse still, three out of four say the weekend has become an extension to the working week rather than a time for relaxation.

Katrina Onstad, author of *The Weekend Effect: The Life-Changing Benefit of Taking Two Days Off*, believes we have lost the art of "weekending". The reason? We have got sucked into the trap of associating being busy with being successful.

"This is a complete inversion of how we used to think, when leisure was the province of the upper classes and the lower classes fought for theirs," she says.

"Now there's this cult of busyness – we're even engaged in competitive busyness. It makes us look needed and powerful."

While there have always been professions involving weekend work, more of us are working seven days a week by choice, says Ivan Robertson, Emeritus Professor of Work and Organisational Psychology at The University of Manchester. "Certain kinds of manual work are paid extra at weekends, and in some professions, such as retail or service industries, working on Saturday and Sunday is unavoidable. It also goes with the territory for many who are self-employed, or on short-term contracts," he says. "But thanks to modern means of communication, more and more people have allowed work to creep into their weekends. The lost weekend has become a phenomenon." A survey by insurance company MetLife found that 7.3



million say their weekends have become "workends" as they try to clear what didn't get done in the week.

We have got sucked into the trap of believing that "catching up with work" at the weekend makes us more productive, says Dr Gail Kinman, professor of occupational psychology at the University of Bedfordshire. "All the research shows that you work more effectively when you reduce your hours, not extend them," she says. "And if you only allow yourself to relax when everything is done, you will perpetually feel under stress. Research shows that just thinking about checking your emails can raise blood pressure and make your

heart rate go up, and ruminating about work problems can trigger the release of stress hormones. But for some it has become a badge of honour and there is often a martyrish element

to working weekends."

Welcome to the "cult of overwork", says Onstad. "In this particular cult, workers have accepted 50, 60 and 80-hour weeks without weekends as status quo, or worse, as a credential of success," she says. "But in fact, working less makes you more productive. Overworked and under-rested people are bad employees. They burn out. You don't want them operating on your kid, and you probably don't want to hang out with them because they are boring. And most urgently, members of the cult of overwork are missing out on their lives."

Inevitably, we believe we are the exception to the rule. We are convinced we thrive on being busy, or at least "don't mind" working weekends because we love what we do. Yet even then we are increasing our risk of





burning out, says Kinman. "Building in adequate time to physically and psychologically replenish our resources is not a luxury, it protects your future health," she says. "Your wellbeing is like a bank account – you can't keep taking out without putting something in. Waiting until you feel burnt out or exhausted to take a break is too late – the damage is done."

And if we let stress accumulate, spending two weeks on a sunlounger once a year is not enough to offset the damage. "Taking time to relax every weekend – even if it's only one day of the weekend – is more important for your health and wellbeing than taking a holiday," says Robertson. "One of the key findings that comes out of research is the link between people's work patterns and pressure, and the psychological and physical health problems that arise, is the evidence that people need a period of respite from work. The evidence shows the longer we go without a period of respite, the more we put ourselves at risk of psychological and physical problems."

THE ART OF DOING NOTHING

It's hard to believe that less than 30 years ago, shops weren't open on Sundays, most sporting events were confined to Saturday afternoons, and TV consisted of a couple of channels showing repeats. "There was nothing to do and it was boring, but it meant we were forced to find ways to entertain ourselves," says Robertson. Now we're more likely to spend the day grappling with flat-packed furniture than leisurely reading the papers – Sunday is the second-biggest shopping day after Saturday – 53 per cent of us regularly shop on a Sunday, and 46 per cent say Sunday shopping has increased their weekend stress levels.

When we're not shopping, we're squeezing in workouts, doing DIY, decluttering the house, entertaining friends, or driving our children to extra-curricular activities. "On Saturday afternoon, I'm already anticipating the Sunday 8am hockey game, the laundry, and the looming loose ends at work," says Onstad. "On Friday, I'll announce, 'I need a couple of hours tomorrow.' Gauntlet thrown. 'Me too,' says my husband, and we play a marital game of rock-paper-scissors until we figure out who gets to slink off to work while the other meets the kids' myriad needs."

It's amazing how many of us work all week, then do household tasks and more work at the weekend, and are genuinely puzzled by why we feel so low all the time. By contrast, making more time for things you enjoy has been found to be as effective at treating the symptoms of depression as talking therapy, according to a recent

study from the University of Exeter. Identifying things they enjoyed, then simply doing more of them, whether that was salsa dancing, pottering in the garden, karaoke, or simply cuddling the dog, reduced symptoms of depression by 50 per cent in two-thirds of people.

As well as undermining our mood, over-scheduled weekends play havoc with our relationships. "Our most important relationships are in the front line in the war on busyness," says psychologist Tony Crabbe, author of *Busy – How to Thrive in a World of Too Much*. "We cannot thrive without great relationships, and relationships cannot thrive without time and attention. We pillage and plunder those relationships for the time and energy to devote to emails, Facebook, and that report that has to be done for Monday.

"We steal attention from relationships because we can. We feel confident that [loved ones] understand that we have to answer that call. Unbridled busyness destroys our relationship from the inside out – slowly, imperceptibly, but surely. We impoverish [them] and, consequently, they nourish and fulfil us less, which means we thrive less (and so do [they]). As our relationships nourish us less, we feel

more isolated and alone." In the MetLife survey, 30 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women said weekend work caused tension in their relationship.

“Over-scheduled weekends play havoc with our relationships”

MINI-BREAK MINDSET

Reclaiming your weekend isn't about collapsing on the sofa for a Netflix binge. To be properly rejuvenating, a weekend activity should be challenging enough to distract us from thinking about work, but not become a new source of stress. For many, the perfect solution is taking a mini-break. "Immersing yourself in a different culture, and the practicalities of finding your way around another city, can be an effective distraction, stopping you ruminating over work problems," says Kinman. "It can also remind you there is life away from work and give you a new sense of perspective. Even the busiest people will benefit from taking at least two mini-breaks a year in addition to their long holiday."

And a city break can "slow down" time far more than a more passive holiday like lying on a beach, according to psychologist Steve Taylor from Leeds Beckett University, author of *Making Time*. "Time perception is related to information processing, so the more information our minds and our senses take in, the slower time seems to go. Unfamiliarity – new experiences, new environments, any kind of newness – slows down our perception. If you make a conscious effort to actually attend to your experiences – in other words being aware of your surroundings and



the feeling of being where you are – then that also has the effect of making time slow down.”

Studies have found that feeling “time affluent” is a bigger predictor of happiness than feeling materially affluent, and one of the most effective ways to increase time affluence, says Taylor, is to expose yourself to as much newness in your life as possible. “Newness and unfamiliarity stretch time. If we regularly expose ourselves to unfamiliarity, we can experience more time in our lives, and so effectively live for ‘longer,’” he says.

Experience this unfamiliarity with a friend or your partner, and you get a double-whammy effect – not only does sharing an enjoyable activity with another person enhance the experience, it also helps you connect. “In a long-term relationship, your conversation can become dominated by tasks - what needs doing, who is going to do it,” says psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd, co-author of *This Book Will Make You Happy*. “Planning a weekend away together can get you out of a rut.”

To maximise the restorative benefits of a mini-break, set some digital boundaries before you go, says Kinman. “Obviously, you will need your phone for maps and information. Perhaps you could agree a specific hour of the day with your partner when you both catch up with emails and social media, but the rest of the day, you give each other your full attention.”

Freeing up your weekends can be life-changing says Onstad. “A weekend is a break that reminds you that you are more than a worker. That was the original promise of The weekend is a sanctuary, a laboratory in which to lead the life you want. Now is your time. How will you use it?”

MANIFESTO FOR A GOOD WEEKEND

“There are key components to a good weekend,” says Onstad. “Nailing just a couple will shift how you feel, inside and out.”

CONNECT

Do this in person: an old friend. A new one. A neighbour. A neglected relative. Extend yourself.

CARE

Volunteer. Become an activist for a cause you believe in.

PLAY

For every passive activity, do two active ones.

GO GREEN

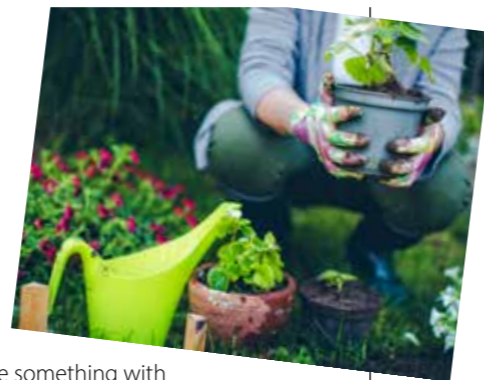
Define nature any way you choose. Get close to it.

SEEK BEAUTY

Expose yourself to art that takes your breath away. Make something with your hands.

DO LESS

Less shopping. Less cleaning. Less decluttering.



ISTOCK