



The well workplace

A hostile boss. Mind-numbing projects. Hours... and hours...of sitting. Can you really make your job healthier without sacrificing success—or quitting? Yes, you can. Here's how.

Written by Holly Pevzner
Illustrations by Monica Ramos

THE GUIDE
health

You

DO GOOD WORK. So why does your job sometimes feel so unsatisfying, if not downright exhausting? It's an all-too-common problem: Less than one-third of Americans say that they are engaged in their careers, according to a 2015 Gallop report. That lack of enthusiasm comes at a cost. "When you're not interested, connected, and creative during your workday, you arouse your body's fight-or-flight response," says John Mirowsky, Ph.D., a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. "But at

work there's nowhere to run, and fighting is discouraged. You're frustrated, tense, and stuck." Over time, says Mirowsky, the physical and mental consequences of the fight-or-flight response (think high blood pressure and a steady stream of stress hormones) can lead to health problems.

You may not want to switch jobs—and even if you do, it might not be realistic to do so right now. So is there anything you *can* do? Yes. New research shows that small adjustments to your behavior, your workspace, and your relationships can make the daily grind happier and healthier—and help you thrive in your career, while you're at it.

Your behavior

Rather than rewriting your job description, tweak the way you tackle your to-do list and the time you spend between tasks.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION. Workers who found ways to be innovative on the job were healthier and scored the equivalent of seven years younger than noncreative employees on physical-functioning questionnaires. And that was true even for those with noncreative careers, according to a 2007 University of Texas, Austin, study. "Creativity comes from finding different things to do and different ways to do them," says Mirowsky, one of the study's coauthors. Creative thinking challenges your brain's prefrontal cortex, which is where planning and problem solving begin. "It's believed that a well-exercised prefrontal cortex gives you a greater ability to control behavior related to long-range goals, including health goals," he explains.

PUNCH OUT ON A POSITIVE NOTE. When women wrote down three positive events, job-related or otherwise, at the end of each workday for several weeks, they

felt less stressed and had fewer headaches and less back pain and muscle tension, according to a 2013 study published in *Academy of Management Journal*.

The key is to write not only what happened to you but also why. (Example: My boss complimented my report *because she appreciates the effort I put in*.) "The why helps you see that there's a lot of good in your life, which reduces stress," says Joyce Bono, Ph.D., the lead author of the study and a professor of management at the University of Florida's Warrington College of Business, in Gainesville. Positivity also keeps work worries where they belong: at the office. "Women who did this exercise experienced greater detachment and less stress from work when they were home," says Bono.

DRINK UP. Even mild dehydration—which you could experience from not drinking water or other beverages for a few hours, especially if you're active or working in a warm space—reduces energy, hinders mood, and thwarts concentration, according to a 2011 study published in *The Journal of Nutrition*. If you prefer coffee or tea to plain water, sip what you like: Research shows that caffeinated drinks can be just as hydrating as the unleaded kind.

MAKE FRUITS AND VEGETABLES YOUR GO-TO SNACKS. Your waistline is hardly the only reason to bypass the vending machine and opt for fresh produce. In a 2014 study published in *British Journal of Health Psychology*, researchers examined the diets of more than 400 adults and found that people reported greater feelings of well-being on days when they ate at least five servings of fruits and vegeta-



bles. Researchers suspect that the complex carbohydrates in produce increase the feel-good hormone serotonin in the brain. And vitamin C, which is abundant in citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes, and other colorful produce, may help increase dopamine, a motivating, happiness-boosting hormone.

TAKE FREQUENT BATHROOM

BREAKS. The mundane act of walking to the restroom and back can undo the myriad ill effects of sitting for long stretches of time, suggests a 2015 study published in *Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology*. Researchers found that sedentary employees who added as little as two extra minutes to their normal walking habits could reduce their risk of death by a third. They speculate that even short bursts of energy reduce the body's tendency to store fat and also trigger chemical changes that can decrease inflammation, insulin resistance, and other health issues.

You might boost your brainpower, too. People who walked had 60 percent more creative ideas compared with those who stayed seated, according to a 2014 Stanford University study.

Your workspace

You may spend nearly half your waking hours in the office. These simple steps can make all that time better for your brain and body.

DON'T CLEAR YOUR CLUTTER.

Neatness, it turns out, does nothing for the creative juices, but a little disarray breeds innovation. In a 2013 *Psychological Science* study, researchers found that people who worked in messy offices generated ideas that were rated significantly more creative than the ideas conceived in neat offices. "Being



surrounded by order stimulates our instinct to follow cultural norms and rules, which is the opposite of creativity. In messier environments, our instinct is to deviate from norms. That rouses creativity," says Kathleen Vohs, Ph.D., the lead researcher and a behavioral scientist at the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis.

DECORATE WITH FERNS AND FICUS. Remarkably, people working among plants reported higher levels of concentration and productivity. They also completed tasks 15 percent more quickly—without making more errors—compared with those in a plant-free space, according to a 2014 study published in *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. "Plants enrich a workplace, which can lead to happier feelings and more productivity," says Craig Knight, Ph.D., an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter, in England.

If allergies or office policies are an issue, Google "garden" or "forest." Gazing at an image of a green area for just 40 seconds during the workday can improve focus and performance, according to a 2015 study in *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. A green micro-break refreshes the centers of the brain that control the ability to concentrate and ignore distractions, say the study authors.

MAKE IT PERSONAL. Putting out family portraits, inspirational quotations, and tchotchkes can help keep workplace distractions at bay, according to a 2013 study published in *Journal of Environmental*

Psychology. "When you work close to others, you spend a lot of energy coping with interruptions and the stress of feeling like you're on display," says Gregory A. Laurence, Ph.D., the study author and an associate professor of management at the University of Michigan, Flint. "Placing personal items in your space helps you maintain a sense of control. And it provides a reminder of positive experiences and goals, which buffers the negative effects of a lack of privacy."

EMBRACE CURVES. People reported feeling calmer and happier in rounded rooms than they did in spaces dominated by sharp edges, according to a 2012 study published in *Environment and Behavior*. You may be stuck with 90-degree angles, but you can bring warm vibes to your workspace with curved accessories, like a round mirror, table lamp, or rug, or by hanging a piece of art with rounded patterns, says Sibel Seda Dazkir, Ph.D., the study author and an assistant professor of interior design at Georgia Southern University, in Statesboro.

Your relationships

The work you do probably isn't as important as the people you do it with. According to a 2015 report on more than 30,000 employees in over 500 organizations from TINYpulse, a company that facilitates anonymous surveys for organizations, more than a third of the people who were most satisfied with their work had the best relationships with their colleagues.

GO BEYOND SMALL TALK. It might just save your life. According to a 2011 study conducted at Tel Aviv University, in Israel, people who had the most on-the-job social support had a 40 percent lower risk of dying from causes such as cancer

and heart disease compared with lonely employees—and that was after researchers controlled for risk factors such as smoking and obesity. “Social support helps prevent emotional deterioration that can escalate to depression and burnout, both of which have been associated with premature death,” says study author Sharon Toker, Ph.D. “And emotional support [also causes the body to release] attachment hormones that have a health-protective effect.”

Do you work remotely or by yourself? Schedule regular social outings with colleagues and clients, and make a point to swap online communication for face-to-face interactions via Skype or, even better, over a cup of coffee.

SUBTLY EXPRESS YOUR IRRITATION. If your boss is a yeller, a credit-stealer, or a finger-pointer or is otherwise intent on making your job difficult, there may be upsides to ignoring her requests or playing dumb every once in a while. According to a 2015 study published in *Personnel Psychology*, reacting—yes—passive-aggressively to work hostility can increase job satisfaction. “It helps you feel less like a victim,” says Ben Tepper, Ph.D., the study author and the chair of the department of management and human resources at the Fisher College of Business at Ohio State University, in Columbus. And it may be less damaging than a confrontation: Tepper and his colleagues found that workers who occasionally used passive aggression didn’t experience backlash or other negative consequences as a result.

FIGURE OUT IF YOU AND YOUR MANAGER SEE EYE TO EYE. If you believe your relationship with your boss is awful but she thinks the two of you

are rock solid, you’ve got a problem. If you both think your relationship stinks, however, you’re actually in a better position, according to a 2014 study published in *Academy of Management Journal*. “If your views are misaligned, you’ll both suffer from unfulfilled expectations, which decreases motivation,” says Fadel Matta, the study author and a doctoral candidate at the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, in East Lansing. Not sure where you stand? Schedule a meeting and ask your boss, “How can I better meet your expectations?” That question, says Matta, can be far more revealing—and less cringe-inducing—than “What do you really think of me?”



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