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Beat Job Burnout

How to refocus and
revitalize without
quitting your job.

By Pamela Ammondson

Photo by Eyewire.com

The United States has surpassed Japan as the most overworked country in the industrialized world. U.S. workers earn the fewest number of vacation days out of a long list of countries (see *News You Can Use*, June, for a partial list), and many companies are laying off employees in an economy that's spiraling downward. With fewer staff doing more work in nearly every industry, people are feeling the drain both mentally and physically.

If your work leaves you feeling tired, unfulfilled, powerless, or frustrated, you may be suffering from burnout. But before you do something drastic, such as quitting your job or switching careers, try a simple revitalization program to renew your energy and rekindle your spirit.

Men and women in many countries take sabbaticals—recurring periods of rest and renewal. People typically envision a sabbatical as a multi-month

retreat to a place of solitude, but a sabbatical needn't be so lengthy. You can renew your energy in small doses on a daily basis. Here's how.

Evaluate and prioritize. The first step is to understand why you're feeling so drained. Keep a log of your daily activities to identify what's causing burnout. Think about what you can do to free up energy. What are your priorities? Are there any tasks you can delete or delegate? Would anyone notice if you didn't attend a meeting or complete a certain task?

Many people take on too many commitments and drain nearly all of their energy. Start taking control of your time by realizing that you don't have to accept every invitation or tolerate every interruption. Learn how to tactfully say *no* and save your energy for more important matters.

Take care of yourself. Keeping your body nourished with healthy foods will keep your energy level up. Very often, people react to stress by drinking more coffee, eating unhealthy foods, and quitting their exercise routines. That's a road to disaster.

During times of stress, cut back on caffeine, alcohol, sugar, fat, salt, and any foods that make you feel sluggish. Regular exercise can help calm your nerves, increase your strength and stamina, and raise your energy level.

Value your sleep. Lack of sleep weakens concentration and impairs decision making and creative thinking. It also undermines the immune system. But during times of stress—when we need the most sleep to be alert and perform well—we're often unable to relax enough to get the rest we need.

If quality sleep time eludes you, assess your pre-sleep activities to make sure you're allowing yourself to relax. Are you working right up until you go to bed? Are you watching violent TV programs? Are you drinking coffee or

other caffeinated beverages late in the evening? Any of those factors may be disturbing your sleep patterns and not allowing you to recharge fully.

An hour before bedtime, read only soothing literature and watch only calming programs. Also, don't answer your phone if you think the caller might overtax you (that would require caller ID). Avoid heavy meals right before bed and limit your beverage consumption, especially alcohol and caffeine. Make sure that your room is comfortable and quiet, and try to go to bed at the same time each night.

Take seven-minute revitalization breaks. Can you really renew yourself

If you spend your days in a bustling city, take a break near a fountain, in a flower shop, at a museum, or even in a hotel lobby filled with foliage. Find a spot that'll allow you to focus on something soothing.

Another great daily technique is listening to relaxing music. Our minds are like giant sponges: They soak up everything around us and use that stimuli to determine our moods. Researchers have determined that harsh, violent, or loud sounds cause stress hormones to rise. At work, keep a portable cassette or CD player nearby with some of your favorite calming sounds, such as classical music

Can you really renew yourself in as little as seven minutes a day? You bet! But it's not a one-time quick fix. You need to take revitalization breaks every day.

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The growing field of ecopsychology studies the powerful connection between nature and mental well-being. Many people experience a heightened awareness in nature: Their senses are sharpened, and they feel connected to something greater than themselves, giving them a sense of inner peace. Try it for yourself: Take a beauty break in nature. Visit a park or a secluded place where you can enjoy the scenery. Inhale and exhale slowly to clear your mind and relieve the chest tightness caused by stress.

or nature sounds. As you listen, breathe deeply and relax.

Plan a getaway. Get away from life's fast pace for a weekend or even a day. Time away from it all can work like magic, completely revitalizing your mind, body, and spirit. Pick a quiet, nurturing environment, where you can rest. You can even plan a getaway weekend at home. Unplug the phone, turn off your pager, and spend a couple of days recharging your batteries.

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Because we often spin our wheels in times of stress, it's important to take a few minutes to stop what we're doing, create a plan of attack, and then take action. Instead of viewing problems as a source of stress, look at each one as an opportunity for growth. Ask yourself, What outcome do I want to achieve and how do I envision myself achieving it?

It's not hard to overcome job burnout once you pinpoint where your energy is being drained and use simple methods to recharge. Many people who implement those techniques report a renewed sense of purpose, without having to make a drastic life change. The key is to focus—on yourself, your surroundings, and your energy level—in order to keep burnout at bay.

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