Work–Life Balance
Slow Down, Move, and Think

Do you work too much and exercise too little? Do you come home from work too tired to cook or too tired to spend quality time with friends and family? Do you sleep too little, experience too much stress? Some of us do this to ourselves. We are overachievers, Type A personalities, which tend not to be good for overall mental health. In our “go, go, go” lifestyle, we do not stop to think about what we are doing to ourselves—our physical and emotional selves. In this editorial, I explore ways to slow down, create time and space, and perhaps more fully enjoy life.

A few years ago I gave up having cream in my coffee. Call it lazy or pressure from my close friends and colleagues who drank black coffee, but in changing to black coffee I felt free from the hassle of ensuring that I always had cream at home and work. A 3-week vacation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil last November and all that changed. I came back to the States with the belief that life is too short to drink coffee without cream. My time with nursing professor and carioca (i.e., native of Rio de Janeiro) Dr. Vivian Schutz, her family, friends, and students taught me a few things about work–life balance.

In Rio, individuals of all ages seemed to prioritize physical activity and physical and emotional health. I saw people walking, riding bikes, running, often with others whom they were actively engaged, talking, walking, and interacting with one another. In Rio, exercise happens anywhere. There are plenty of fitness centers and gyms, but many individuals exercise in the natural environment or non-traditional (by U.S. standards) places. One day as I was driving down the road, I saw a man doing burpees (i.e., squat thrusts) in the median on the side of the road. If there is a space, even a non-traditional outdoor space, individuals use it (and the time) to move their bodies. Everyday objects and spaces in the environment can be used for fitness. I observed one woman who seemed to be stretching her hamstrings—she had her foot on top of an electrical cover, using it like a ballet barre. And, on one of my walks along the beach, I had to wait in line to use a workout station, of which there are several along the beach. I have seen these workout stations at parks in the United States, but rarely have I seen individuals using them, and never have I seen people waiting in line to use them. But in Rio, people worked out. They moved their bodies and paid attention to what they put into them—good food, coconut water, açai.

I also saw poverty. I know that I am privileged. I know that a 3-week vacation is unusual for workers in the United States. In fact, in the United States, paid vacation is not mandatory as in every other country in the developed world (Ray, Sanes, & Schmitt, 2013). Therefore, many workers do not have paid vacation. For U.S. workers in the lowest income brackets, only approximately 50% have access to paid vacation, and for those with the highest income brackets, approximately 80% have paid vacation time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Of U.S. workers who have paid vacation, most only have 10 days per year (Ray et al., 2013) and many cannot
Editorial

take more than 1 week off at a time, as opposed to European countries whose workers get twice the amount of days and often take 1 month off from work at a time. According to Brazilian law, “any worker has the right to 30 days of paid vacation per year” (The Brazil Business, n.d., para. 5). Extended time away from work is good for us. According to Chen, Huang, and Petrick, (2016), it is associated with greater life satisfaction.

This is not the first time I have tried to get a handle, for myself, on work–life balance, and I have even written about it previously (Buettner, Shattell, & Reber, 2011; Shattell, 2010). And I do not claim to know everything about a healthy work–life balance or about Brazilian culture; however, what I do know is that spending a chunk of time in Brazil made me think differently.

It made me make some changes to create more space in my life and prioritize physical activity and time to think. Taking time to think is part of the slow scholarship movement (Mountz et al., 2015). I started with my calendar. I examined it with an eye for activities that I could extricate myself from participating in. I looked in the past and future (2 months in both directions). I sent several e-mails that day—I resigned from boards, university and professional organization committees, and a course at another university that I was going to teach. No one was telling me that I needed to work myself like I had been. It was all self-imposed. And it was not healthy because it took the place of regular exercise, cooking and eating well, and time and space to think. We must take care of our bodies and minds. If we can help it, let’s stop working ourselves to death.

REFERENCES


Mona Shattell, PhD, RN, FAAN
Editor
The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.
do:10.3928/02793695-20170301-01