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It seems that we all have one specific time each year when we feel truly overwhelmed. Regardless of whether you are a student, professor, consultant or public servant, we have all been there, and typically sense that feeling of pressure coming on. There are just not enough hours in the day to get the work done! During these stressful periods, we feel that we are spending more time in the office than at home. We feel guilty stopping for lunch or returning phone calls, and may begin to take our stress out on those around us.

When we are stressed or feeling as if we are carrying a heavy workload, we rarely stop to catch our breath, but when we do, we realize there is a knot in our neck, a virus coming on, or our clothes are just not fitting quite right.

That is when we *should* pause and realize that we have neglected the word “balance”. In all of life’s chaos, we forgot to take time for ourselves!

Over the past two years, I have been actively working to become more aware of what drives my stress level, and I imagine my conclusions would align with most others.

When I have deadlines, the first things I skip are the things that motivate and keep me going. I pass up doing yoga or running, and I skip the interactions with those people I care most about. And to be honest, if I am skipping my exercise time, then those who I am interacting with probably are trying to avoid me since I am likely beginning to resemble the persona of Cruella de Vil.

By being aware of what these drivers are, I try my best to sneak them into those dreaded stressful days. By doing so, I find I am more thoughtful in my work and feel more accomplished and at ease. I remain more focused and make fewer mistakes.

When the hours in your day start to fly by, make the worthwhile effort to stop, breathe deeply, and take a moment to do what keeps you feeling wholesome and complete. This could be as simple as a five-minute lunch walk or a dinner out with friends or spouse.

Yes, there are certainly times when I honestly do not feel that I could sneak in the five minutes. However, I have become more clever about how and when I make time for myself and multitasking is key. As I shuttle my three elementary aged kids to their soccer practices after work, I may look a mess, but I make the point to run a couple miles while they are warming up. I like to wake up early and get a couple of hours of undisturbed work time in so that I feel more productive as the day goes on, and then I feel like a quick walk at lunch is not unreasonable between meetings. As the calendar seems to fill up quickly, I block off dedicated time for yoga.

I have found my productivity is actually increased after I take these short breaks, especially for tasks requiring focus like technical writing or editorial work. Without the breaks, my mind would be spinning and I would be less focused.

It certainly takes time and dedication to train yourself to take work breaks without feeling guilty. However, as your body and mind start to reap the benefits, it becomes natural and something you anticipate.

BIO

Heidi recently began a new position as the Phosphorus Program Director for the International Plant Nutrition Institute, working on national and international environmental and nutrient stewardship issues associated with agricultural phosphorus use. Previously, Dr. Peterson was a research scientist at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) where she served as a lead technical expert on the implementation of best management practices to address impaired waters issues in agricultural landscapes. Heidi serves as an Adjunct Professor in the Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering Department at the University of Minnesota, where she is also an active mentor for students across all of the agricultural water quality programs. Heidi has previous experience as a soil and groundwater remediation consultant and soil science instructor at the University of Wisconsin- River Falls. Heidi attended Purdue University for her Bachelor's (Natural Resources and Environmental Science) and Master's degrees (Agronomy), and her PhD was from the University of Minnesota (Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering).

Heidi is based out of Minnesota, where she lives with her husband and three children. She has followed a non-traditional career path, completing her Ph.D. after obtaining work experience and starting a family. Outside of work she devotes time to community service and enjoys spending time outdoors being active with her family.