

IN FOCUS: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# WORK ENDURANCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Feeling burnt out? Or just overwhelmed by the pressure of work? It may not be the workload that is to blame. Certain behaviours, under our own control, can make the difference between enduring and going under, as **Siobhan Soraghan** explains.

The statistics are not pretty. Our population has unprecedented levels of cancer, heart disease, autoimmune disorders, allergies, etc, and GPs are seeing many professionals reporting deep unrelenting fatigue.

Having supported the development of leaders for 18 years I have observed many professionals undertake major career and life transitions. Regardless of conventional measures of success,

some have suffered more wear and tear than others while navigating their inevitable challenges. Today's world of flatter organisations, 24/7 global interactions, increasing role autonomy, job insecurity heightened by recession and increased pressure to 'get the work done' severely tests our personal boundaries. Professionals who protect and 'regulate' themselves seem to have greater endurance than those who too willingly yield. Excesses, whether work or reward, tend to come home to roost.

exertion, healthy self-care, happy times with loved ones and so on.

'Drains' include things like failure (real or perceived), misfortune, too little (or too much) exercise, emotional pain, poor self-care, etc. They fall into three categories:

- luck;
- our chosen actions and habits – let us call this 'discipline'; and
- our involuntary reactions to events – let us call this 'disposition' (see Box 1, left).

We cannot do much about luck. But there are things we can do about discipline and disposition.

**Discipline**

Whether we realise it or not, many of us employ rituals and routines in our life that have, de facto, become our disciplines. The question is, are they filling or draining our cup? Think about the chocolate biscuit (or two) with your coffee. Or that nightcap when you are working late. Or the half bottle of wine to wind down when you get in of an evening. Or spending hours in front of a screen without breaks.

Apologies if this scares you, but did you know that... regular intake of refined sugar can destabilise the sensitive balance in some of the body's complex systems, seriously affecting our energy and wellbeing.

Alcohol taken at night, even in moderate amounts, is now widely understood to harm the quality of our 'rapid eye movement' sleep and significantly compromise its restorative properties. Lack of sleep is the cause of many accidents.

Box 1

**Discipline**

The small habits and the daily decisions we make about our lifestyle and self-care.

**Disposition**

A combination of the temperament we are born with and how life has impacted our character – the deep inner wiring that determines whether we perceive something to be a threat or not.

Imagine yourself as a cup containing energy and vitality. How full your cup is depends upon whether it is being filled more than drained. The difference between endurance and burnout is simple – there must be more filling your cup than draining it.

'Fills' can include things like compliments, achieving a goal, winning a prize, a good rest after

Figure 1 SHED CHECKLIST

		Rarely	Occasionally	Regularly	Most of the time	Always
<b>Sleep</b>	Do you get 7-9 hours of good quality uninterrupted sleep each night?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Hydration</b>	Do you take in (through drink and water-rich foods) enough water daily such that your urine is not concentrated and you do not have a dry throat or headaches?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Exercise</b>	Do you daily get 30 minutes' exercise where you lift your pulse rate from resting into the anaerobic zone for your age?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Diet</b>	Do you get three meals a day rich in: fresh vegetables, fruit and fibre; low in: sugar, unhealthy fats, sugar, alcohol and caffeine?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 2 EMOTIONS

	The emotion we feel when something triggers the belief that...
<b>Anger</b>	– your rights or boundaries have been violated in some way.
<b>Guilt</b>	– you have violated someone else's rights or done something wrong.
<b>Shame</b>	– there is something wrong with you.
<b>Fear</b>	– you are under threat.
<b>Anxiety</b>	– there may be a future threat.
<b>Sadness</b>	– you have lost something, tangible or intangible (such as self-worth).
<b>Embarrassment</b>	– you are being judged negatively by others.

The military knows something about discipline. It needs its men and women to be on top form at all times, ready for any eventuality, and has a simple formula that is critical for endurance: SHED (sleep, hydration, exercise, diet – see Figure 1, opposite). How do you fare?

Neglect SHED over a long period and your body will have to compensate in some way. The high price you pay will become clear in time... usually when it is too late.

#### Disposition.

Depending on our disposition, certain events in day-to-day life can significantly affect our emotional equilibrium and drain our cup. Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence* refers to these as 'Amygdala hijacks'. The Amygdala is the part of the brain where emotions to ensure survival are aroused, causing the fight, flight or freeze response. It seems we are significantly more susceptible to such hijacks when depleted. So the more we demand from our physical system and the more we mistreat ourselves, the less emotionally stable and resilient we may become.

However, this presents an oft-missed opportunity – our underlying 'issues' become more accessible for resolution. The next time your buttons get pressed, look carefully at the emotions you are feeling – they offer valuable personal insight and an opportunity for building greater resilience. Figure 2, above, shows how the critical ones work.

An intense emotional reaction can have its roots in a deeply unpleasant event long ago in your past when this response helped you survive, albeit at the cost of higher-level thinking. Understanding how and why these emotions get triggered can open the door to managing your present-day responses appropriately – which will be far easier on you, not to mention on the people around you.

Professional input helps – do you need it? Well, if your reaction in certain situations stops you fulfilling your potential, then perhaps. Today there are many resources available, such as: a good coach; sensitively facilitated 360 degree feedback; a perceptive and kind mentor; inspiring role models; and a commitment to one's own personal development.

Some simple practical tips for handling a hijack are to:

- first, notice it is happening;
- then breathe deeply;
- next, as politely as possible, withdraw from the situation, deferring any critical interactions or decisions;
- compose yourself, working to gain perspective until you are calm;
- finally, resume.

(Note, regaining composure can take minutes or days, depending on the severity of your reaction, how fit and well your body is and how open you are to seeing different perspectives. As you can

## RESOURCES

*Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman

*Self-coaching – what to do when your life gets out of control*, Joseph J Luciani

*Authentic Happiness*, Martin E P Seligman

*Work Endurance – the self-check handbook for 21st century professionals*, Siobhan Soraghan, [www.active-insight.com/work-endurance-handbook](http://www.active-insight.com/work-endurance-handbook)

**Some online resources** (subscription may be required):

- [www.healthmonitor.com](http://www.healthmonitor.com)
- [www.weightwatchers.co.uk](http://www.weightwatchers.co.uk)
- [www.weightlossresources.co.uk](http://www.weightlossresources.co.uk)

**iPhone apps:** BMI calculator; Meal Diary, Daily Burn, Sleep cycle alarm clock, Pedometer, to name but a few.

imagine, the longer it takes, the greater the toll on your body.)

#### Conclusion

In essence, work endurance is down to your commitment to manage both your discipline and your disposition. A great starting point is to do a proper reality-check that tells you specifically how you are adding to or diminishing your own endurance. This should generate all the motivation you need. ■



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