

QUIT YOUR WAY TO WELLNESS

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WORK LESS AND
FEEL BETTER



When was the last time you met someone under the age of 60 whose plan for achieving wellness involved quitting work? For some individuals, quitting work commitments—or at least trading them in for more desirable pursuits—has greatly contributed to their overall health and happiness.

We've all deliberately quit things in the pursuit of well-being—smoking, drinking, eating meat, self-criticizing, loafing—so why isn't work normally listed among them? Before we can answer that, we need to define what we mean by *work*.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF WORK

Each of us has a different work situation. For the sake of this article we'll consider work to be an activity that demands physical, mental, or social effort—paid or unpaid—which occurs on a regular basis. Using this definition, work could mean mowing the lawn, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or showing up at a nine-to-five job.

It's important to note that this definition also means your wellness could be enhanced by quitting work that you love or find to be of great benefit to others. But that doesn't mean you need to quit such work, or any work for that matter. The goal is to simply identify options for improving your wellness that you may not have considered.

A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

Consider the case of Vancouver-based Jonni O'Connor. Her work took the form of studying for her PhD and seeing clients by day. In addition she was a single parent of a child in kindergarten. But despite her full workload, O'Connor was aware of her limits, so she was able to maintain a healthy balance.

That is, until her father and sister both died unexpectedly within two weeks of each other.

"The death of my family members pushed me beyond my capacity to continue to care for my son, myself, my clients," says O'Connor.

So she quit her PhD program with no plans to pick it up again. "There was an immediate sense of relief as I freed up much-needed mental, emotional, and physical energy in order to better manage the rest of my life."

QUITTING BEFORE A CRISIS

O'Connor found herself in a crisis that could be resolved by quitting one particular work commitment. And while many of us might have made the same choice, quitting work commitments is a strategy fewer of us might consider when there is no crisis. In other words, unless it gets really bad, we usually don't quit work to enhance our wellness.

This reluctance to quit work is not surprising, since from childhood many of us have been taught some form of traditional work ethic that takes a dim view of leisure. Then there's the assumption that quitting work commitments will leave us without adequate physical activity, social connections, or funds.

We may have heard about studies that showed this situation is exactly what happens when people retire. These reports add to the belief that our health can take a turn for the worse as soon as we stop working.

RETIREMENT AND WELLNESS

In 2007 John Bound and Timothy Waidmann from the University of Michigan Retirement Research Center reviewed existing studies of the impact retirement has on health. They found many of these studies reported that retirement has a negative effect on physical and mental health, because they compared general health trends before and after retirement.

Bound and Waidmann point out this approach seriously exaggerates the

negative health effects of retirement in cases where already deteriorating health was the reason for retirement.

In contrast, Bound and Waidmann compared subjective and objective health indicators *immediately* before normal retirement age with those after retirement. Their findings suggest that, for men at least, retirement seems to have a small positive effect on physical health. Women showed some similarities to those found in men, though generally not as statistically strong.

Bound and Waidmann went on to note that their findings were similar to those of a 2004 study published in *Research in Labor Economics*. It examined psychological well-being following retirement and also concluded that retirement has a positive effect on health.

REDEFINING RETIREMENT

"By retiring, my wellness has benefited by [my] having the time to spend with my family," says one retiree interviewed for this article. He adds, "Stress has been reduced as most of the things I hate doing—commuting, dealing with bosses—have been eliminated, so I'm left with the things I enjoy doing."

If this sounds like a recipe for wellness that we can hopefully enjoy once we're as old as this retiree, there's one thing you should know: the man in question retired before the age of 35.

Derek Foster, author of *Stop Working: Here's How You Can* (Foster Publishing, 2005), retired at 34 after building a stock portfolio designed

to pay him enough dividends to live on. Since that time, he's continued to evolve his investment strategy while writing books on the subject.

In *Stop Working*, he sums up the daily wellness benefits of retirement: "You can take some time to reflect on how lucky you are to have the life you do and be in good health and able to enjoy it."

REDEFINING QUITTING

But what about the majority of us who aren't in the position to retire?

In his best-selling 2007 book *The 4-Hour Workweek* (Crown Publishers, 2007), Timothy Ferriss argues it isn't retirement that we need for good health, but a shift in attitude.

"One cannot be free from the stresses of a speed- and size-obsessed culture," Ferriss maintains, "until you are free from the materialistic addictions, time-famine mind-set, and comparative impulses that created it in the first place."

His solution? Mini-retirements: getting far away for two to three months, or more, to rest and reflect on the hectic pace and daily routines that distract and drain us. His book serves as a step-by-step guide to creating work situations that allow such mini-retirements on a regular basis.

And what about the majority of us who aren't in the position to even mini-retire? Think smaller.

In my own case, it was rearranging my schedule so that I had every Friday off over a period of several months. Yes, I billed fewer hours, but having one day each week dedicated to my creative projects resulted in a higher energy level, a benefit that far outweighed any drop in income.

Why wait for a crisis or for things to get bad enough? Ask yourself today what work you could quit to improve your well-being. Then quit your way to wellness. **a**

5 BABY-STEP STRATEGIES FOR QUITTING

- 1) List all your work commitments. Quit the one that's easiest to perform.
- 2) Ask someone to take over one of your work commitments.
- 3) Pay someone to take on one of your tasks, such as mowing the lawn.
- 4) Ask your employer if you can work one hour less each day.
- 5) Eliminate consumption that provides little life value. Then consider a lower-paying job with less stress.

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