



THE HELPFUL MIND

Overcome the Overwhelm

If home life has you tired and wired, here's how to step away from the stress.

BY RACHEL SYLVESTER

IS IT THE CULTURAL moment? (How long will this pandemic stretch on?) Is it the time of year? Is this real life, or is it Groundhog Day? These are the kinds of questions that may be running through your brain on a loop, and the effect can be a feeling of listlessness. Sociologist Corey L. M. Keyes coined the term “languishing” for the space that exists between depression and flourishing. It’s a nebulous middle (and “meh”) ground, a draining blend of stagnation, exhaustion, and anxiety that can take hold of us no matter our occupation—parents, caregivers, and nine-to-fivers can all begin to short-circuit. But with these insights from professionals, you can set the mental reset button for your home life.

Rule Out Professional Burnout

A lot of us interchange terms like “burnout” and “exhaustion,” but there’s an important difference between them. Technically, burnout usually pertains to work (see our We Did It column on page 70 for ways to handle that). Ordinary tiredness, boredom, and stress may result from limited time and energy. “It’s easy to equate burnout and exhaustion,” says Jonathan Malesic, author of *The End of Burnout*. “But if you can take a break from a task and come back feeling energized, then what you had wasn’t burnout.” Once you identify whether you’re burned out at work or overwhelmed at home (or—quite possibly—both), pinpoint the tasks that sap your energy or inspire the most dread. Being aware of your personal stressors helps you determine what needs to change on your to-do list.

Audit Your To-Do List

Sometimes those frazzled feelings are a byproduct of good luck. You have everything your heart desired—spouse, kids, home, a car not held together with duct tape—but now you also have to take care of them on a daily, hourly, and minute-by-minute basis. But here’s the thing: You can do less. Step away from the idea that everything can be accomplished, says Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work*. Take laundry. Do you really need to tackle three loads, or can you wash one and save the folding for the following morning? Granted, some home tasks—especially those involving caring for and feeding kids—are nonnegotiable, but you can still make them less

stressful. For instance, if packing lunches feels like your daily dose of torment, let your kids buy school lunch if your budget allows, or have them pack it on their own. Try breaking down your to-do list into what you can (and maybe even want to) do, what you can delegate, and what doesn’t need to get done at all.

Invest in Your Social Life

When you’re wiped out, your social life is often the first thing to go. But receiving support from others is the very thing that will replenish you. Social connection is a highly effective—and often underused—tool to help combat burnout and stagnation. When you’re fatigued,

consider carving out time for a quick video chat or coffee break with a neighbor. “Regular connection and laughter remind you you’re not alone,” says Sheryl Gonzalez Ziegler, PhD, a therapist and the author of *Mommy Burnout*. Research shows that when you expand your inner circle of friends, you can combat anxiety better. Having a trusted crew of confidants boosts your overall mental health, strengthens your immune system, and helps alleviate the effects of emotional distress, studies have found. “Insert yourself into a community, like a book club or a place of worship,” Ziegler says. “If one doesn’t exist locally, create your own community with like-minded friends, and more connections will come.”



Commit to 20 Minutes of Daily Movement

Yes, it may be the last thing you want to do. But a walk or bike ride can help you snap out of a funk, and you will feel so good when it's over. Sleep, water, and nutrition are important, but you have to get outside and away from whatever is zapping your energy, says Ziegler, who argues that very few weather conditions truly inhibit you from grabbing a little fresh air. Stop telling yourself you'll exercise as soon as you catch up on work. Just get up and move for 5 or 10 minutes, five days per week. If you're already

active, don't rely solely on your sweat sessions at the gym. It's important to move throughout the day, no matter how many minutes you clock in during a single fitness class, Ziegler says.

Avoid the Social Media Numb-Out

Those quick TikTok hits—a dance routine, three cat videos, and a viral pasta recipe—might feel like a necessary brain break, but they can be quite the opposite. We often walk away from a social media binge feeling frustrated, knowing

that those well-intentioned “breaks” led to wasted time. Rather than always scrolling during moments of boredom, Ziegler suggests giving your mind a tiny vacation in the form of a silent rest far from your smartphone. The silence will help you feel focused, and quiet time helps you cope with mental fatigue. “I set my phone's timer, turn off tech distractions, and sit down for a passive break,” Ziegler says of her own at-home reset ritual. “Mental rest is part of the productivity equation.” Start small by carving out two five-minute breaks in your daily schedule. ■



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