

RECLAIM YOUR COMMUTE

GETTING TO AND FROM
WORK DOESN'T HAVE TO
BE SOUL CRUSHING.

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Every day, millions of people around the world face long commutes to work. In the United States alone, approximately 25 million workers spend more than 90 minutes each day getting to and from their jobs, and about 600,000 “mega-commuters” travel at least 90 minutes each way, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In the United Kingdom, the average round-trip commute takes 54 minutes (up from 45 minutes in 2003), and in most of the world’s major cities, from Milan to Manila, it’s over an hour.

And yet few people enjoy their commutes. When Ford Motor Company surveyed 5,500 people in six European cities, many ranked commuting as more stressful than their jobs, moving into a new house, or going to the dentist. In a 2006 survey of 909 working women in Texas, conducted by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues, respondents said the morning journey between home and the office was, on average, the least enjoyable activity of their day; the evening trip home was the third worst. (Working itself took second place.)

This distaste for commuting has serious implications for well-being. A 2014 British government survey found that workers with lengthy commutes felt more anxious and less satisfied with life than people with shorter ones. They were also less likely to find their daily activities worthwhile. Other studies have found that people with long commutes are more exhausted and

less productive at work, and have lower job satisfaction. And a study conducted in Sweden in 2011 found that couples have a 40% higher chance of getting divorced when one partner commutes at least 45 minutes to work each day.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Research, including our own studies, suggests that small tweaks can improve your commuting experience, leaving you happier and more productive. Here are five strategies to try.

USE THE TIME TO SHIFT YOUR MINDSET

Your commute is an opportunity to transition from the personal to the professional. At home in the morning, you might play the role of parent, partner, or caregiver. When you arrive at the office, you don your professional hat. In the evening, you might revert to the personal even if you eventually switch to finish up work before bed. Each of these transitions requires a shift in mindset. If we don’t take the time to make one, the thoughts and concerns that stem from one role are likely to carry over into the next and weigh us down.

One way to smooth this mental transition is to engage in simple rituals. In an as yet unpublished study of regular commuters, one of us (Francesca) and Hal Hershfield of UCLA found that those who maintained small routines on the way to work—such as checking the news on the train or having a look at the calendar for the day—felt more excited about the day ahead, more satisfied with their jobs, and less stressed-out than those who had no set routine. This is not surprising, given that rituals have been shown to produce all sorts of benefits—even for people who don’t believe in their value or effects: They lower our anxiety before we engage in high-stakes performance tasks, increase our enjoyment of the activity at hand, and even help us recover faster when we experience failure or loss. So consider establishing your own commuting routines. You might buy a decaf latte from the same coffee shop every day on your way to work, for example. For an even more powerful effect, try making a ritual out of one or more of the other commute-enhancing tactics we recommend below.



PREPARE TO BE PRODUCTIVE

When you spend at least some of your commute planning for the day or the week ahead, you'll arrive at work better prepared and therefore happier and more energetic and productive. That's what we concluded from a series of studies we did with British and American workers. The first was a field study of 225 employees at the UK offices of DigitasLBi, a global marketing and technology agency. As we expected, our study showed that, on average, the longer people commuted each day, the less content and more likely to quit they were. But there were exceptions to the rule, which left us wondering whether those individuals possessed certain psychological traits that helped them avoid the negative outcomes experienced by their peers. We found one: self-control, or the ability to resist temptations that can undermine efforts to achieve longer-term goals (such as checking Facebook instead of doing work, or eating the cake a colleague brought in instead of an apple).

To explore that link, we surveyed 229 employees from various organizations to

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learn what they typically did on their way to work and discovered that those who scored high on measures of self-control tended to use the time to engage in productive planning—what we call *work-related prospection*. “I think about what I will do when I get into the office,” one participant told us. “I try to plan out what things I will accomplish for the day.”

Our final step was to investigate whether everyone—not just the most disciplined people—could benefit from the same exercise. We recruited 443 full-time U.S. workers with commutes of 15 minutes or more for a four-week study. In the first two weeks, participants received daily prompts that allowed us to measure how much work-related prospection they did during their morning travel. As before, we found that those who did the most planning were better able to handle longer commutes. In the second two weeks, we randomly assigned the same participants to one of four conditions. In a daily text message that arrived 15 minutes before they typically left for work, we asked some of them to engage in work-related prospection as

they traveled, some to engage in relaxing thoughts and activities, and others to do both. A quarter of the participants received a text message that did not contain any particular prompt. We found that only employees in the first group—those asked to engage in productive planning and nothing else—reported feeling more satisfied with their jobs than they had prior to the intervention. This finding held regardless of their natural propensity for self-control, as measured at the start of our study.

So this is a simple, straightforward strategy available to everyone. Simply ask yourself: What steps can I take today and during this week to accomplish my work and career goals? How can I be more productive?

FIND YOUR “POCKET OF FREEDOM”

As you sit in traffic, wait for a delayed bus, or stand in a crowded subway car, you may feel you have little control over your commute. But you can temper that frustration by focusing on what you *can* control: how you spend your time during the trip. We’ve already talked about rituals and planning, but think also about activities that you enjoy, such as listening to music, catching up on podcasts, or reading books. We borrowed the phrase “pocket of freedom” from Adela, the great-aunt of one of us (Jon), whose early adult years were spent in various Polish ghettos during the Nazi occupation. No matter how hungry, tired, or frightened she was, she devoted one hour each night to a creative activity with her niece—a practice that, she later noted, helped her persevere. Though the stakes in a commute to work are much less significant, you, too, can make the time more bearable by thinking of it as an opportunity to pursue your passions. Beyond passive media consumption, you might use the time to learn a new language via audiobook or if your hands are free, take up a new hobby, such as drawing or knitting.

This advice is supported by research that shows a correlation between higher levels of autonomy and greater well-being, satisfaction, and productivity and lower levels of stress. For example, John Trougakos of the Rotman School of Management and his colleagues discovered that employees who could decide where,

when, and how to spend their lunch breaks felt more replenished by them than those who had no choice.

So try to tune out the negatives of commuting and concentrate on the opportunity to express yourself and recharge.

SHARE THE SPIRIT

So far, we have explored how you can improve your commute by dedicating it to solitary pursuits. But one of the downsides of long travel to and from work is that it can be lonely. In fact, when Harvard political

scientist Robert Putnam studied the issue, he found that for each extra 10-minute period that people spent commuting, they had 10% fewer social connections, which led to greater isolation and unhappiness. We recommend preempting that problem by using your commute to reach out to others.

Most research on the psychological benefits of social connection focuses on relationships with family or close friends. But according to studies conducted by behavioral scientists Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago and Juliana Schroeder of the University of California at Berkeley, talking to strangers can improve well-being



for commuters. Epley and Schroeder went to a train station, recruited more than 200 people, and randomly assigned them to one of three groups. Some were instructed to connect with a fellow rider, others were asked to keep to themselves, and the rest were told to behave as they normally would. Although participants predicted that their ride would be more enjoyable if they sat in solitude, the research team found that the opposite was true: Those who were asked to engage in conversation had a more positive commuting experience and felt no less productive.

Another study, from the New Cities Foundation, found that even using social sharing apps, such as Waze, can trigger this effect and reduce drivers' transport-related stress.

So think about how you might be more social as you commute. If you take public transportation, consider removing your headphones and flouting the unwritten rule against chitchat. If you drive, put your phone on speaker and call a friend, ask a neighbor who works near you to ride with you, or try an app, such as Sluglines, that helps coordinate casual carpooling. If you live in a city that has Uber, choose uberPOOL (which will connect you with strangers) over uberX (where you ride by yourself). And if you're on a company-provided shuttle, as is often the case for Silicon Valley tech companies, talk to your seatmate.

REDUCE YOUR COMMUTE

If you've done all you can to make the most of your existing commute but it's still causing you stress, making you unhappy, and killing your productivity, there is another option: Reduce it.

This starts with the decisions you make about where to live and work. Most people overweight the upside of traveling a greater distance—a job with a higher salary, for example, or a larger house in a nicer neighborhood—while underweighting the downsides of commuting. We call this commuter's bias. To test it, we conducted an as yet unpublished study in which we asked more than 500 full-time U.S. employees from a wide range of industries to choose between two scenarios: Job 1, with a salary of \$67,000 a year and a

PEOPLE WHO ENGAGED IN CONVERSATION HAD A MORE POSITIVE COMMUTING EXPERIENCE AND FELT NO LESS PRODUCTIVE.

commuting time of 50 minutes, and Job 2, with a salary of \$64,000 and a commuting time of 20 minutes. Everything else would be equal: the neighborhood where they lived, the advancement opportunities at work, and how much they would enjoy the role. A full 84% of our participants chose Job 1, thus expressing a willingness to forfeit one hour each workday to their commute—250 hours per year—in exchange for just \$3,000. That's \$12 an hour of commuting time—less than half their hourly rate at work! We checked to see whether participants could do this math, and they could. Their responses simply reflected an inability to fully appreciate the psychological, emotional, and physical costs of longer travel times.


If you're considering a new job or looking for a new apartment or house, we encourage you to resist this bias. Carefully consider the downsides of a long commute before committing yourself to one.

One way to reduce your commute without switching jobs or moving is to occasionally work from home or at a place closer to home, such as the shared offices provided by companies like WeWork. Telecommuting is becoming increasingly common: In 2015, 24% of U.S. workers did some or all of their work at home, according to the U.S. Census, and research from Global Workplace Analytics suggests that regular telework has more than doubled over the past decade. Studies have also shown that people who have the choice of

working from home on some days are more productive and happier than those who don't. In a field experiment conducted at the Chinese travel agency Ctrip, Stanford economist Nick Bloom and his colleagues found that employees randomly assigned to work from home accomplished 13% more than those assigned to work from the office, reported being more satisfied with their jobs, and were 50% less likely to quit their organizations. So if your employer allows flexible work, and you think your boss and teammates would be amenable to your telecommuting, try it one day a week or a few days a month.

MOST PEOPLE WHO have long commutes feel like helpless victims enduring a necessary evil. As a result, they arrive at their jobs and homes depleted, and their performance and well-being suffer. But it is possible to improve your commute by turning it into a more positive experience and, when possible, reducing it. ☺

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