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For so many of us, myself included, our days feel filled with a million small interruptions. And this is true even of our days off. Maybe you've taken a call at the beach, texted your boss from the grocery store or emailed a colleague while on a picnic with your family. We've convinced ourselves that these behaviors are no big deal. It's just one email. But there's a real cost to these interruptions, and there are smart strategies we can all take to better protect our time.

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(Music)

00:32

[The Way We Work]

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These moments seem so small at the time, and yet research suggests they add up to a tremendous loss. The constant creep of work into our personal lives can increase our stress and undermine our happiness. So just what is the cost?

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In one study, researchers recruited parents who were visiting a science museum with their kids. Some parents were told to check their phone as much as possible; others were told to check their phone as little as possible. After the visit, parents who used their phones reported that the experience was significantly less meaningful. They also felt much lonelier.

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In another study, tourists who were asked to have their phones out while visiting an iconic church remembered fewer details a week later. And in my research, employees who were paid for their performance spent increasingly less time interacting with friends and family, and more and more time interacting with colleagues and clients.

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These constant interruptions come at a cost to organizations, too. Companies lose 32 days of productivity each year to employee depression, which is often caused by the stress and burnout

of our always-on culture. Despite knowing better, I, too, have found myself focusing on “urgent work distractions” over important life moments. Most recently, I found myself texting a client while in the middle of my first child’s first ultrasound ... happy client, guilty mom-to-be. When you add up all of these moments, the sum total is a life shortchanged on meaning, joy, connection and even memory.

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As we remake our models of work in the wake of the pandemic, now is our opportunity to create a new culture that respects time. And the way to make this really big change is through small steps that we can take right now. The first step that we need to take is to reframe rest. Reflect for a moment about what you think about when you hear the word “rest.” Sounds amazing, right? But in my mind, I immediately worry about not being productive enough or letting down my colleagues. When we do have time off, we need to find ways in which we can enjoy the present moment and savor the leisure time that we have available, as opposed to seeing it as an unproductive barrier to our work.

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One specific strategy we can take is to treat our upcoming weekend like a vacation. On Friday afternoon, jot down how you would act and behave as if you were on a holiday. Maybe you and your partner will buy a bottle of wine and watch online clips of the Eiffel Tower. Maybe you’ll visit a local café and listen to some live music. Or maybe you’ll go for a long walk in the middle of the day with no phone and no agenda. The plan doesn't have to be expensive or extravagant.

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Another strategy you can take is to create clear boundaries for your time off. Instead of saying, "I'm out of the office. Feel free to Slack me whenever," say, "I'll be offline. Call me only if it's urgent."

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To uphold these personal goals, work together as a team. Set team goals for personal time. Do it publicly, collect data and hold each other accountable. These goals could sound like, “I will not check email between 6:00 and 8:00pm;” “I will have dinner with my family four nights a week;” or "I will go for a jog midday." Check in on your team's progress and see how everyone's doing. If you or your teammates are unsuccessful, work together to help accomplish personal goals.

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Lastly, you can negotiate for more time to prevent work from creeping into your personal life. In business school, I teach students to negotiate for salary but realize I spoke almost nothing about negotiating for more time. What does this look like in practice? You can ask for more time on adjustable deadlines at work. If your client asks for a deliverable Monday morning, ask for an extension until Tuesday afternoon so you don't find yourself working on your well-deserved weekend. And don't worry too much about reputation. Quality truly is the metric that matters most. In my data, employees who proactively asked for more time reported lower levels of stress and burnout, and were seen as more committed and professional by their colleagues. These are small but powerful changes to not only reframe rest, but to reclaim it. Once you discover the profound impact that these changes can have, you'll feel empowered to demand that others respect and accommodate your approach to time. Maybe they'll even feel inspired to piece together the fractured moments of their lives, too.