

I'M SOOO BUSY

Bulging inboxes, phones that never stop pinging... we all love to humble-brag about how busy we are, but as Jamie Khoo asks, are we actually getting anything done?

There was a time when I spent the first hour of every single day lying in bed going through the 200 WhatsApp messages, on average, that had accumulated on my phone in the six short hours I'd been asleep. I'd continue checking my phone at least once every 10 minutes for the rest of the day, paranoid that I might miss something urgent or important. I checked my messages at meetings, over meals, even in the shower. It was, I see now, an addiction.

I worked 15-hour days, every day, and had one day off a month (maybe). I slept when I could and ate hurriedly in front of my laptop. I was, by all definitions, very busy and I wore my busyness like a badge of honour.

Finally, tired of being ruled by my phone, I did the unthinkable: I uninstalled WhatsApp and disabled email notifications. The incessant 'noise' of messages, memes and endless group conversations finally stopped. It was instant quiet and immediate bliss. The earth didn't crumble, and I haven't been shunned as a social pariah. I realised very quickly that the noise of messages and emails is really just that — white noise. None of it is really that urgent. We accord it — and ourselves — much more importance

than it really needs if only to keep busy (or at least appear that way). I also remember a time, not so long ago, when we didn't have all this urgency — and we managed to cope just fine.

As our phones get smarter and we become eternally connected, we can no longer justify an idle moment. We answer emails at traffic lights, update our Facebook status over dinner and are constantly at the beck and call of whoever is pinging us on WhatsApp, Line, Viber or WeChat.

But the busyness started before the advent of smartphones. Multitasking has been the accepted norm since the 1980s, while longer work hours are applauded and multiple portfolios adopted to boost careers. We have long been victims of the cult of busy.

Malaysian labour laws state that we should work no more than eight hours a day. In reality, many of us pull much longer hours. Even when we're not in the office, some of us never really stop working, thanks to our cleverly connected phones. We're always on call, always reachable. But could the busyness just be a cover for the fear of being judged?

“Plugging in for 15 hours a day did not mean I was producing better or more work; it just meant I was exhausted, my ideas were stretched thin and resentment quickly replaced creativity.”

Holistic stress management coach Kate Bartolotta believes fear plays a major role in keeping us busy. “There is fear of missing out, fear of being ‘less important’ because we aren’t busy, fear of falling behind. But this is more about meeting a status quo than being productive. If the expectation in one’s social or work circles is a 12-hour day or taking work home on the weekends, there is guilt attached to not living up to those expectations,” she says.

We do it to our children too, filling their days with extra tuition, dance classes, piano lessons, play dates. We teach them it’s not okay to do nothing — because we’re too terrified to do it ourselves.

Speaking at the Meditating with the Body retreat, an annual programme held at Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, Dr Reginald Ray, founder and spiritual director of the Dharma Ocean Foundation and former chair of the Religious Studies Department at Naropa University in Colorado, attributes busyness to the much deeper anxiety of being alone. “We use the busy-ness of our lives as an excuse to avoid having to actually live our own life,” he says. “We are terrified of who we actually are. We are actually incapable of being alone, of doing any work that requires genuine solitude, without entertainment, that requires making a connection with the silence of the inner being.”

I know this to be true — the old me couldn’t bear the aloneness of waiting in a café for a friend. So I’d busy myself with checking my phone, even if I’d just checked it five minutes ago.

This chronic busyness has been proven to hurt us on more than a superficial level. Bartolotta points out how busyness damages our health: “The elevated cortisol levels associated with this approach to life have a negative impact on our immune systems, blood pressure and adrenals. When we are in a constant state of busyness, we train our bodies and minds to ignore their natural rhythms. This is a fast way to burn out — body and mind.”

The returns may not even be worth it. Increased busyness doesn’t always make for greater productivity or efficiency. Plugging in for 15 hours a day did not mean I was producing better or more work; it just meant I was exhausted, my ideas were stretched thin and resentment quickly replaced creativity.

Studies at the University of Florida showed that top performers in physically or mentally demanding fields, such as athletes and musicians, concentrate the most intense part of their training work within four-hour blocks and regard routinely scheduled rest as integral to their success. They give their all and perform at their best but only to the point that they are physically and mentally able; anything more drains the body and mind of energy.

That’s not to say that we should all grind to a halt. Psychologists also agree that a certain level of stress is healthy to keep us motivated and productive. The key is in understanding what we’re being busy about and how — or if — it’s creating true benefit.

Michael Teoh, talent development trainer, consultant to and board member of several government ministries, foundations and

companies, juggles many portfolios and is what you’d consider a very busy man. To manage his time, he adheres to one key principle.

“I love the quote from Benjamin Franklin: ‘Never confuse motion with action,’” shares Teoh. “I think a lot of young people are trapped in a view where they believe they’re doing a lot — going in and out of the office, attending talks. They may be moving but they’re not actually taking the right action to elevate themselves to a new level.”

Instead, Teoh is highly strategic about his every move, prioritising each activity on three levels. “The first priority is sustainability: could that activity bring in more economic return, gain access to resources, stand me a better chance for a promotion? Secondly, I look at the social return and impact of this activity on my environment, loved ones, business partners and clients. I ask myself how I’m being a better human being, a better son, a better boyfriend. Lastly, I ask if I have been true and fair to myself, my own personal development. I make sure when I’m busy, I am effectively being busy.”

The antidote to busyness, not surprisingly, is rest. There’s an old Zen saying: “You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day, unless you’re too busy; then you should sit for an hour.”

This rest doesn’t have to literally be meditation. It could simply be, as Teoh describes, “taking your thoughts and your mind out of work” and bringing it to the gym, a party or an Xbox. It is about scheduling time away from the noise and speed of work, to tune back into our own physical, emotional and mental needs.

“I don’t care if you have four children and three jobs. We have one human life. And if you can’t [take] 15 minutes to relate to yourself, everyone else in your life is going to suffer,” says Dr Ray in the same talk. “If your mind is always busy then you have no sense of the world you live in. By being busy you are basically giving away your human existence.”

The old me from a few years ago would have balked at this idea of sitting for a whole hour ‘doing nothing’. But in reality, although I was ‘doing something’ every waking hour, I wasn’t really living a life; I was just going through the motions.

But circumstances around me have changed vastly since then. It took me almost a whole year of readjusting to working eight-hour days, going home at 5.30pm and enjoying three-hour Sunday teas. The last step was ridding myself of WhatsApp and forcing myself not to check my email every half hour.

I got off the hamster wheel and took back control of my life — how busy or relaxed it is, how quiet or loud I want it to be. I’ve learnt that sometimes, doing nothing for a day can be more meaningful than cramming in 20 ‘somethings’ for the sake of being busy. □



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