Taking a break is hard work, too

My lab bench was strewn with tubes and pipettes—remnants of an experiment that had refused to work for several weeks. I was slouched against the bench, deep in despair. It was a far cry from how I had felt just a few months earlier, when I started my master’s research project. At that point, I thought I had cracked the code to academic success. After years of excelling in the classroom thanks to intensive studying, the idea that I would be rewarded if I worked hard enough was deeply rooted in me. So I spent long hours in the lab, steadily filled pages in my notebook, and was praised for my diligence. When my experiments didn’t produce the exciting results they were supposed to, I thought I just needed to work more.

Yet here I was, working harder than ever—but not getting anywhere. I didn’t know what to do.

It was late in the evening. One other person was still in the lab: A postdoc, who noticed my distress, came over and gently asked how I was doing. I told him about my struggles with the experiment. I didn’t tell him that I was also wondering what was wrong with me and that I felt like a failure. After we talked through the experiment, the postdoc said, “I think it’s time to go home and get some sleep.” He added with a smile, “Taking a break is also hard work, you know?”

Those comments planted the seed of a new approach. Previously, when my nonresearch friends questioned whether the “always working” ethos that is common among academics was normal or healthy, I had brushed off their concerns. Now, I realized that they were on to something. I started to go easier on myself, to try to make being in the lab from early morning to late evening the exception rather than the norm. Pushing back against the belief that long working hours are the hallmark of a good researcher was hard, and I slipped back into my old routine more than once. But things got a little better. I felt less stressed and my research started to progress. Yet, in the back of my head I still felt guilty for not working “enough.” I hadn’t fully understood what the postdoc was trying to tell me.

A few years later, during my Ph.D., the penny dropped the rest of the way. My adviser and I were at a café, discussing a hurdle facing our field of nanomedicine and many other biomedical fields: that research rarely translates to improved clinical outcomes. As he finished his coffee and rubbed his forehead, he said, “We need to work smarter, not harder.” I had never heard that mantra before, although I now know it is common, and it resonated with me. It also helped me see how academia is often set up around the opposite premise: Working harder and longer is seen as a virtue, regardless of how “smart” that work is.

That conversation helped me understand that exciting, novel ideas do not come from a mind constantly under pressure. My best ideas and “aha” moments almost always come after I allow my mind to relax, to drift—whether that’s playing video games with my brother, cooking a nice dinner, or going on long hikes with my wife. Part of working smarter, I realized, can be taking a break. Fighting academia’s norm of overwork to detach for a while and fully experience something else is an effort—but one worth making.

Today, a decade after that eye-opening evening in the lab, I try to pass this mindset on to my own students. Not too long ago, in the lab one night, I walked by one of my students slumped over her bench. I gently asked how she was doing. She responded that the protocol refused to work, again, despite many attempts. I couldn’t help but see myself all those years ago. We talked for a while about academic life and what it means to be a researcher. I asked her why we do what we do. Often it comes down to pursuing curiosity and passion.

How can we nurture that spirit? The answer does not include working ourselves to exhaustion. Work-life balance is not a detriment to excellent research, or an optional bonus, but an integral part of it. ■

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