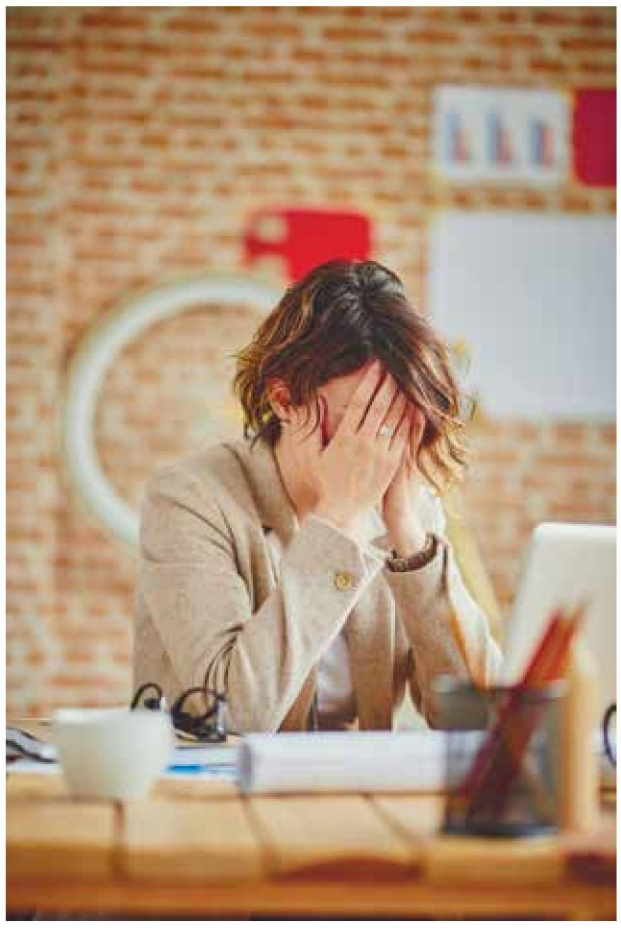
# Why refining your working habits is key to **achieving happiness**



**by Yu Dan Shi**

Workplace stress has escalated over the past few decades. The United Nations' International Labour Organization has identified occupational stress as a global epidemic. Furthermore, a 2017 survey conducted by think-tank Reventure Australia revealed that 73% of employees are stressed about work.

When work gets busy, it's easy to think the only way out is to work harder and longer hours. We know stress levels in the workplace are high. The situation is getting worse with the rapid rate of technological connectivity and the interconnected global economy. We also know that work-life balance is at the top of many companies' agendas.

What we seldom explore is the fact it's not easy for people to achieve work-life balance – unless they have been taught how. We are creatures of habit. We can't change the way we work or live overnight. It's a skill. I am an advocate of working less. I know the consequences of working longer hours: I suffered a severe burnout in my first executive job as a Chief Marketing Officer for a global tech company.

However, I am also pragmatic. In reality, there are a minimum number of hours people must work. But stress isn't only caused by long working hours – it can also be caused by how we manage our psychological and physical wellbeing.

The reality is the majority of the workforce has never been taught how to work in a healthier way or how to perform at an optimal level. Workers have only ever been taught how to work harder.

We expect people to somehow know how to manage their work. It's not that easy. I went through many leadership development programs during my career working for Fortune 100 companies. These companies were eager to develop me. But none of them taught me healthy working habits: how I could truly be at my best.

I was so burnt out in 2008 that it took an emergency operation to force me to look at things differently. My doctor explicitly told me that my life-threatening illness was the result of stress. To the outside world, I was a positive, strong, resilient leader, but I suffered internally and lacked the tools to manage the situation.

The motto I followed was "no pain, no gain". Workaholism is a label people seldom want to wear publicly, yet secretly, we often feel it represents "strength".

Until this way of thinking and working starts to wreck our body. That is because many people use unhealthy means to recover and do not understand how to achieve optimal performance daily.

I saw this happen over and over, how other colleagues got sick due to stress or had to leave their jobs. We know statistically, stress is a silent killer. I recently lost a former mentor, a successful senior executive and beloved leader in his 40s, to a stress-related illness.

At the time, I attributed 100% of my problem to the company and my belief that my job was the wrong one for me. But none of that should have made me sick if I had known how to look after myself better. The job definitely had some misalignment with my talents, and the culture was not ideal, but my stress was largely caused by unhealthy working habits.

Too often, we try to motivate people by telling them to try harder and toughen up. But this only creates more stress, guilt and feelings of inadequacy. It doesn't retain our best talents; instead, it leads to disengagement and high staff turnover. I discovered a better way of working when I studied my Master of Coaching Psychology at the University of Sydney. It gave me invaluable tools that enabled me to work and live at a whole different level.

I learned how to motivate myself naturally without shouting "come on, you can do it"; how to use my natural strengths at work; how not to bring work stress home; how to perform at my peak; how to restore my energy daily; and how to re-design my work and daily agenda to get the best out of myself.

The change was profound. I went back to the same job in the same industry a few months later, but not only was I able to cut back my working hours by 30%, I was rarely stressed. As my vigour and drive returned, I had more energy to look after my kids. I also became a better contributor to the industry. I started to mentor others and served on a not-for-profit board. Eventually, I moved into areas that were more aligned with my natural strengths.

Work has two parts: what the work entails and how you manage it. And as you move up the management ladder, how you work plays an increasingly important role.

As a coach, I have observed that leaders face four common challenges:

- They are unable to cope with the work demand.
- They lose interest in their work.
- They feel stressed.
- They feel stagnated.

These are significant problems. However, they can be resolved or improved by learning better working habits.

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I often see tremendous results within a short period of time. Leaders start to take back control, feel energised and driven. They not only start to perform better at work, but they also feel much happier overall. They sleep soundly at night. Their relationship with their family improves as their psychological wellbeing recovers.

All too often, by the time clients come to see me, they are contemplating leaving their jobs. However, of these clients, only 20% need to make a drastic change. The majority can improve their situations dramatically by learning better working habits.

Telling people to have a work-life balance isn't enough. We need to equip people with the right tools and techniques, so they can work better and be at their best.

We all want to succeed. We don't have to sacrifice our happiness and wellbeing to achieve success. We can succeed in a healthier way – that's the real success.

**Sydney-based Yu Dan Shi is a sought-after coach, mentor and speaker. After hitting rock bottom in 2008 while working as an executive for a Fortune 100 company, she was compelled to search for more meaningful ways to work and live. Today, Yu Dan helps other professionals and executives live an inspired life. She is also the author of the new book, Come Alive – Live a Life with More Meaning and Joy. Learn more www.yudanshi.com**