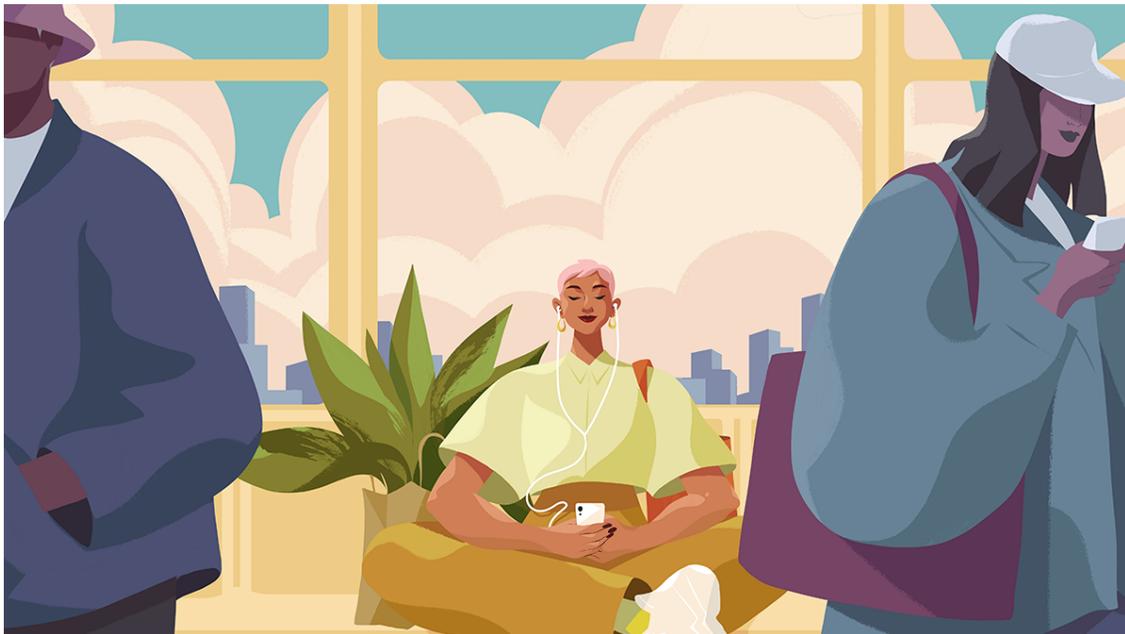


Health

That “Dreaded” Commute Is Actually Good for Your Health

by James R. Bailey and Andy Cohen

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Summary. The overarching narrative, up until now, has been that commuting is a bad thing. Studies show that longer commutes lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased risk of mental health issues, while shorter commutes have the opposite effect. But despite a... [more](#)

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We live in a world of commuters. Because of our love of cars and big suburban houses, 75% of Americans drive to work. Long distances. The average American travels 16 miles each way to their office and 220 million spend at least 1.5 hours a day in their cars.

Globally, those numbers are lower, but not by much: 61% of people in the European Union put in 60 minutes per day commuting. Even those of us who prefer buses, trains, bikes, or scooters invest an inordinate amount of time getting to and from our jobs.

The overarching narrative, up until now, has been that this is a bad thing. Studies show that longer commutes lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased risk of mental health issues, while shorter commutes have the opposite effect. Yet, despite a year of working from home, our job satisfaction and general mental health have continued to deteriorate.

A part of this is the result fewer in-person interactions. The burnout and loss many of us have faced is a large part of it too. But we believe misplacing our commutes has also made a contribution.

Pre-Covid, our commutes were a part of our daily rituals, and rituals have been a natural human behavior since the beginning of time. Nightly prayers are a ritual. Morning showers are a ritual. Even bringing donuts to work on Friday — every Friday, rain or shine— is a ritual. Simply put, a ritual is a process we repeat at more or less fixed times to add some stability and certainty into an otherwise unstable and uncertain world — alleviating feelings of grief, anxiety, and increasing confidence.

So, let us think about your commute.

You wake up at whatever time, stumble downstairs, eat some breakfast, and make a cup of coffee or tea while listening to your favorite podcast. If you have children, a part of your ritual may be dressing them for school. If you have pets, a part of your ritual may be

filling their bowls with kibble and taking a walk around the block. At some point, you shower and put on your work clothes. Tie that tie, wrap that scarf, pull that sweatshirt over your head. You get your backpack or briefcase, check your phone for messages, climb into the car or hop onto your bike or run to catch your train — and off you go.

You've taken this ride countless times. As a matter of fact, you travel the same route every day. During the commute, you turn on the media — maybe it's the news, music, an audio book, or talk radio. You show up at work, do your thing, then repeat the whole process in reverse.

It might seem robotic. It might even seem pathetic. But it's good stuff — for your mind *and* your body!

Here's why.

Structure

Commutes structure our daily behaviors into a nice, neat pattern, and in this pattern, our brains find safety. Why? Structure is written deep into the human genome. It provides us with predictability. When we can predict the future, we are less vulnerable to the dangers that may pop up when we are uncertain about what to expect. This is why partaking in rituals has become a base human instinct — one that is built into our religious services, school days, bedtime, dinnertime, and yes, our commutes.

Initiation and Closure

We have many selves, but two of the primary ones are our home and work identities. Most of us are not completely different people in those two domains. Nonetheless, they often require a different way of thinking, acting, and reacting — that is how it should be. Commutes help us separate those two parts of ourselves, set healthy boundaries between them, and avoid burnout. The moment we step out of our cars into the office, we “switch on” our work identities and the moment we leave the office and climb back into our cars for the commute home we are able to relax and switch back off.

Shared Experience

What was the first thing you used to say to someone upon arriving at work or at school? It likely had something to do with your commute. “The 1/9 was so backed up, even the carpool lane was moving slowly,” or, “The L-train was delayed *again* this morning,” or, “I biked all the way here in the rain!” Prosaic stuff, to be sure, but universal. Most people experience similar dilemmas on their way to work. Not only does this help you sympathize with others, but it also helps you empathize and make connections. You and your coworkers or peers are people of the same club: You are commuters. For the day, week, year, or decade, you are bonded by a common struggle. That brings you closer. That makes you better colleagues. That allows you in social contract.

Purpose

In those many or few minutes on the way to and from work, we often recall our purpose. We are employed for a reason — whether it is to support ourselves or our loved ones, create change and better society, or pursue our passions. Our purpose is the reason for loading ourselves into the car or the train or the bus every day. And at that moment, our existential propane is ignited. Why we’re here is clarified. We’re here to strive and provide. We create value through our unique talents. We achieve and help others to achieve. Commutes help us to reconnect with all the purposes that working taps into, a precursor to improved productivity and job satisfaction.

Preparation

If you’re wise, you don’t go into a meeting unprepared. You’ve got your slides and your speech polished. You’re mentally and emotionally prepared for whatever happens because you’ve set aside time to prepare and practice. Your commute serves a similar purpose: It prepares you for your day. While you drive, ride, or walk, you might be thinking about your meeting with Ronald or Regina and

regulating responses to their ripostes. You might be thinking about your to-do list and which tasks to tackle first. Or maybe you're thinking about how to pitch a new idea to your manager.

This is not lost time. It is readying you for what's to come. Sailors do it. Athletes do it. And so do commuters. By the time you arrive at work, you are ready, steady, and composed. This feeling can only come from the time you spend alone, collecting, gathering, considering, anticipating, and deciding.

Working from home, the seconds between eating breakfast and hopping on your first Zoom call aren't enough, just as the seconds between your last Zoom call and dinner aren't enough to prepare you either. Once we've put a bow on the office, we head home. And we all know that home is not necessarily a sanctuary. We've got to prepare for it too.

What we're trying to say here is commutes are good!

Bringing the Commute Back

In the post-Covid world, how do we capture the benefits that commutes can provide? Hybrid modes of working — partly from home and partly from the office — will surely allow us to restore at least some of what they offer. But how do we recover the rest?

In the end, commutes are about time. That's why our strongest recommendation is to make the time to commute, even when you are working at home. A “virtual” commute, so to speak. Put 15 to 30 minutes on your calendar at the start and end of your workday to make a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual passage from home to work and back again.

Your “commute” could be as simple as spending some solo time meditating in an unoccupied room or taking a short walk around your block before hopping into your first meeting. Whatever you decide, make it a ritual, one you feel safe repeating time and again.

To maintain the balance between who we are and what we do, to prepare ourselves for the latter, and to understand our purpose and position, commuting is a soothing salve. That drive, ride, or walk that we used to despise so much served an important role in activating and orienting us to everyday work. Commutes are not something we have to do. They are something we should do.

So whether you are new to the world of commuting or a grizzled veteran, the process of going from here to there and back again – of becoming this, and then, that, and then, this again – is worth experiencing. Commuting is restorative. After all, it's all about the journey, right?

Now, go enjoy your trip.

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