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## **ARTICLE** **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

# Stop Putting Off Fun for After You Finish All Your Work

*by Ed O'Brien*

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

# Stop Putting Off Fun for After You Finish All Your Work

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How often have you put off doing something fun, like taking a trip or treating yourself, because you felt that you had too much work to do, and you had to get it all done first?

My laboratory has surveyed people from all walks of life about their preferences for ordering work and leisure. Time and time again, we hear the same thing: *of course* you can't just leave and have fun before work is done. Work comes first, leisure comes second.

This sounds intuitive. No one wants to spoil a pleasurable experience because they're worrying about their to-do list or feeling guilty for celebrating prematurely. That's why, for example, we'll schedule a trip for the weekend after a big due date as opposed to the weekend before. We save rewards until after we've actually earned them, hoping that way we can really enjoy ourselves.

But is this intuition correct? My lab recently conducted a series of experiments to test what "leisure first" really feels like — and we found that it's not nearly as worrisome as it seems. Our findings were [published](#) in the journal *Psychological Science*.

In our first experiment, we invited 181 passersby at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago — working adults from diverse employment backgrounds — to complete two activities. One was called the Fixed Labor task, a strenuous battery of cognitive tests; the other was called the Magic Maker game, a fun iPad game involving creating and listening to music.

We randomly assigned some participants to play Magic Maker *after* they had successfully completed Fixed Labor; while others were stuck with the opposite order: they had to play the fun game before getting the harder task over with. Before playing, participants predicted how enjoyable their experience would be on rating scales from -5 to +5. After playing, they rated how their experience actually was.

The result? While participants *thought* activity order would matter a great deal — participants in the "play first" condition predicted significantly lower enjoyment ratings than participants in the "play after" condition — in reality, order didn't matter at all. *Actual* enjoyment ratings were equally high in both conditions. "Play first" participants enjoyed themselves just fine.

We replicated these findings in a follow-up experiment. We built a makeshift "spa" in the laboratory — with a massage chair and footbath — for 259 ever-at-work University of Chicago students. Students could choose to come during the weeks right after their stressful midterm exam period or during the weeks right before midterms began. (We had essentially the same number of students show up at both time periods, and they were of similar age, gender, etc.) They predicted their enjoyment before visiting and rated their experience afterward.

We found that while the students who visited the spa before midterms *predicted* that the experience would be less enjoyable due to looming midterms exams, they actually enjoyed themselves just as much as those who visited the spa after midterms. The intuition was again mistaken.

Why don't we think "leisure first" will be as fun as leisure later? The answer has to do with our ideas about distraction. In the spa experiment, we also asked the students to predict the percentage of time they'd be distracted by midterms as opposed to just sitting back and enjoying the massage. Then, after actually having the spa experience, they reported the actual percentage of time that they ended up being distracted. While the students assumed they would be highly distracted if they received a massage before midterms (they predicted exams would dominate nearly 40% of their attention at the

spa), this didn't actually happen. In reality, the students thought about midterms less than 20% of the time. They mostly just enjoyed themselves.

In a final experiment, we tried to help people better appreciate the power of putting leisure first. We invited 332 students to the laboratory to complete two studies: one was dubbed the Cognitive Marathon, a series of stressful performance tasks (e.g., timed challenges similar to the Rubik's cube); the other was framed as a reward for their hard work completing the marathon — it involved snacking and watching funny videos. We told all participants that they had to complete the reward study first. They were led to believe that the Cognitive Marathon would be next, but we never actually had them suffer through it. Our main goal was to see how they enjoyed the reward despite not yet “earning” it from completing the harder task.

We randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions. In one condition, participants completed the reward study and rated how enjoyable it was. Like in our other studies, these participants appeared unbothered by upcoming work and rated the reward as extremely enjoyable. This was our benchmark for the other two conditions, in which we asked the participants to *guess* the enjoyment ratings of people in the first condition.

One group simply made their guesses with no other information. They significantly underestimated people's actual enjoyment; like in our other studies, they assumed the reward would be much less enjoyable than it really was.

The other group also made these predictions, but first they answered a series of guided “zoom-in” questions, designed to remind them of the absorbing power of fun. For example, one question was, “Think about the experience of taste, while in the moment of actually chewing on a tasty snack. Let's say this lasts for 10 seconds. What's actually going on moment-to-moment?” Then they saw 10 blank lines, representing each second, and were asked to specify what they'd likely be thinking and feeling during the experience. (Participants listed things like “Just savoring” and “Just sitting back and feeling the pleasure.”) This exercise was meant to make it easier for them to appreciate the gustatory sensations despite other distractions.

That's exactly what we found. After completing the “zoom-in” task, they more accurately predicted just how enjoyable the reward study was for the participants in the first condition. By breaking down a leisure experience into moment-by-moment detail, they were better able to appreciate the feelings we associate with leisure: pleasure, excitement, stimulation, and relaxation.

Our findings suggest we may be over-worrying and over-working for future rewards that could be just as pleasurable in the present. We're all familiar with the ideal of delayed gratification. American workers [work longer hours and take fewer vacations](#) than anyone in the industrialized world. Most of them are [unhappy with work-life balance](#), [leave paid vacation days](#) on the table, and wish they [took more time for fun](#).

This is a problem, because, among other benefits, leisure improves our work. People often [work better](#) and are [more satisfied](#) with their jobs after returning from restful breaks. Enjoying work also helps people [stick to longer-term goals](#). If people intuitively put leisure last — there’s *always* more work to do — they may fail to take advantage of such leisure opportunities and end up feeling burned out or dissatisfied at work. We may keep postponing doing something fun for “the right time,” only to realize that it never seems to come.

Fighting this intuition won’t be easy. But you can allocate your work and leisure to get better at enjoying yourself now. Here are three steps:

**First: Ask yourself why you’re hesitant to do something fun or to reward yourself.** If you find yourself thinking, “It’ll detract from my work,” you might be right. Some leisure can undermine our ability to work afterwards — nobody is recommending having celebratory beers just *before* you run your 5k. But if you find yourself thinking, “It’ll ruin my fun, and the payoff will be better if I wait,” you might be wrong. This is not to suggest that delayed gratification doesn’t pay off. After all, even in our own studies leisure-*after*-work was just as great as people thought it would be. But the point here is that leisure-*before*-work may be just as rewarding.

**Second: Spend a moment trying to visualize the fun experience in greater detail.** Close your eyes and bring it to life moment-by-moment. Engaging in highly specific, concrete, and directed imagination is something [good decision makers do often](#), but most of us do rarely. Consider our “zoom-in” experiment where people simply listed out what the experience would be like and improved their predictions about the value of leisure. In real life, if you’re worried about taking time off before finishing a big project, you could list the many things you’ll be doing during some vacation to help you remember the fact that enjoyment is immersive. The experience likely won’t be spoiled by your being distracted.

**Third: Try actually engaging in “leisure first” when the stakes are low.** Go have some fun (perhaps a quick trip to the spa) with some work left undone. Pay attention to where your attention is in the moment and how work feels once you return to it. The [most effective strategy](#) for shedding our biases is to go through an experience ourselves. Unfortunately, our intuitions against “leisure first” makes us avoid finding out what it actually feels like. A small experiment now will become a helpful, vivid reminder when you’re later trying to organize your work and leisure.

Having fun may seem like hard work. It’s not. You could wait for a “right time” to enjoy something or just enjoy it now. The point is, you’ll enjoy it either way.

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