Maintaining equilibrium in life has become more difficult in this increasingly fast-paced world, but that also makes it all the more important, writes **Alex Andersson**

BALANCING ACT

THINKSTOCK

It's official: our society's got ADD. "We've become accustomed to over-stimulation, so a lot of people have developed very short attention spans. A big reason for that is the bombardment of tweets, texts and emails that we are constantly exposed to, coming from all directions," says Laura Leist, chief product officer at Eliminate Chaos, organisation and productivity solution specialists.

Combine this with a demanding work environment that includes regular travel, high levels of responsibility and communication across time zones and you get a situation where you are reachable, and working, at any given moment – all day, every day.

This fast-paced, hyper-connected environment not only blurs the lines between personal and professional life, but it also disables us from focusing on our mental wellbeing, says Leist.

"People have lost touch with themselves and knowing when they are stressed."

Unintentionally, the checking of emails, pings, tweets and bleeps can reach near-compulsive levels. And this is a slippery segue to a point where work dominates disproportionately, and starts to tangibly affect your wellbeing.

This is a particularly dangerous situation for certain personality types, says Dr Clara To, director and

principal consultant at the Hong Kong Psychology Society. According to Dr To, Type A personalities (see box on P50) are especially prone to prioritising work excessively.

Do you work over 48 hours a week? If so, your life is unbalanced, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). And you are not alone. One in five workers globally exceed this benchmark, according to the ILO paper *Working Time Around the World*, which also confirms that "long working hours are common in the Asian region". It lists Indonesia, South Korea, Pakistan and Thailand as some of the worst offenders, with over 40 per cent of the workforce exceeding 48 hours a week. In a recent poll, 67.8 per cent of *Business Traveller* Asia-Pacific readers agreed that Asia "absolutely" had especially high stress levels.

So business people on this workaholic continent, surrounded by the incessant beeps of global communication, are exposed to conditions that cultivate overwork, and a concerted effort is required in order to recognise, reflect on and reconcile habitual overworking with personal needs.

SIGNS OF IMBALANCE

These are both psychological and physical, and usually affect one another.

The first sign is not being able to sleep, or sleep through the night. This indicates that you are stressed and have too much on your mind. Weight fluctuations are also common among the overworked. "You eat differently, your body processes food differently, and if you don't eat at appropriate times it can affect digestion and nutrition uptake," Leist explains.

In the long term, researchers Meyer Friedman and RH Rosenman have linked serious medical conditions such as high blood pressure and heart disease to stress.

But the most devastating effects can be emotional, says Dr To. "People can become easily irritated and act out in extremes – closing themselves up into their own comfort zones and not listening."

"This can be detrimental to relationships in the long run," agrees Judy Warmington from the Organizing Specialists. If you find yourself working in the evenings, weekends and on holidays you miss out on time with family and friends, and this will inevitably result in you growing more distant from them, she adds.

Leist concurs, saying "people have to realise that every time they are saying 'yes' to something, they are also saying 'no' to something else."

And personal time deserves the same attention as work, as Dr To points out, since "a lack of a social network actually increases the likelihood of an inability to effectively manage stress."

The following are a few valuable tools for helping achieve a greater balance between your professional and personal life, which ultimately alleviates stress and the ills that it may bring.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Often people overwork because they have packed far too many things into their schedule. It is important to review what you do in a day, and eliminate and delegate, says Leist. "Realise that you might have to let things go, and let someone else step in and do it. That's very hard for people, but it needs to be done to lessen stress."

So in order to allow more time for life, your commitments must be balanced and reasonable. In order to achieve this, it is advisable to have regular meetings with your colleagues and discuss workload, tasks, etc, and allocate or rotate

them accordingly. If it's too much, consider hiring a part-time admin assistant. Then make sure you and your colleagues leave work on time, at least most nights a week.

This also applies to home life, says Leist. If your time spent at home is taken up by housework it might be helpful to consider domestic support, which leaves you more time to relax, engage in hobbies and spend time with people you love.

WORK SMART

Another way to avoid work encroaching on personal time is to maximise office time, and get more things done in the working day. For this, actions have to be streamlined, and organisation is an effective tool.

"When people think of organisation they tend to think of the visible forms of clutter, like piles of paper on their desk, but often what they don't consider are the non-visible forms of clutter which can be wiped by systems and processes that allow people and companies to be productive and profitable," Leist explains.

Consider how much time in your day is spent opening file within file or scrolling down long lists of outdated documents. It may not seem like much, but mundane tasks like that add up to quite a lot of time collectively.

You can combat this by setting aside half an hour to delete obsolete files that make finding a document akin to navigating a virtual maze, and creating shortcuts to things you need to access often. Much software comes equipped with systems to ease tasks – and these tools are your friend, not your foe. Familiarise yourself with them, and use them.

DISCONNECT

Maintain clear boundaries between work time and personal time. If this requires you to turn off your gadgets, then do so. It is important to detach in order to be able to give personal commitments your full attention.

"Ask yourself, 'What's the worst thing that will happen if I don't check my email, answer a text, or take a phone call?' We usually find that it's not as important as we imagine," says Treva Berends, also of the Organization Specialists.

Another effective way of doing this is by having a separate room in the house where all work-related documents, computers and so on are kept so that you create a physical separation.

CHOOSE LIFE

Taking the time to exercise, eat well and cultivate your personal relationships actually helps you work productively. As mentioned, stress can lead to disturbed sleep and health, and if you are not functioning at an optimum level you will not be as productive at work. So taking extended holiday time to unwind is important, says Leist.

"Everybody is different, but in general, in our high-stress society, it takes the body and mind at least five days to fully relax and readjust. At which point you might be going back to work."

Similarly, activities like reading, painting, sports and socialising work to relieve stress and should at least be given equal importance to work commitments. Leist suggests we allocate a regular time slot in our schedules for it, because ultimately "nobody is going to lie on their deathbed and wish that they had worked more; they are probably going to wish they had spent more time doing the fun things in life." ■

PRACTICAL TIPS

■ Make a list of things you enjoy, and want to do. Keep it somewhere visible.
■ Manage your time. Use a calendar.
■ Track how much time you spend on any given task during the day – then delegate and eliminate.
■ Have separate work and personal computers.
■ Develop regular 5-10 minute breathing and muscle-relaxing exercises.
■ Try to clear your mind with brief meditation stints.
■ Don't bring your phone to the dinner table.