



# How's Your Work/Life Balance?

If you're not prioritizing self-care and self-compassion, now is the time to start.

BY ROSIE WOLF WILLIAMS

**A**fter he moved from Queens, N.Y., to Olympia, Wash., Steve Francks discovered backpacking. Long days on the trail allowed him to take in the beauty of the moment.

"If I think about work, it's not about details and little things," says Francks, RCE, CAE, CEO of Washington REALTORS®. "It's about big-picture stuff. Being able to decompress like that lets me come off the trail with greater energy and enthusiasm for my job. I first experienced that in a big way when I hiked the Wonderland Trail, a nine-day, 93-mile trip around the base of Mount Rainier that is physically demanding and incredibly beautiful. I was so recharged that I made backpacking a priority every summer."

According to the American Institute of Stress, 76% of American workers say their work-related stress has caused tension in their personal lives. Francks found a healthy way to destress and reconnect with loved ones. "My wife is an avid and strong backpacker, and we've done a lot of great trips together," he says.

Hiking plays a part in Cindy Butts' well-being, too, and she often incorporates her love of the outdoors when traveling for work. "The Code of Ethics includes the beautiful preamble, 'Under all is the land,'" says Butts, RCE, CAE, CEO of Connecticut REALTORS® in East Hartford, Conn. She began by hiking Connecticut's 52-mile stretch of the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail, and then she was hooked. "I hiked parts of the Shenandoah National Park section over a series of years when traveling to D.C. for the REALTORS® Legislative Meetings, and parts of the Georgia section when traveling to Atlanta for the AE Institute," she says. "When hiking, I'm so mindful of—and connected to—the gifts of clean air, clean water, natural resources and green space. Those don't leave my head or heart as I work on real estate legislative and regulatory issues."

Both Francks and Butts have managed workplace stress by practicing self-care through outdoor activities, but they might be in the minority. Many people do not recognize when they are nearing burnout or experiencing too-high stress.



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“There has been [extensive research] on people who are in the helping professions,” says Amelia Roeschlein, a consultant at the National Council for Mental Wellbeing in Washington, D.C. That includes both association executives and their members. “If your job is dealing with people, and you're good at it, often you have a high amount of empathy for others. The problem is that you may tend to be incredibly self-critical.”

### Finding a Passion is Self-Compassion

Roeschlein suggests that leaders should observe how they are treating themselves during stressful times, pointing out that executives often push themselves to produce more and to accomplish more.

“What we find is that people who are kinder to themselves during hard times tend to fare much better,” she says. “Have a practice of well-being where you ask yourself, ‘Am I overwhelmed? How full is my cup?’ Even when it is full, you need to take care of yourself.”

One helpful tool that Roeschlein points executives to is an online quiz called The Self-Compassion Test, at [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org), that can help you measure how

self-compassionate you are and offers practices to help you balance and decompress.

Francks says that he realized backpacking was positively affecting his work when he started coming off the trail with new creative ideas. “I'm convinced that we have lots of information and challenges overwhelming our brains every day, but we rarely have time to just sit and contemplate answers or strategies,” he says. “I find that getting away to the wilderness for days, or even a day hike, with no cell service, lets me forget about the daily stressful details of the job and lets crazy ideas pop into my head and percolate. Some of my best ideas have come to me on the trail with a sudden sense of clarity, as though they rose out of my subconscious.”

### Beginning to Balance

Executives need to remind themselves that their own personal well-being is at least as important as the work. “There is overwhelming data on how harmful overworking is to a person's mental and physical health, and how it can make you less productive and more error prone,” says Francks. “A stressed-out leader who can't find time for themselves or their family is not doing themselves or the association any favors—and is not setting a good example for the members.”

“I am a work in progress,” admits Duncan MacKenzie, RCE, CEO of New York State Association of REALTORS® in Albany. Golf, a sport he began playing as a kid with his dad, can bring comfort and a sense of perspective about challenges in the office. “Just like in golf, workplace mistakes that aren't reckless or intentional are learning experiences,” he says. “I always give my staff another shot.”



Left: During a state CEO annual retreat, Duncan MacKenzie, New York State Association of REALTORS®, golfed with fellow AEs, all part of a close-knit group that regularly collaborates. Pictured from left are Nick Kremydas, Rob Campau, Jarrod Grasso, MacKenzie, Scott Reiter and Gavin Blair. Center: Steve Francks, Washington REALTORS®, is an avid backpacker. Right: Cindy Butts, Connecticut REALTORS®, often includes a hike during her travel time to conferences.



The COVID-19 pandemic drove home the importance of the sport to MacKenzie’s mental well-being. When golf courses were approved for use after New York state’s order to isolate, MacKenzie was on a course on opening day. “After that round and a small return to normalcy, I had a sense that I was going to get through everything without losing my mind.”

Genevieve Hawkins, executive leader and author of *Mentally at Work*, reminds leaders that what works for one person won’t work for everyone. She points out that there are four important aspects of decompressing:

- **Physical**—Exercise or enjoy a sport, even simply walking the dog or taking a brisk walk around the block, if time is limited.
- **Emotional**—Laughter is the best medicine in this category and can be found by spending time with a friend, watching comedy shows or reading a humorous book.
- **Mental**—Focus on projects or events outside of work, journaling, playing cards or gardening.
- **Spiritual**—Connect to something greater than ourselves. This can include nature-based activities such as forest bathing, the Japanese practice of immersing oneself in a tree-filled space; listening to mood-shifting music; or practicing mindfulness or meditation.

### Love Yourself More than Work

Many activities can touch more than one of these four categories and help an executive decompress. “There can be a risk, when we love our work, that we get lost in it,” says Hawkins. “You need others around you who can call you on it. You want friends who can appreciate the energy that work might bring but also hold you to account for spending time with them.”

“You often hear among the CEO crowd that our work is our hobby. The reality of it is that this job is stressful,” admits Andrea Bushnell, RCE, CEO of North Carolina Association of REALTORS®. “We have times when things are just insanely busy, and it is stressful when you can’t ever see the end of your to-do list. You’ll have days where you look at your list and you have not done one thing. But you write down six things just so you can check them off so that you feel accomplished.”

Bushnell took up tennis to decompress from work and heal from hip problems that had left her relatively immobile, leading to a hip replacement. “I was having a glass or two of wine while my husband was out playing tennis and being healthy,” she says. “[Then] I was sitting at my desk one day, and I was thinking, ‘If somebody were chasing me, could I run away from them?’ I decided that I was going to take up tennis. It’s freeing, almost a relief.”

### Pace Yourself

For hikers, a common expression is “Hike your own hike.” “[That] applies to work, too,” says Butts. “Many association executives start to feel burnout the first year on the job, and they need to embrace that they are hiking their own hike—not their predecessors’ and not the hike of other association executives.

“We each need to pace ourselves, figure out how to breathe, take a break when it is needed, prepare for problems and set our own victories.” ●

*Rosie Wolf Williams is a writer whose work has appeared in USA Weekend, Woman’s Day, AARP the Magazine and elsewhere.*