

It's Blur O'Clock on a Blurday

By Govindh Jayaraman, Head Coach IMBA Medical



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It's almost like a scene from "The Office" or, depending on your vintage, possibly even "Seinfeld."

I can almost imagine it. If we're thinking of "The Office," either Michael or Dwight, or if "Seinfeld," George, sharing how they miss the sound of the door closing at their office on their way out of work at the end of the day. Waxing on about the way the door sounds as it latches, beckoning freedom and fun.

At least that's the image that came to mind when a friend shared a story with me around April 2020. Unfortunately, that's not quite how our script played out. There was no punch line. No laugh track.

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I can't remember if we were having a virtual coffee or a virtual beer. It could have been one of the first virtual birthday celebrations that have now become commonplace. I was sitting down with a few of my friends in two dimensions, sharing a tasty beverage. Most of the people on the call are fairly high-achieving folk, so it didn't take long for the conversation to shift to work.

The themes are predictable. What's new at work? How are you guys handling virtual work? Do you feel more productive? The conversation, however, took a turn that I wasn't expecting at the time.

One of my virtual mates mentioned something unusual in that conversation. "I miss the sound of my door," he said.

I asked him what he meant.

He went on, "I miss the sound that the door makes when I close it on my way out of the office." He mentioned that his boss is a tireless worker and pulled in late hours most days. But, when

his door closed when he was in the office, the day was done and my friend did not need to think about work any longer. It was a physical cue to change gears, essentially physically distancing himself from work. Now, post pandemic and in the remote work world, he felt like he was on call far more often.

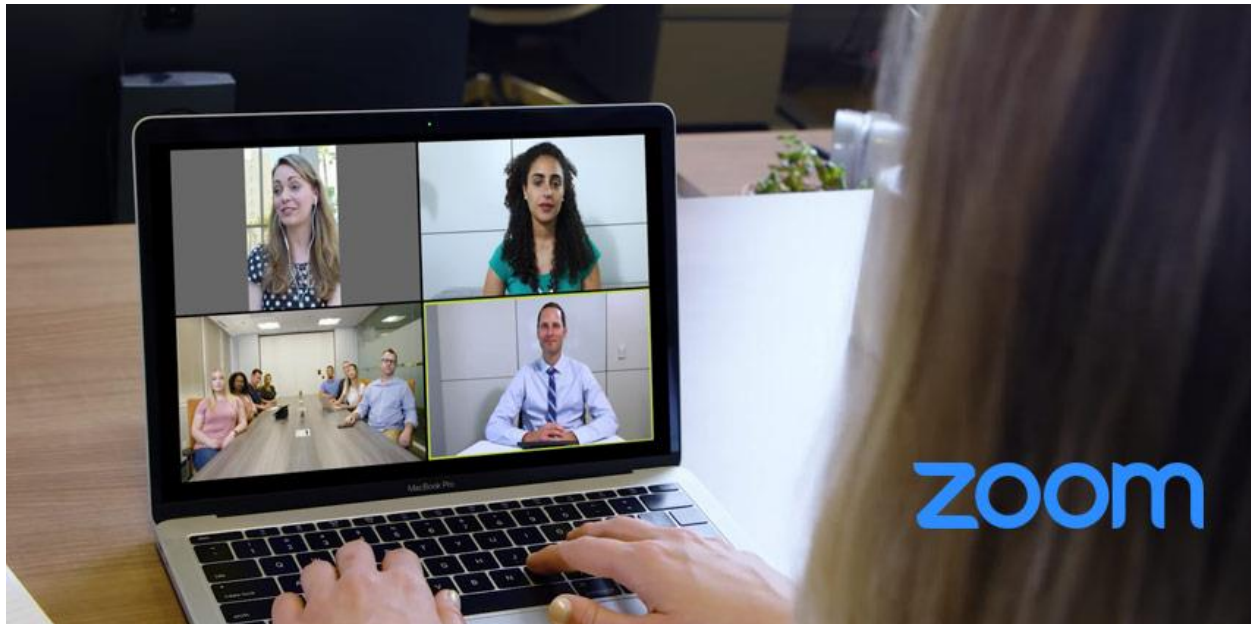
The door never closes anymore. And that brings to mind a vitally important question: What happens when we can't close the door on work?

Morning Rituals

Over the past decade or two, there has been an increasing number of research papers and studies that document the value of morning mindset. There have been volumes written about how to build effective morning routines. Waking up early, making your bed and other steps have been coached into human behavior based on these learnings. Army generals, business tycoons and authors have made best sellers out of morning habit rituals and how to build them.

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Now a year later, after zoom meetings and zoom fatigue, what are the indicators for mental health in the community?



Not good.

The ongoing effects of the mental health pandemic that shadow the coronavirus pandemic are significant:¹

- 62% of employees report feeling more overwhelmed than before the pandemic.
- 53% feel that the toll of this overwhelms their personal mental health and well-being.

¹¹ https://files.kff.org/attachment/Frontline%20Health%20Care%20Workers_Full%20Report_FINAL.pdf.

- 71% of those working as service providers report negative health impacts of the pandemic and that those to whom they provide services are more argumentative, less appreciative and harder to serve.

Of course, work from home also had some benefits, as reported at the beginning of the pandemic. Many people felt that they were more productive and happier working from home. And, in fact, many people do not wish for the “work from home” benefits to end anytime soon.

The benefits of “work from home” have, however, started to fade. Only 11% of employees feel more productive than a year ago, 35% feel more productive but less engaged, and 55% were both less productive and less engaged. This does not bode well for the much-hyped V-shaped recovery that has been ballyhooed.

Why Is the Pandemic Having Such an Impact on Mental Health?

There are really a number of reasons for this. We are all experiencing some form of trauma related to COVID-19. The constant reporting about news to the never-ending changes of what we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do are affecting our collective mental health. This is a phenomenon that is widespread across the globe and affects us in many ways:



Anxiety and Lack of Sleep. Stress and anxiety are feeding poor sleep, which is creating a vicious cycle. The more people lie awake, the more people will feel anxious the next day and, generally, our mental health becomes worse.

Loneliness. There is also the significant impact of loneliness. Social and physical distancing have left people isolated and, while that does not actually affect us all equally, as many of us are still living with our families, it is the variety or the number of people that we interact with that has drastically changed. People who are younger or living alone have truly felt this more than anyone else. And the people who are living with their families in less-than-ideal circumstances have found that pressure to become overwhelming. This has been something that has significantly affected those in the lower socioeconomic strata more severely than those who may be more affluent.

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Domestic Abuse. Both children and adults who were subject to abuse prior to the pandemic currently have no access to a safe haven. Increasing incidents of domestic abuse and violence have been reported around the world. While scientific surveys are only just beginning, the preliminary results confirm that these trends among those already experiencing domestic

violence have gotten worse in more than 60% of the cases. This comes down to a variety of factors, one of which is obvious. They are spending more time with their aggressors. Adding to this dynamic, their aggressors are also under more pressure financially and from other mental health factors. All of these add up to be compounding impacts to the overall level of domestic abuse.

Demographics. While COVID-19 presents greater health risks to older people, early data appear to show that younger people are struggling more emotionally. This is due to several factors, one of which is somewhat simplistic in its concept. If someone is 60 years old and has spent the last 12 to 14 months in relative forms of isolation or physical distancing due to the pandemic, that is less than 2% of their lifetime. On the other hand, if that same period was experienced by someone who is only 10 years old, that would represent more than 10% of their life to date. Moreover, it could start to become a feeling of the isolation being never-ending.

It has also anecdotally been observed that women are faring worse from mental health effects of the pandemic than men. Time and study will be required to understand this impact better.

Socioeconomic Status. Income and education play a significant role in the mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic because the pandemic threatens the economy of those who are most vulnerable to economic upswings and downswings and are facing the financial realities of the pandemic much more severely. Though politicians around the globe have liked to say that we are all in this together, it is very clear that this is not true from a socio-economic perspective. Individuals and families on the lower end of the income spectrum have suffered more and have been more physically affected by COVID-19 than other groups.

Racism. The world over, there are significantly higher incidents of racial violence than there were prior to the pandemic. And, in fact, within particular racial communities in the United States, there have been a higher number of incidences of COVID-19 fatalities and illnesses. For example, research shows that more than 25% of black Americans know somebody who was hospitalized due to COVID-19 whereas that number is only about 10% for white Americans. These social inequalities have significant mental health impacts.

Work. One of the most significant disruptions has, obviously, been to our work lives. This could even include students' work lives, for example. While our first responders have taken on the valiant and urgent task of caring for COVID-19 patients, other essential workers at lower income and education levels have also put themselves in harm's way to sell food and otherwise provide essential services that help to keep a community operating. The disruptions to this work/life balance have been substantial and significant. While some of that has turned into increased unemployment, the other significant impact has been the blurring together of hours and days into something that becomes difficult to manage. Work seemingly has no start time or end time anymore. And part of that is because everybody is trying to accommodate the additional challenges of working from home during the pandemic.

And that's where evenfall comes into play.

Flatlining occurs when the body operates in a continuous state of energy, with no intervals of recovery or recharging.

So, What Is Evenfall?

As the dictionaries explain it:

e•ven•fall ě'vən-fôl"

n. The fall of evening; early evening; twilight.

n. Beginning of evening.

Evenfall is defined as the early evening – the fall of the evening, so to speak. It has been a time of day that has largely been overlooked. Or perhaps, more accurately, it has been overwhelmed. It has been overwhelmed by your afternoon commute, perhaps. Or the rush home to pick up your children and take them to their various activities. This natural oscillation of responsibility from work to family has given people an opportunity to change gears. Nowadays, we seem to operate only in one gear. For most people that gear is starting to burn out.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunities that come with working from home have also overwhelmed evenfall, but in a different kind of way. It has now been overwhelmed by “The Blur.” The Blur is what has happened to time, to boundaries, to our general ability to keep work and home life physically distant. It was only in 2017 when Professor Robert Kelly was famously interrupted by his children and his wife during an interview with the BBC (<https://youtu.be/Mh4f9AYRCZY>). The video of Professor Kelly and his family went viral at the time, but now this sort of situation has become normal.

Fast forward a few years and now it is quite normal to see family in the background of video calls made for work. Dogs barking, kids joining into conversations and waving to colleagues, working from the kitchen table and even getting caught in webcam filters – like the lawyer who became a cat – have become normal. The counterpoint of this collision of work and homelife, however, is the blurring of the lines between when is it time for work and when people are engaging with their families.

The lines of the time of day become blurred, as parents are more likely to have to spend time during the day supporting their children in distance learning activities and perhaps using evening hours for work. Likewise, weekdays and weekends are similarly blurring together.

Some of Gallup's ongoing COVID-19 Panel tracking findings² about the “Blur” are incredible:

- Approximately 8 of 10 employees have said they are doing their job differently.
- About half of this group have said the changes have made their jobs harder.

Incredibly, other surveys have also shown that nearly half of all employees are working more hours now than they were before the pandemic.³ The bad news didn't stop there as working

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/339824/pandemic-affected-work-life.aspx>.

³ <https://www.joblist.com/trends/balancing-life-as-a-working-parent-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

mothers were more than twice as likely to say that their work-life balance since the start of the pandemic was poor and, likely uncoincidentally, one in four said their relationship with their partner had worsened. Women were also more likely to state that the support they received to promote work-life balance from their employer was poor.

This lines up with a worrying trend in the Gallup poll, which showed that nearly half of all employees felt that their employers were supportive of their well-being early in the pandemic but now that number has dropped to about a third.

Fewer than one in 10 parents say they are less stressed than they were at the start of the pandemic.

Now, back to evenfall. This is the time of day most generally obscured or blurred by the pandemic/work-life balance issues.

Early on, people joked about this with a never-ending parade of memes. Who could forget the coffee cups running relay races with the wine glasses with captions like “This is me ... every day.”

Add to this the lack of a “forced” end of workday routine that could have involved anything from meeting a colleague or client for an after-work drink or meal to managing personal and family responsibilities. All these activities, and their inherent opportunities to add cadence to our days, are gone.

The impact of this lack of cadence and natural oscillation of energy and attention from personal to work life and back again is something well within our control, however, and is a well-known pitfall.

Dr. Heidi Hanna, a neuroscience and brain health expert, *New York Times* bestselling author, instructor of the Brain Health and Performance Course at Harvard Extension School and a Fellow of the American Institute of Stress, cautions against those days when we are forced to go “back to back” in meetings and obligations. “You may think that all that adrenaline is your best friend. But it turns out it’s a fickle friendship,” she explains. “Just as the name implies, flatlining occurs when the body operates in a continuous state of energy, with no intervals of recovery or recharging.”

Short periods of down time will recharge your body and mind for better balance and endurance.

She goes on to caution against what she calls *brain fatigue*. “Overtaxing certain parts of your brain, like the logical/analytical portion, while undertraining others (creative/reflexive, for example) can leave you feeling out of balance and losing steam. And multitasking, once a badge of honor, is really leading to decreased productivity, leaving you frustrated and stressed.”

The lack of a natural cadence to the day is robbing your brain of the variety of activities that would naturally have occurred when you used to leave the house for the office, walked from your transportation into the office, added lunches, water cooler conversation, surprise

meetings or drop-ins from colleagues or clients and then, of course, rushed home and into evenfall.

Variety is the spice of life, and variety is the cure for all these things.

Morning routines and, just as important, evenfall routines, are essential ingredients to ensuring that our brains and energy levels are naturally able to oscillate between activities and, more important, types of activities. As we change what we do, we change how we're thinking. Staying in "one" zone for too long each day puts us in the zone where our energy flatlines.

So, What Do We Do About It?

The solutions are remarkably simple to conceive and, likely in equal measure, difficult to implement without the positive peer pressure that supports some of the natural shifts of focus and energy that usually occur during our days. Even the simplicity of your colleagues poking their heads around the corner to wish you "goodnight" or "see you tomorrow" would be helpful. Here are some ideas to try.

Step 1: Morning Routine. Build a routine that sets up your day. Researchers from McMaster University joined forces with the World Health Organization (WHO) to study more closely the impacts of COVID-19 stress on students. Many of their recommendations⁴ focused on maintaining, or establishing, a morning routine that includes a healthy sleep schedule. They recognized that maintaining a normal schedule is harder during the pandemic, which makes it more essential. It is harder to maintain a regular routine throughout the day if you do not start the day with one.

Start small; create a "wake up" routine where you focus on positive intentions and mindset before you get out of bed. Perhaps take a few minutes to journal about positive thoughts for the day; give yourself an opportunity to not only express but feel gratitude for the day to come.

Then, when you get out of bed, make it. Start your day by ending your sleep. No better way to physically do this than to make the bed.



Step 2: Take Breaks. Rather than setting meetings for 30 and 60 minutes, set them for 25 and 50 minutes, respectively. Give yourself 5-10 minutes of alone time, meaning, don't save the time to spend it on more work. Take those 5-10 minutes to reflect, breathe purposefully, stretch, or just walk outside for a moment. Give your eyes and heart a chance to contemplate something else, for yourself, in that time.

⁴ <https://brighterworld.mcmaster.ca/articles/new-study-examines-students-mental-health-and-covid-19/>.

Short periods of down time, applied regularly, will recharge your body and mind for better balance and endurance. You'll have more energy. And making movement a part of your breaks can really help to keep you focused and balance your energy. Another idea is to plan on standing up for all of your phone calls.

Step 3: Fuel Up. Making sure you have planned for several small meals and snacks during the day. Focus on nutritious and healthy food whenever possible and watch out for what you are drinking! Too much caffeine and sugar can depress your energy levels artificially and can even affect your sleep.

Did you know that staying hydrated can also help you manage stress and feelings of fatigue in the mid parts of the afternoon?

Step 4: Evenfall Mindfulness. Close the door. Build a routine that symbolizes the Evenfall Mindset of leaving the office. Perhaps you could include a short interlude of gratitude (like the one you started with in the morning). Some organizations have group Intranets or Slack channels; maybe you could start wishing people goodnight and signing off for the day intentionally at a regular time. This must be a time that works for your new work/live schedule – but it is helpful to make it a schedule.

Regaining Control

Our team at IMBA Medical wondered if we could support employee mindfulness, help them regain control of their routines and, particularly, support the re-establishment of end-of-day routines.

Can we help them blow the whistle on the end of their day?

Could we remind them to close the door?

To support this exercise, we designed a pilot program and invited a group of participants to join in. Over the course of our pilot, each participant would receive a reminder to engage in a short mindfulness practice, along with a video link, delivered by way of IMBA's proprietary nudging technology called *Take Action*. *Take Action* would send each participant a nudge with a personalized message and a link to video that would align with a theme early each morning and again at evenfall. Participants could select their theme for the week.

Our expectations were based on research that suggested to us that 20-30% would be engaged with our nudges on a weekly basis.

Interestingly, the results showed that all of our pilot participants engaged in the mindfulness nudges weekly. Participants were just about as likely to engage with evenfall nudges as morning nudges which, again, was a surprise as Evenfall Mindfulness is a relatively new concept.

With this early-stage success, we intend to extend our Morning and Evenfall Mindfulness program (MEM Program) to more than 10,000 participants starting this summer.

While we have got a process for this and science to support the nudge techniques we employ, mindfulness is not that hard to put into place.

All it takes is to remember to do it. An alarm or a calendar reminder can help to do the trick. Just wait for the alarm and finish what you were working on. Take five intentional breaths in and out, make each of them as long as you can, just focus on your breath, notice how the air feels coming into your lungs and leaving them. Just breathe. Then close the laptop, close the door, do something else.

Imagine the sound of your door closing, imagine walking out of your building.

Save a moment for yourself.

Imagine you are leaving the office behind.

Embrace evenfall and, perhaps, tomorrow will feel just a little less blurry.

