

We're all just so "busy" these days. "Slammed" in fact. "Buried." Desperately "trying to keep our heads above water." While these common responses to "How are you?" seem like they're lifted from the Worst Case Scenario Handbook, there seems to be a constant exchange, even a one-upping, of just how much we have on our plates when we communicate about our work.

My favorite "busy" humble-brag was that of a potential client who apologized for lack of communication due to a "week-long fire drill." What does that even mean? Does this mean there were fake fires, but not real ones, all week? Does calling it a "drill" mean that everything is okay? Is your business in flames? Should I call someone?

Then there was the date I had with a fellow who was so busy "crashing on deadlines" that he asked me to "just make a reservation somewhere" for him. I was floored.

So much of this is about out-doing each other. To say that "I'm busier than you are" means I'm more important, or that my time is more valuable, or that I am "winning" at some never-finished rat race to Inbox Zero. (Inbox Zero is another absurd contest to tackle at another time.) What you're trying to say with these responses is: I'm busier, more in-demand, more successful.

Here's the thing: it's harming how we communicate, connect, and interact. Everyone is busy, in different sorts of ways. Maybe you have lots of clients, or are starting a new business, or are

taking care of a newborn. The point is this: with limited time and unlimited demands on that time, it's easy to fill your plate with activities constantly. But this doesn't mean that you should.

To assume that being "busy" (at this point it has totally lost its meaning) is cool, or brag-worthy, or tweetable, is ridiculous. By lobbing these brags, endlessly puffing our shoulders about how "up to my neck" we are, we're missing out on important connections with family and friends, as well as personal time. In addition to having entire conversations about how busy we are, we fail to share feelings with friends and family, ask about important matters, and realize that the "busy" is something that can be put on hold for a little while.

I am not trying to belittle anyone's work-load in the slightest. But in using it as a one-upping mechanism, we're failing to connect in a very substantial way. And we're making the problem worse: When everyone around us is "slammed," it's easy to feel guilty if we're not slaving away on a never-ending treadmill of toil. By trying to compete about it, we're only adding to that pool of water everyone seems to be constantly "treading" in. And all this complaining is having serious effects on our mental health.

And yet we continue to use long hours as a sort of macho badge of honor.

We need to work smart, not (just) hard.

Just because you clocked 15 hours at your office, with likely dry eyeballs and a complete lack of focus, doesn't mean you've accomplished things in a smart way. Many people have written or spoken about this. Typically, you have 90-120 minutes before you devolve into internet fodder or social media. If you're putting in 15 straight hours at your desk, without breaks, how good is your output? How much time are you wasting?

The distinction between working hard versus smart has hit me as an entrepreneur. In high school and college I was always that girl who read all the assigned reading (and no, I was not giving you my study guide). I created outlines, outlines of outlines, and then flashcards. One of my greatest lessons as a businessperson has been to throw out that skill set. This isn't to say you shouldn't be diligent or that you should half-heartedly execute, but rather, that it's crucial to know what you have to do as opposed to everything you could do. It's about being strategic.

For once, I'd like to hear someone brag about their excellent time management skills, rather than complain about how much they can't get done. Maybe we could learn something from each other.

In fact, I'll start — here are three tactics I've been using to work smarter:

Constrain the time. The more I constrain my time, the more focused and productive I feel, and

the less I waste time on low-priority work. If you can only afford to spend 45 minutes on a certain project, then only spend 45 minutes on it — and move on, even if it isn't perfect.

Use a scheduler. If you're really up to your neck, it's very easy to find a scheduler, virtual or otherwise, to help put things on your calendar. Sometimes it's a matter of freeing up that time used for coordinating plans to actually doing them. Zirtual is a great answer to this. As is the DIY scheduler Doodle.

Cut the fat. Once I cut out superfluous meetings that were not: fun, productive, leading to new business, or really had something wonderful in it for me professional or otherwise, that plate emptied a little bit. (Here's a tool for figuring out what to cut.)

Yes, we all have some strange need to out-misery each other. Acknowledging that is a first step. But next time you speak to a friend and want to lament about how busy you are, ask yourself why. Try steering the conversation away from a complain-off. With some practice you might find yourself actually feeling less "buried" (or at least feeling less of a need to say it all the time).

And maybe that's something worth bragging about.

Please Stop Complaining About How Busy You Are

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