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Having work vs. not having work –  
A no-brainer? Think again.  
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In today's economy, one would think that having a job, any job, is better than having no work at all. But, not so fast. How so?

Health.com reports on a study (Peter Butterworth, Ph.D., senior research fellow at the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University, in Canberra.) suggesting that that some jobs are so demoralizing that, when it comes to one's mental health, they're worse than having no job at all.

The study followed more than 7,000 Australians over a seven-year period. Some of the findings: those who were unemployed reported feeling calmer, happier, less depressed, and less anxious after they obtained work BUT only if they found their new jobs to be rewarding and manageable.

In exploring individuals' mental state, employment status, and (if they had a job) working conditions they either enjoyed, or didn't enjoy, the survey respondents were asked to what degree they agreed with statements such as "My job is complex and difficult" and "I worry about the future of my job."

The research pinpointed four job characteristics linked with mental health: work complexity and demands, job security, compensation, and control over one's job (i.e., freedom to decide how best to do their job).

Unemployed folks who rated their job positive in these areas reported substantial improvements in their mental health. However, newly employed folks who felt overwhelmed, insecure about job stability, underpaid, and micromanaged reported sharp declines in their mental health, including increased depression and anxiety. Interestingly, those who couldn't find a job fared better.

One finding is counter to conventional wisdom, that "any job offers psychological benefits for individuals over the demoralizing effects of unemployment." Just not so.

Another finding suggests that certain jobs and job environments (e.g., call center jobs) are more likely to adversely affect one's mental health.

Finally, the study suggests something that most of us know, namely, managers have a direct impact on employees' mental health and well-being. "Bad bosses will make anybody unhappy...(and)...stress comes from bad managers."

And this brings me to a second, related point.

Marshall Goldsmith, a world-renowned executive coach extraordinaire recently explored (in a piece on the Huffington Post site) "why folks work." He asked, "Do you work to live or live to work" (given the notion that most folks spend at least one-third to one-half of their waking hours at work)?

In this vein, Mr. Goldsmith asked a number of leaders how they viewed their work. They had three choices; they estimated the percentage of work that fell into three categories (and you might want to give this a try yourself):

Play - work is fun; would do this regardless of whether or not you were paid to do it; it provides an outlet for creative energy or self-development and self-actualization

Work – not play, not fun but work which you would do if you were reasonably compensated for it and work towards which you are committed

Misery – not fun and no amount of money could make it fun; often tasks or activities you would attempt to avoid.

Here are some survey results from Mr. Goldsmith:

15 percent of what professionals do is considered play;
75 percent of what professionals do is considered work;
10 percent of what professionals do is considered misery.

So, related to both surveys, mental health is often at stake in how we spend our time at work.

So, what to do?

Generally, when you explore your life at work (and you might also consider at home, at play and in relationship), consider those activities that bring you fun (real fun, not faux, a “make-believe-this-is-fun” appearance of fun) and those that bring you some flavor of misery.

To do so, first clarify your natural tendencies related to how you interact with your world, so you can make better life and work choices and decisions.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- What percentage of your work would you define as “fun,” “work” and “misery.” Are you OK with these percentages?
- What percentage of your relationship would you define as “fun,” “work” (in the sense that it “works” you and you “work” it to keep it conscious and healthy) and “misery?” Are you OK with these percentages?
- If you’re uncomfortable with any of the above percentages, what steps can you take, or what would need to change, in order to move the needle in a direction that would make you more comfortable?
- How much freedom do you have on your job? How about in your relationship (really, do you ever wish you had more freedom)?
- Is your mental health (or emotional, physical, spiritual or psychological health) suffering due to your job? Due to your relationship?
- Are you worried about your job? About your relationship? Why, in either or both situations?

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