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Dreading a return to your commute? These tips might make it less terrible.

By [Allyson Chiu](#)

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Alex Ogden remembers always being in a rush. Rushing to get ready for work and take care of her dog after waking up at 6 a.m. Rushing out of her home in D.C. to the Metro station. Rushing to catch a crowded train jam-packed with other harried commuters. Rushing off the train and hustling through the city streets on foot to her final destination: the office.

“There were a lot of times where I would arrive at my workplace already stressed out, and I hadn’t even started my work day, because the commute had been awful,” said Ogden, 34, who has been able to do her job for a nonprofit remotely. “Even before the pandemic, I found my commute to be sort of a soul-sucking experience.”

Now, “I’m arriving at ‘work’ kind of relaxed and ready for my day as opposed to stressed out because I was on this 45-minute odyssey to get to my office,” she said, adding that train delays or rush hour would increase her travel time to an hour or more. “Thinking about voluntarily going back to that is very demoralizing.”

Diana Sanchez, 37, described her experience fighting traffic in Austin during the workweek: “It’s like a salmon swimming upriver. It’s a struggle.”

Sanchez, an administrative manager, used to drop off her child at day care before spending anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour trying to get to work in the mornings and then hitting rush hour on the way home. “It’s just that constant stress of trying to be somewhere on time when there’s so many things beyond your control,” she said. The idea of resuming that commute is frustrating, “because I know that it doesn’t have to be this way.”

Research on commuting shows that it can have positive and negative effects on well-being and mental health, experts said. Shorter trips and active commuting, such as walking or biking, can be beneficial buffer periods that help with transitioning between work and home life. But people’s satisfaction tends to decrease over the duration of a commute, and congestion, crowding and unpredictability can be stress-inducing, according to a review of commuting research published in 2019.

As more people weigh returning to offices, frustration and trepidation about commuting is to be expected, experts said.

Aside from being out of practice, former commuters have had the opportunity to reevaluate their lives, and the great work-from-home experiment revealed that many employees can work effectively outside the office — rendering commutes largely unnecessary for those who have the choice and resources to be remote.

“Now, people are really thinking about, ‘Do I want to have these stressors in my life? I realized what’s important, how I function, tell me why I need to do this,’” said Lynn Bufka, a senior director at the American Psychological Association.

Ideally, employers should be considering the individual needs of their employees and prioritizing flexible work arrangements, said Cort Rudolph, an associate professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Saint Louis University who studies occupational health and well-being. “Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to this will not work.”

Cathleen Swody, an organizational psychologist with Thrive Leadership, agreed. “The companies that are taking a hard line and saying, ‘Everyone’s coming back, end of story,’ employees are going to feel a lot more resentment,” she said “Those 30 minutes on the train, they’re just simmering on the way there. It’s like it makes it even worse than it was before the pandemic.”

Still, many U.S. workers don't have much flexibility and either continued commuting to work during the pandemic or will have to start again in the coming months. Here are tips for managing feelings about commuting and how both bosses and employees can make it less onerous.

Don't dwell on the negative

While it can be helpful to acknowledge how you're feeling, it's important to avoid letting negative thoughts take control. "Our thoughts influence our emotions and reactions, and that influences our behavior," Swody said. "So if we are stewing and simmering on our way to the office, it's not helping us, ultimately."

If there's a specific cause of your dread or anxiety, such as different traffic patterns or new public-transit hygiene protocols, take steps to address those concerns, Bufka said, perhaps with a trial run of your commute.

Don't compare commuting with how you used the extra time while working from home. "That's where dissatisfaction comes from," said Swody, and it can cause a negative spiral. "At the very least, it's not productive, and at worst, it just further cements the negative feelings and the negative reactions," she added. "What is productive is, 'All right, what do I do now?'"

Employers can also take action to improve employees' commuting experiences. For example, leaders can help make a commute feel more worthwhile by emphasizing the value of being on-site, Bufka said. Additionally, organizations can reduce logistical hassles by offering flexible hours and allowing workers to travel during nonpeak times, said Katrina Burch, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Western Kentucky University, who has researched commuting. This benefits employees "because it gives them a sense of ownership over their time and can positively impact the perception of the commute as well," she said.

Swody encouraged employees who are unhappy about returning to the office to talk with their managers about flexibility. "You don't get what you don't ask," she said.

If flexibility isn't possible, experts said, you should refocus your energy on making your commute more efficient and enjoyable. The [Association for Commuter Transportation offers resources online](#) to support people making the trek to and from their workplaces.

Make productive changes

First, plan ahead, said Vivian Pender, president of the American Psychiatric Association. “It gives you a feeling of control. It gives you a feeling of being self-sufficient and being capable and having the agency to do what you want to do.”

Whether you’ve been commuting or are just starting again, experts recommended giving yourself extra time to get places in case there’s increased traffic or congestion on public transportation as more people return to offices. Consider also trying different modes of transportation if those are available, Burch said. Or try to incorporate some walking or biking into your commute.

You can also take advantage of the fact that commuting provides two intermissions during your day. “It’s a time for you to psychologically and physically transition to your work self and then psychologically and physically transition to your nonwork self,” Burch said.

Heading into the office, for instance, you can use the commute to set goals and prepare for your work day, Rudolph said. On the way home, rather than ruminating about work, try thinking about activities you’re looking forward to, such as spending time with family and friends.

You can also engage in activities — such as listening to news on the way in or music on the way home — that “are going to make you happy and help with your detachment either from your work life or your home life, to really facilitate that transition,” Burch said. The [Association for Commuter Transportation](#) has [additional resources](#) online for supporting people returning to workplaces.

Find enjoyment

Reframe your commute as “me time,” Rudolph said. Aside from creating playlists and finding podcasts and audiobooks, you can reward yourself with a pit stop to get your favorite coffee drink or a treat. The time could also be used for self-development, such as learning a language.

Options for enjoyable commuting activities will depend on how you're getting to and from work; there may be more freedom on public transportation. If you're driving, it's important to stay focused on the road and your surroundings, Burch said. When she used to have a longer commute, Burch said she took a scenic route through the country that was prettier than the highway. "That really helped me to better enjoy the time in my car when I was sitting in there by myself."

Staying connected with others during your commute might also be helpful, experts said. Some studies suggest talking to fellow commuters on public transportation can result in more pleasant commuting experiences. People who drive can consider carpooling opportunities. Be careful about talking on the phone while driving as studies have shown that even hands-free phone calls are a potentially dangerous distraction.

And keep in mind that some commutes might be beyond saving, Rudolph said. "We're not going to just will this away if it's, like, truly dreadful." But, he said, those workers aren't entirely without options either. "If it's that bad, there are lots of open jobs right now."

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