

Lengthy Commutes Take a Mental Toll

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The amount of time we spend commuting between work and home can have a serious impact on our physical and mental health.

Lengthy commuting times have been linked to a wide range of health ailments, including hypertension and obesity. And research from a team of behavioral scientists has now linked time behind the wheel to lower life satisfaction.

To examine the relationship between commute time and well-being, University of Waterloo researchers Margo Hilbrecht, Bryan Smale, and Steven E. Mock analyzed data from 3,409 Canadians who regularly commuted to work by car.

Long commutes were tied to an increased sense of stressful time pressure. Essentially, long chunks of time spent on the road took time away from other stress-relieving activities, like spending time with family, exercising, and even sleeping.

“Results suggest workplace practices aimed at increasing opportunities for physical activity and government-led efforts towards more integrated solutions to reduce traffic congestion may help increase well-being,” Hilbrecht and colleagues write in *World Leisure Journal*.

Participants in the study kept a time diary in which they tracked their daily activities down to the minute.

They were then asked to rate their satisfaction with their life as a whole using a 10-point scale. Time pressure was measured using a 10-item index that assessed feelings of “time crunch,” including feeling trapped in a daily routine, worrying about not spending enough time with family and friends, or not having time for fun anymore.

The average amount of time spent travelling to and from work was 53.2 minutes per day. Longer commutes were associated with higher stress levels, and commuters who had to contend with particularly fierce traffic and unpredictable travel times reported the worst quality of life.

The researchers note that workplace policies may be one way to mitigate the negative relationship between commute time and well-being for staff. Their results showed that having flexible work hours was one factor associated with enhanced well-being. Other policies, such as offering telecommuting options, may be one way to help prevent the negative impacts of a long commute.

While telecommuting may alleviate the stress associated with slogging through a morning and evening commute, a new [comprehensive report](#) published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* suggests that people who work from home may not actually spend less time on the road.

The report highlights research indicating that telecommuters consistently take longer and more frequent daily car trips compared to regular commuters. On average, the research showed that telecommuters traveled 45 more miles per day in a vehicle relative to regular commuters.

Instead of stopping by the grocery store on the way home from work, telecommuters end up racking up extra miles in the car by making separate car trips for errands. However, increased flexibility can help ensure that people avoid the worst traffic, minimizing the frustration and mental toll of being stuck behind the wheel.

“In sum, research on this issue is inconclusive, but there does not appear to be robust evidence to

suggest that telecommuting significantly reduces the number of vehicle miles traveled,” according to report authors Tammy Allen, Timothy Golden, and Kristen Shockley.

References

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