



The Productivity Paradox

Keeping Busy During Shutdown May Be The Wrong Strategy

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“A seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”

———— Paradox Defined ————
Oxford Dictionary

Why Relax, When You Can Work

Despite the apparent endless feeling of the global shutdown of non-essential health care activities, it's only been less than 8 weeks since the World Health Organization's declaration of a COVID-19 global pandemic on March 11th, 2020. Most of us are experiencing dramatic reductions in work. With 7 of 10 surgeons reporting an extreme reduction in their practices, we all seem to have a new sense of urgency to fill this time. How we spend the majority of the week isn't particularly surprising. The shutdown has focused many of us towards investments in family time, new hobbies, and exercise.

Two interesting findings stand out from OrthoEvidence’s member polls (Exhibit 1). First, nearly one third of surgeons continue to fill their week with more work despite significant reductions in their practices. Some openly admit to filling time with paperwork and low yield clinical activities to simply “stay busy”. Less than 5% of surgeons have taken this 8-week forced reduction in work life to relax. In a time where panic and fear are pervasive, the very notion of relaxation (i.e. to make less tense or anxious, Oxford Dictionary) would seem to be a good one, wouldn’t it?

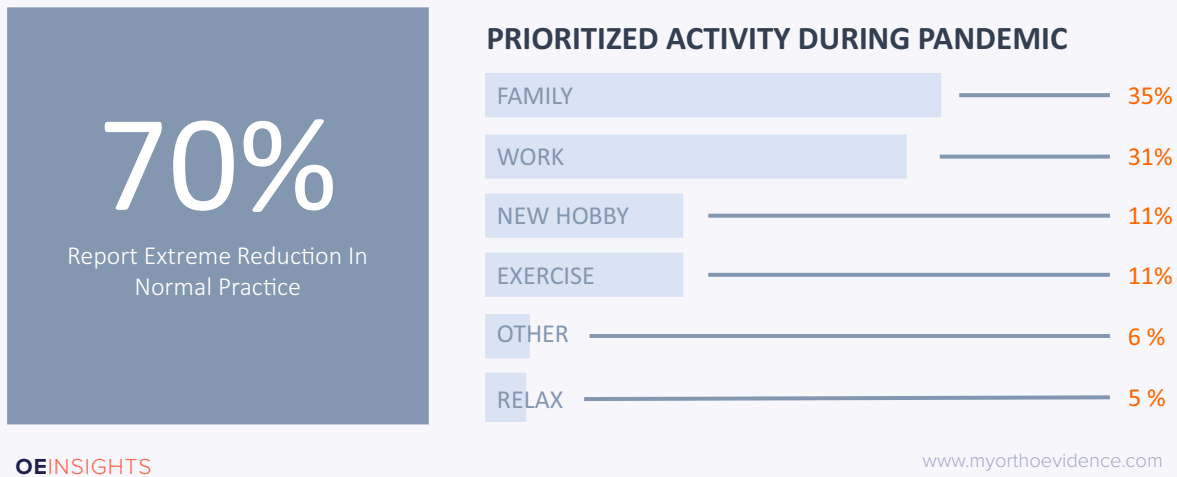
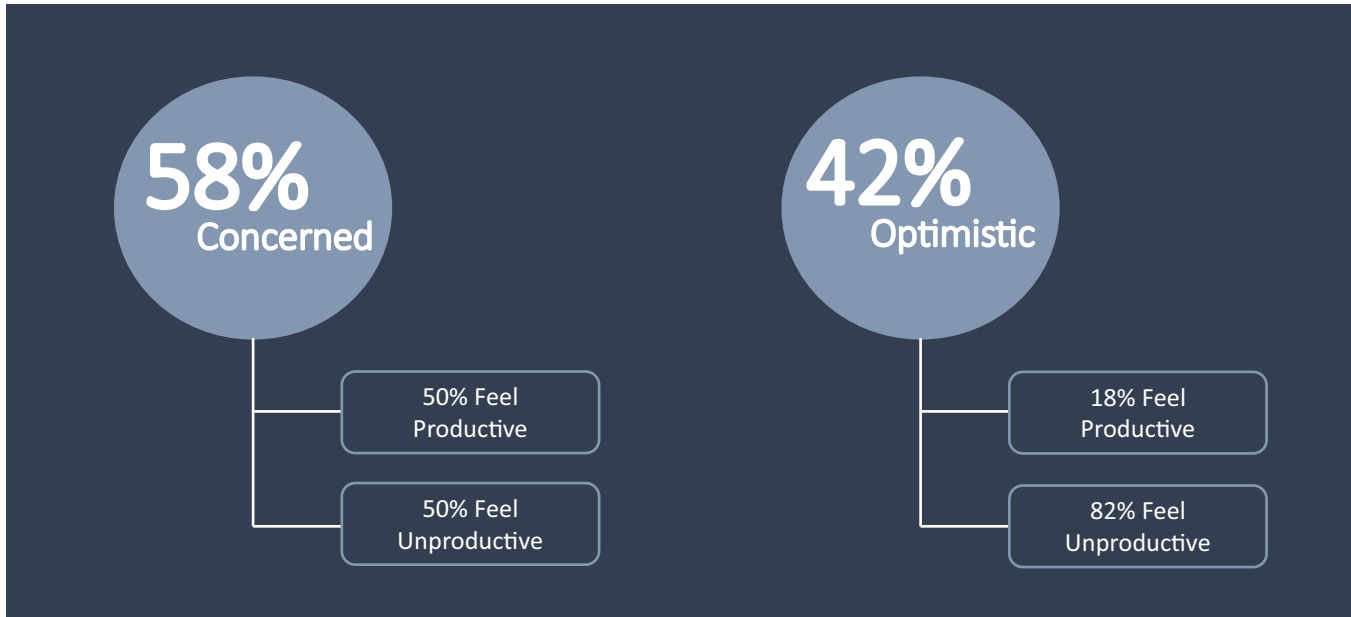


Exhibit 1: Reduction in Practice: OrthoEvidence random sampling 201 members

Unpacking Productivity and Optimism

Our analysis suggests productivity is highly correlated to optimism. Of those who feel optimistic about their current situation, the overwhelming majority are feeling unproductive. On the other hand, among those feeling concerned, exactly half of them feel quite productive. There is a demonstrable 32% increase in productivity when concerned, albeit some form of pessimism exists (Exhibit 2). But why? We hypothesize there is an undertone of not wanting to remain idle and ruminate on “things we can’t change”.

“I’m not sure what the future holds right now, and I’m working to distract myself from over thinking the longer-term consequences of this pandemic on my life and work.”



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Exhibit 2: Productivity and Optimism: Random sample of 201 OrthoEvidence Members.

“This frightening pandemic... forcing many of us to slow down, to spend more time in personal reflection, away from the noise and heave of the world. With more quiet time, more privacy, more stillness, we have an opportunity to think about who we are, as individuals and as a society.”

— Alan Lightman —

The Atlantic

A Surgical Pause

A 2017 article in the Harvard Business Review argues for quiet in this busy world (Talbot-Zorn and Marz). It's not a particularly novel insight that successful writers (e.g. JK Rowling, Walter Isaacson) and billionaire hedge fund gurus (i.e. Ray Dalio) incorporate periods of silence into their structured routines. However, Talbot-Zorn and Marz offer tips for finding silence in a very noisy period in our history. Some suggestions include “punctuating virtual meetings with 5 minutes of quiet time in between”, or a “silent afternoon in nature”, or “a media fast” which includes turning off news cycle for several hours. Michelle Hlublinka of the MIT Media lab supports the notion of reflection during any design process. Specifically, imagining and realizing a product is but only part of the process. Critiquing and reflecting on the experience is critical for a deeper understanding of future innovations. But even this is not enough. She argues further that new insights should be shared with others for maximal impacts. Kiron Koshy suggests surgeons use reflective practice daily at work. Reflecting on what went wrong but also on those aspects of care that went well are important and informative (International Journal of Surgical Oncology, 2017). But reflection needn't only focus on your work. Its value may be greatest when we apply it to our lives.

To Be Most Productive: Do Nothing

“Many people are caught up 'doing' so much that they don't have time stop, take a productive break, and think. Finding time to think ~ really think ~ about just about anything is hard to do.”

— Thomas Oppong —

2017

While it may seem paradoxical that greatest productivity stems from doing nothing, it's not that improbable a hypothesis. We have been given an opportunity to reflect and reset. It is highly unlikely that any of us would have reduced our workload by 70% for several weeks by choice, especially with the intention of using that time to reflect and take measure of our lives and our priorities. But here we are. Why spend time trying to keep busy at the expense of a missed opportunity to deeply think and reflect on making important advances. The internet is full of suggestions to keep you busy from re-organizing your closet to trying a bunch of new recipes. And of course, let's not forget all the posts of “busy” people giving advice on how they've optimized their home offices to ensure maximum productivity. Sidenote: it's amazing they actually found time to post tips and pictures amongst all their productivity.

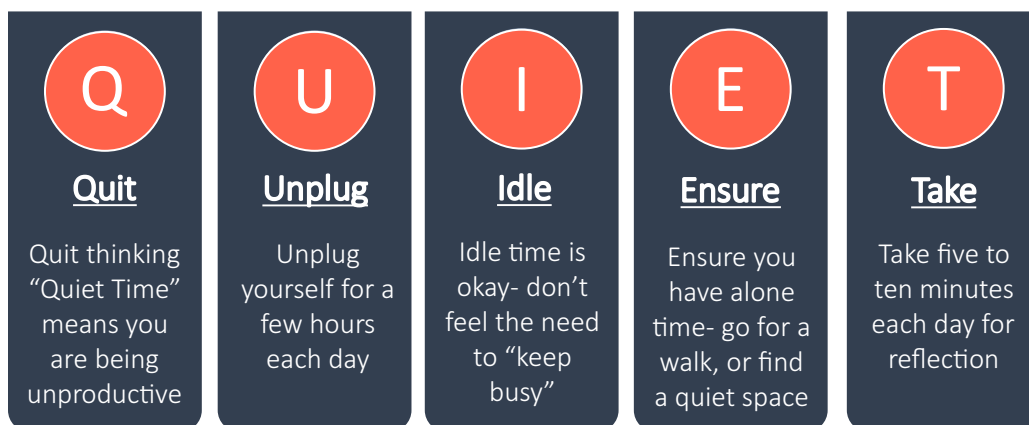
Tim Kreider writes, “The space and quiet that idleness provides is a necessary condition for standing back from life and seeing it whole, for making unexpected connections and waiting for the wild summer lightning strikes of inspiration — it is, paradoxically, necessary to getting any work done”. Jennifer Porter views reflection as a critical leadership tool - one that allows conscious consideration and analysis for the purpose of learning to create meaning. She believes “meaning making” is crucial for all leaders who want to grow and develop.

“When it comes to accelerating performance, there's a paradox: If we want to have greater impact, faster, we have to slow down enough to reflect on what we've done and what we're going to do.”

— Hagel, Seely-Brown, de Marr, Wooll —

Get Productive in 5 Simple Ways

There is no magic formula or 'how to' guides that work for everybody. However, it is clear that making time for **“QUIET”** as part of a structured daily routine will pay dividends (Exhibit 3). Rather than over-intellectualize the process, it seems almost obvious that “As you start to walk on the way, the way appears” (13th century Persian poet Rumi). I've started to build in 5 simple rules to my day, no matter how busy I feel I am. First, I've begun with deconstructing the myth that quiet time is unproductive. Consider the possibility of simply unplugging yourself from the noise of media for parts of your day. Embrace the idle parts of your day, or week, by getting out alone or finding a quiet space at home to think. Whether it's morning, or night, set aside a few minutes to reflect on how this process is going—and most importantly, how you will ensure the day ahead has **“QUIET”** time. It's working for me, I hope it works for you.



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Exhibit 3: 5 Tips for Increased Productivity