

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. 'Hustle culture' is an attitude in modern society. It encourages hard work, long hours and success. It convinces people to value work more than their health, wellbeing and personal lives. Look at the list below. Tick the activities that you think are a part of hustle culture.

- going to work early and staying late most days ☐
- working at the weekends or during festivals ☐
- bringing work with you when you go on holiday ☐
- missing family events like birthdays because of work ☐
- cancelling social plans with friends because of work ☐
- thinking about work when you are at home ☐
- working when you feel exhausted or unwell ☐

2 Key words

a. Choose the correct word or expression to match each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Some words may appear in a different form in the article.

cult	delegate	fatigue	liberating	output
boundaries	flexible	glamorise	struggle	recovery
burn out	drive	hectic	loop	inescapable

1. to assign responsibilities or tasks to another person _____
2. extreme physical or emotional tiredness from stress or work _____
3. real or imagined limits in time, commitments or relationships _____
4. feeling free, powerful and able to break social expectations _____
5. to make something seem more exciting or desirable than it really is _____
6. a strong inner desire or motivation to do something _____
7. the amount of goods or services produced during a period of time _____

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

8. to fight against physical, mental or emotional challenges _____
9. a process that continue again and again, as in a circle _____
10. to become emotionally exhausting and unmotivated due to stress _____
11. something that is impossible to avoid or ignore _____
12. extremely busy, chaotic or intense for period of time _____
13. a group that shares a strong belief or excessive commitment to something _____
14. open to making changes and doing things in a different way _____
15. the act of getting physical, mentally, emotionally better and healthier _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. A good manager _____ work fairly and responsibility.
2. It's important to have clear _____ between your work life and personal life.
3. The day before the wedding was _____, but the wedding day was lovely.
4. Angela was ill for quite some time, but she's healthy and in _____ now.
5. Social media _____ the lives of influencers – their lives aren't perfect.
6. Moving away from home to go to university felt _____
7. In time travel films, characters are often stuck in a never-ending _____.
8. After long, difficult days at work, people often feel exhaustion or _____.
9. AI can increases workers' _____, but it can also lead to job losses.
10. Terry's timetable isn't _____ – he has to follow it exactly.

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

c. Use the remaining words from task a a to write your own sentences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

The modern mind is a column where experts discuss mental health issues they are seeing in their work

Gaynor Parkin and Dave Winsborough

15 March, 2026

- 1 From the outside, Ariana* performs brilliantly in a high-profile role. She races through her days. When her baby sleeps, she jumps on calls and replies to messages. When the baby wakes, the loop begins again. She's exhausted but, she feels the need for high output and pace.
- 2 This way of living is often called "the cult of productivity". It comes from popular "hustle culture" – do more and do it faster!
- 3 In our work, we often see people struggle. But it's not because they are failing at productivity. It's because they are succeeding at it too well.
- 4 Phil* looked for help after a health scare. He's a successful senior manager at a national health service. His days were always hectic with back-to-back meetings, a huge team to manage, and responsibilities that made it difficult for him to take time off. Phil noticed more fatigue and slowed decision-making, but he struggled to prioritise his health.
- 5 Murray* contacted us after experiencing panic attacks at work. He was juggling work with a busy blended family and caring responsibilities. "I know I'm in that sandwich generation – working, looking after kids and an elderly parent – but I don't think I can make it all fit together".
- 6 All three described a similar pattern: a strong internal drive to be productive, and daily habits of doing everything at a pace.
- 7 We notice when a colleague is burning out, or a friend is always busy. We offer good advice: breathe, slow down, delegate, take a break, rest, be kinder to yourself. But often, we don't recognise these problems in our own lives.
- 8 Our business feels necessary, important and inescapable. Other people need boundaries. We just need to keep trying.
- 9 Our clients, and many people, grow up believing that productivity equals worth. In business especially, endurance, hard work and "pushing through" are rewarded. Hustle culture ignores exhaustion or glamorises it.
- 10 How then, do we create alternatives?
- 11 First, we can change the way we view strengths like productivity. For Ariana, Murray and Phil, this started with curiosity – when is this strength helpful for me, and are there alternatives? What would happen if I added rest, relaxation or play to my day?
- 12 We also need to change our beliefs about the importance of productivity. We can move away from black-and-white rules ("more is better", "rest is earned") and toward more flexible beliefs ("recovery has value", "a slower pace can be useful, not lazy").
- 13 We also have to think about the purpose of rest. If we only use rest to be more productive, then we never truly rest at all.
- 14 Finally, we need to experiment by making small changes. Ariana tested: "What happens if I stop 10 minutes earlier? Leave one thing undone? Take a lunch break?" Murray tried finishing work an hour earlier some days. This gave him a break before his family responsibilities. Phil delegated work to other people on his team so he could focus on his own recovery.
- 15 We recommend Oliver Burkeman's book *Four Thousand Weeks*. He explains that there will always be more to do than can possibly fit into a human lifetime. Burkeman writes: "Let your impossible standards crash to the ground. Then pick a few meaningful tasks from the rubble and get started on them today."
- 16 Letting impossible standards crash can be liberating. Sometimes, instead of doing, we need to simply learn how to be. Our clients' lesson is simple but not easy: we don't need to finish the list before we make time for play and recovery (the list will never be finished, and that's OK).

*The people named in the article are based on a mix of real clients.

© Guardian News and Media 2026

First published in *The Guardian*, 15/3/2026

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True, False or Not mentioned in the article.

1. Clients like Ariana feel the need to work hard because of pressure from other people.
2. Hustle culture means more work, more stress, and less rest and relaxation.
3. The 'sandwich generation' are adults who look after both their children and their parents.
4. It's easy for people to recognise when they are burning out in their own lives.
5. The 'cult of productivity' only affects people who have stressful family situations.
6. Hustle culture recognises the dangers of physical exhaustion.
7. Hustle culture is made worse by influencers and social media sites.
8. The experts recommend rest and breaks as a way to become more productive.
9. The only way to recover from hustle culture is to make several big life changes.
10. It's important to accept that we can't always complete everything on our 'to do' list.

4 Key language

a. The words below are used in the article. These words are frequently used to talk about sport, exercise and physical activity. Match the words below to the sport-related meaning.

pace

endurance

push through

hustle

jump

race

1. the speed an athlete moves or a match progresses _____
2. to lift the body high up in the air _____
3. the ability to give a consistent performance over a long period of time _____
4. to continue physical activity despite pain, difficulty or fatigue _____
5. to put in 100% effort; to play with maximum speed and energy _____
6. to run, cycle or swim competitively with the goal of going as fast as possible _____

Hustle culture is destroying our clients. It's time they let their impossible standards crash to the ground

Level 2: Intermediate

- b. The words above are used in the article to talk about productivity in people's professional and personal lives. Why do you think the authors use these words? How are the people in the article similar to athletes?

5 Discussion

- a. Discuss these questions.

1. Do you experience hustle culture in your own life? In what ways?
2. Do you think the advice in the article is helpful? Why or why not?
3. What else would you recommend to help people recover from hustle culture?
4. Do you think hustle culture will get better or worse in 5 years? In 10 years? Why?

6 In your own words

- a. Find out how hustle culture affects your classmates, coworkers, friends or family. Make a survey with 10 questions. Ask about people's attitudes about work, breaks, health, personal life and other areas. Include these types of questions:
- Yes/No questions
 - Multiple choice questions
 - Ordering questions
- b. Share the results of your survey with your class. Use graphs, posters or other creative ways to show the information.