



I'M STUCK
IN A RUT AT
WORK

I'm stuck in a rut at work

Rut is one of those handy little words that we tend to use when we're dissatisfied, bored or trapped.

And it's not really a suitable metaphor. A car that's stuck in a rut might be able to move a couple of inches forward or backward, but is ultimately unable to rescue itself. It would need an external force – a pick-up truck or Wonder Woman – to remove it.

That's not the case with us. We have much more control over our situation, and there's a great deal we can do to help ourselves when we feel like we're rutted.

What to do

Accept responsibility

Acknowledge that no-one else can get you out of your rut but you.

Look carefully

Identify how you victimise yourself through your own thoughts.

Find your flow time

Break the vicious cycle of feeling overworked.

Research flexibility

Employers are increasingly open to employees working flexible hours.

Become 'self-employed'

Are you a slave to the man, or is the man buying your services?

Be real

Don't let 'grass-is-always-greener' thinking dictate your choices.

Accept responsibility

This might sound harsh, but no matter how dirty, unpleasant, or cramped that wee rut feels, it's yours.

Sure, your boss might be a tyrant, progression may be limited, the work itself might be tedious. But you have the ultimate responsibility for how these things affect you, and what action you take.

We're not saying that you should bear it all with masochistic stoicism, we're just saying that if things need to change, it's you who needs to change them.

In his TED talk about unlocking your true potential, expert in leadership psychology Tony Robbins cites all the excuses we tend to give for not affecting personal change:

'I don't have the money', 'I don't have the time', 'I don't have the experience'.

But, Robbins explains, the defining factor is never resources, it's resourcefulness. Robbins places the buck back into the hands of the individual by stressing that 'decision is the ultimate power.'

Following his advice, break down your current rut into three decisions of destiny:

What am I going to focus on? The past, present, or future? Myself or others?

What does this mean? Is it the beginning or the end?

What am I going to do about it? Am I going to give up or move forward?

By answering these questions you make controlling decisions about your life. Your work situation stops being defined by external factors, and starts being defined by your response to them.

Look carefully

Now apply this self-responsibility to the specifics of your current situation. Being in a rut can mean many things to different people, so it's important to clarify what it means to you.

Make a list of ways in which you feel victimised in at work, then rephrase them in a way that empowers you. For example:

'My boss upsets me when she's tyrannical' becomes 'I get upset when my boss is tyrannical because I think she doesn't respect me'.

'My colleagues bore me' becomes 'I'm bored because my colleagues don't meet my expectations'.

'I'm not getting paid enough' becomes 'I'm not getting paid as much as my lifestyle demands'.

This approach may dismantle all your fodder for that delectable after work rant, but it also puts you in a unique position of power.

Whereas you can't change your boss' aggression or your colleagues' tiresome wittering about Eastenders, you can change your expectations and your assumptions.

This exercise takes your sense of satisfaction out of other people's hands and places it back into your own.

And if it doesn't get you out of your rut, it'll at least help you see your rut in a new light.

Find your flow time

One way of conceptualising the experience of being in a rut is to imagine it as a vicious cycle, or what clinical psychologist and author Gill Edwards calls a Hard Time Cycle. It sounds like this:

When we're in the office we struggle and clock watch. We feel obliged to do what we're doing and to seek the approval of others. Our lives feel cluttered and we have little sense of meaning.

This Hard Time leaves us stressed out and exhausted.

When we get home we're so wound up that we can't relax. We waste our time with joyless and mindless pursuits. We try to distract ourselves from how arduous our day has been, and how arduous it will be tomorrow.

This Lost Time leaves us frustrated, as we feel our work impinging on our home life.

When we go to work the following day, we struggle and clock watch, we live in Hard Time, and the cycle begins again.

Edwards explains we need to find Flow Time in order to break this cycle. Edwards' personal idea of Flow Time is a riverside picnic on a sunny day, with the sound of the rushing water and the scent of the grass greeting her senses.

But you don't have to sign up to the pastoral idyl to experience Flow Time. More broadly, Flow Time is a sense of fulfilment and higher purpose: the quiet and unthinking joy we feel when we're engrossed in a task.

Edwards suggests making the search for Flow Time your priority in working your way out of a career rut.

Think hard about what you really love doing, then see how you could either introduce those things into your current situation, or change your situation to accommodate them.

Research flexibility

With bosses constantly breathing over our shoulders, blocking our promotions while pressuring us into commitment, it's easy to forget that there is usually a Human Resources body working independent from them.

If you decide to stay at your company, rather than move, speak to your HR department. They're there precisely to offer you advice and try to improve your situation.

No company wants a transitory workforce, so it's in their interest to help you.

If time management is a problem for you – maybe the 8am commute is stressing you out, or you're not getting enough time with your kids – ask about the possibility of flexitime.

Thanks to the internet, workforces are increasingly mobile, and more and more companies now offer the opportunity to work remotely from time to time, or to structure your own working hours.

Check out www.familiesandwork.org, which provides objective information about changes in the workforce landscape, and will help you strike a healthy home-work balance.

Become 'self-employed'

By this we don't mean setting up as a freelancer and going at it all alone (although that's an increasingly viable option these days), we mean re-thinking your attitude towards your work, and your own autonomy in managing it.

Have confidence in your skills and regard yourself as a consultant to the company for which you work. You have a valuable set of skills for which your company 'buys you in' for a certain period of time.

This quickly breaks down the rut mentality – yes you have a contract, but you also have the freedom to withdraw your services if you get a better offer.

Be real

If you decide to change jobs, make sure your move is fuelled by rational thinking rather than a 'grass-is-always-greener' mentality.

Demanding your ideal job is rife with pitfalls, not least because ideal is so often a mirage. Find it, and you're likely to find yourself in a rut once more, locked in your endless pursuit of perfection.

Psychologist Russ Harris suggests an alternative way of thinking about your career. Instead of writing down all the things which comprise your dream job, ask yourself the following questions:

What personal qualities would you like to bring to the workplace?

How would you behave towards your colleagues if you were the 'ideal you'?

What sort of relationships do you want to build at work?

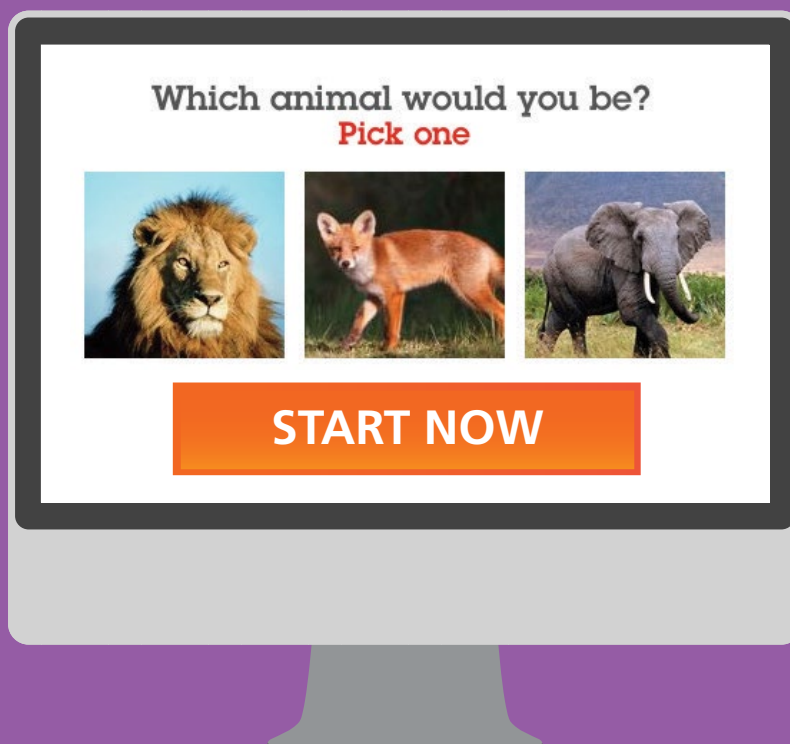
What skills, knowledge, or personal qualities do you want to develop?

A decision that takes into account these factors will stop you taking your rut with you wherever you go, and will let Wonder Woman rest easy.

Continue your journey

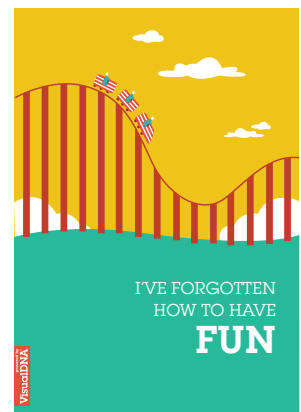
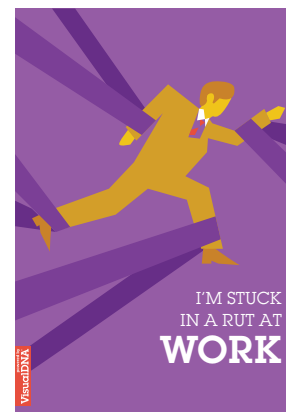
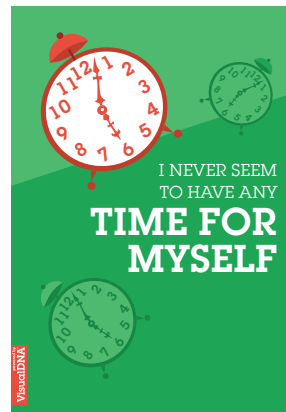
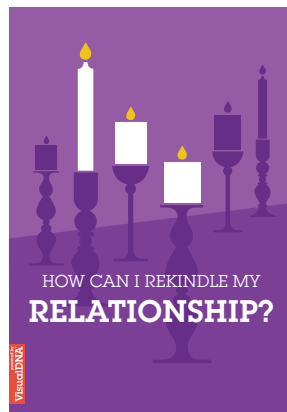
Visit visualdna.com to find out about who we are and what we do

Take the VisualDNA personality quiz



Keep reading

Click a cover for your next book



Please share your thoughts

Now that you've had a chance to read some of these articles, please do let us know your feedback. We'd love to hear from you, so when you're ready, email feedback@visualdna.com to share your thoughts.

All your feedback will help us make the journey better.

Did you find this article useful?

Learnt a new tip that you can incorporate into your daily life? Feel free to share it with friends via email, Facebook, or print it out and post it to them if you'd like.

Share this eBook

