



Studies show that it takes from 21 days to two months to form a new habit Nubelson Ferande / Unsplash

# How to form new habits as you adapt to the changed work week

**W**hile many people across the UAE are reaping the benefits of a new, shorter working week, if you feel like the new Monday-to-Friday structure is a drag, you are not alone.

Social media has been awash with memes as people try to adapt to Tuesday no longer being the middle of the week, and having that Thursday feeling delayed until Friday, making the weekend feel that little bit further out of reach.

We know nothing has changed in terms of our working hours, in fact, many people are now doing fewer. So why does it feel like this new working structure has somehow slowed everything down?

Conditioning plays a big part. Many people will have spent years living in the UAE unlearning the Monday to Friday week with which they grew up in their home countries, and while it undoubtedly will have taken some getting used to, in many cases it marked a welcome change.

Dreaded Mondays were no longer so dreaded, and by the time you'd hit that Wednesday hump, the week was practically over. Everything, including the weekend, felt as if it had been brought forward a day.

"All of us were used to having Tuesday as our midweek point, and although the number of working days remains the same, the sudden change to Friday, and not Thursday, as the start of the weekend gives us the impression that we are working longer as we are yet to psychologically adjust to this change," says Dr Mercedes Sheen, associate professor and academic head of psychology at Heriot-Watt University Dubai.

Humans are creatures of habit and so disruption to routines can mean changing long-established customs that have set the benchmark for people's daily lives.

"Most people like to follow a routine or a structure because it gives them a sense of organisation, control and comfort," says Mina Shafik, psychologist at Thrive Wellbeing Centre in Dubai. "When a routine or structure gets disrupted, we may feel confused, out of control and uncomfortable.

"Currently, people's routine and week structure have been interrupted, so they are feeling confused and uncomfortable. They are trying to justify those feelings by falsely associating that the new week feels longer.

However, it is not a longer week; it is just a change, and change always gets better with time."

So how long should we expect it to take before we stop thinking of Thursday as the end of the week? Studies show that, on average, it takes from 21 days to two months to form a new habit, depending on how much your routine has been adjusted.

"Changing [the] week structure is like forming a new habit. With that said, the time to adjust depends on how many factors are being changed," Shafik says. "For example, if I am doing the same routine I do every weekend but now I do them on Saturday and Sunday, instead of Friday and Saturday, then the only factor changing here is the date, which can be easy to adjust to.



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**MINA SHAFIK**  
Psychologist

"However, if my routine, activities and other factors change as well, then it will take longer for me to adjust."

Mandeep Jassal, behavioural therapist at Priory Wellbeing Centre, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, agrees. "As with most changes in life, individuals undergo an adjustment, which takes time to become accustomed to," Jassal says.

"The new changing week is a key example of this. While we may find the adjustment period challenging initially, with time it will become second nature."

The good news is for those who now enjoy a 4.5-day working week as a result of the change, there are plenty of psychological benefits. A UK study conducted last year by the 4 Day Week Campaign and

Platform London looked at the effects of a shorter week for people who work in the public sector. The study concluded that shorter weeks helped to prevent work burnout, reduced anxiety and depression, and improved overall work-life balance.

Another international study, which looked at companies that offered four-day working weeks in Denmark, Japan and South Korea, found that they gave people more time to reflect and rest, leading them to be more productive and creative at work.

"The new working week provides a healthier work-life balance," Jassal says. "Individuals have a shorter working week which means prioritising their workload and, on days off, individuals can relax, have fun and socialise with their family and friends.

"Having balance such as enjoyment and social connection can help individuals feel more grounded, along with improving their focus and concentration."

Ensuring a healthy work-life balance has also never been more important.

"With many people working from home due to the pandemic, switching off has become more difficult at the end of a working day and mental well-being was being compromised," Sheen says.

"The new four-and-a-half day working week will evoke a sense of having more free time and allow people to have that extra time with their families and friends, or to take part in leisure activities that were previously out of reach."

Not all businesses will have adapted to the 4.5-day working week that the UAE's public sector has. Sheen says those that haven't might want to consider.

"Similar to when a holiday falls just before the weekend, allowing us to enjoy a three-day weekend, going into the work week knowing that you can switch off by 1pm on a Friday will give us the same sense of happiness, as we will have more time off and come back refreshed on Monday morning," she says.

"It might be beneficial for organisations to evaluate their business model and how it affects employee satisfaction, and consider making changes to the working week to align with the rest of the UAE."