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SOCIETY

How to deal with work stress — and actually recover from burnout

Mindfulness, detachment, selecting off-time activities with care: Here are evidence-based strategies to achieve healthy work-life balance

By Chris Woolston | 07.08.2022

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There's job stress, and then there's the crushing pressure paramedics went through during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The uncertainty, the dread, the constantly changing protocols, the shortages of personal protective equipment, the multiple calls to the same nursing home — it was almost too much for Kate Bergen of Manahawkin, New Jersey.

"It felt like everything was closing in around us," Bergen says. "At some point I knew that I couldn't take any more. Was I headed for a meltdown? Was I going to just walk off the job one day? I was getting very close to that point."

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Instead of quitting, Bergen found a calling. One day while waiting for the next emergency call, she took a picture of herself in her full PPE. The image inspired her to paint a self-portrait poster in the style of World War II icon Rosie the Riveter. The message: "We need you to stay home."

It was the first in a series of "Rosie" posters of women first responders, an ongoing project that has helped Bergen calm her mind during her downtime. Ultimately, she says, the Rosies helped her withstand the stress of her job and allowed her to show up to work each day with new energy and focus. "They made it possible for me to keep going."

While workers like Bergen are responding to emergency calls and saving lives, many of us are doing things like responding to emails and saving receipts from business trips. But even for people with jobs in offices, restaurants and factories, there's an art and a science to making the most of downtime, says Sabine Sonnentag, a psychologist at the University of Mannheim in Germany. The right approach to non-work time can help prevent burnout, improve health and generally make life more livable. "When a job is stressful, recovery is needed," says Sonnentag, who cowrote an article exploring the psychology of downtime in the 2021 issue of the *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.

Workers everywhere are feeling frazzled, overwhelmed and ready for the weekend. With that backdrop, researchers are doing work of their own to better understand the potential benefits of recovery and the best ways to unwind. "Work recovery has become part of the national conversation on well-being," says Andrew Bennett, a social scientist at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. "There's a growing awareness that we can't just keep working ourselves to death."

At a time when many people are rethinking their jobs (if they haven't already quit), they should also be thinking about their quality of life away from work, Sonnentag says. "People should ask themselves, how much free time do I have and how much energy do I have for my free time? How do I want to continue my life?"

You Can Do It!
WE STEP UP WHEN OTHERS STEP BACK
WE NEED YOU TO STAY HOME

Paramedic Kate Bergen painted this self-portrait, the first in her "Rosie" series, to combat work stress while sending a message about burnout.

CREDIT: KATE BERGEN

A weekend paradox

We can all use a chance to unplug and unwind, but here's the rub: Recovery from work tends to be the most difficult and elusive for those who need it most. "We call it the 'recovery paradox,'" Sonnentag says. "The odds are high that when a job is stressful, it's difficult to have an excellent recovery."

That paradox was underscored in a 2021 analysis that combined results from 198 separate studies of employees at work and at home. Workers with the most mentally and emotionally draining jobs were also the least likely to feel rested and rejuvenated during their off time. Interestingly, people with physically demanding jobs — construction workers, furniture movers and the like — had much less trouble winding down. The surest way to feel lousy after hours, it appears, is to think too hard at work.

Sonnentag authored a 2018 study published in *Research in Organization Behavior* that helped to explain why the paradox is so hard to escape. People who were more stressed out at work tended to get less exercise and worse sleep, an ideal scenario for feeling less than great. In other words, stressful work can disrupt the very fundamentals of healthy living.

To help workers break out of that destructive loop, researchers are pondering both sides of the work/life cycle. As Sonnentag explains, certain tasks, obligations and workplace cultures make it especially hard to unwind when work is done. Time pressure, the feeling that one is constantly under the gun, is especially disruptive. Jobs in health care, where that time pressure often combines with life-and-death stakes, tend to be especially taxing. Working with customers can be exhausting too, Sonnentag says, partly because it takes a lot of focus and effort to act cheerful and friendly when you don't always feel that way deep down, a task known as emotional labor.

The demands of work vary widely from one person to the next, and so do approaches to downtime. Recovery is highly individual, and different people will have different strategies. "We don't have a single prescription," Bennett says. Researchers have grouped approaches into broad categories, including "relaxation" and "mastery." Relaxation, a concept that's easier to grasp than it is to achieve, includes any activity that calms the body and mind, whether it's walking through a park, reading a good book or watching a zombie hunter movie on Netflix. (Note: The latter may not be an ideal choice if your actual job involves hunting zombies.)

The future of work recovery

Work-life boundaries
As the lines between work and life become increasingly blurred, recovery will happen in new ways and in new contexts. Among other questions, researchers will investigate how time management and family interactions affect recovery for at-home workers, for better or worse.

Technology
Technology has transformed work and home life, with important implications for burnout and recovery. Staying constantly connected can make it difficult to disengage from work, but apps, games and podcasts also offer options for escape.

Work arrangements
Identifying the best ways to support recovery in the gig economy will be a major research focus going forward. To what extent do unpredictable schedules and unstable employment make it harder to unwind?

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM S. SONNENTAG *ET AL* / *AR ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR* KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Experts in the field of work recovery have identified three main areas of concern that need to be investigated in a rapidly evolving work landscape.

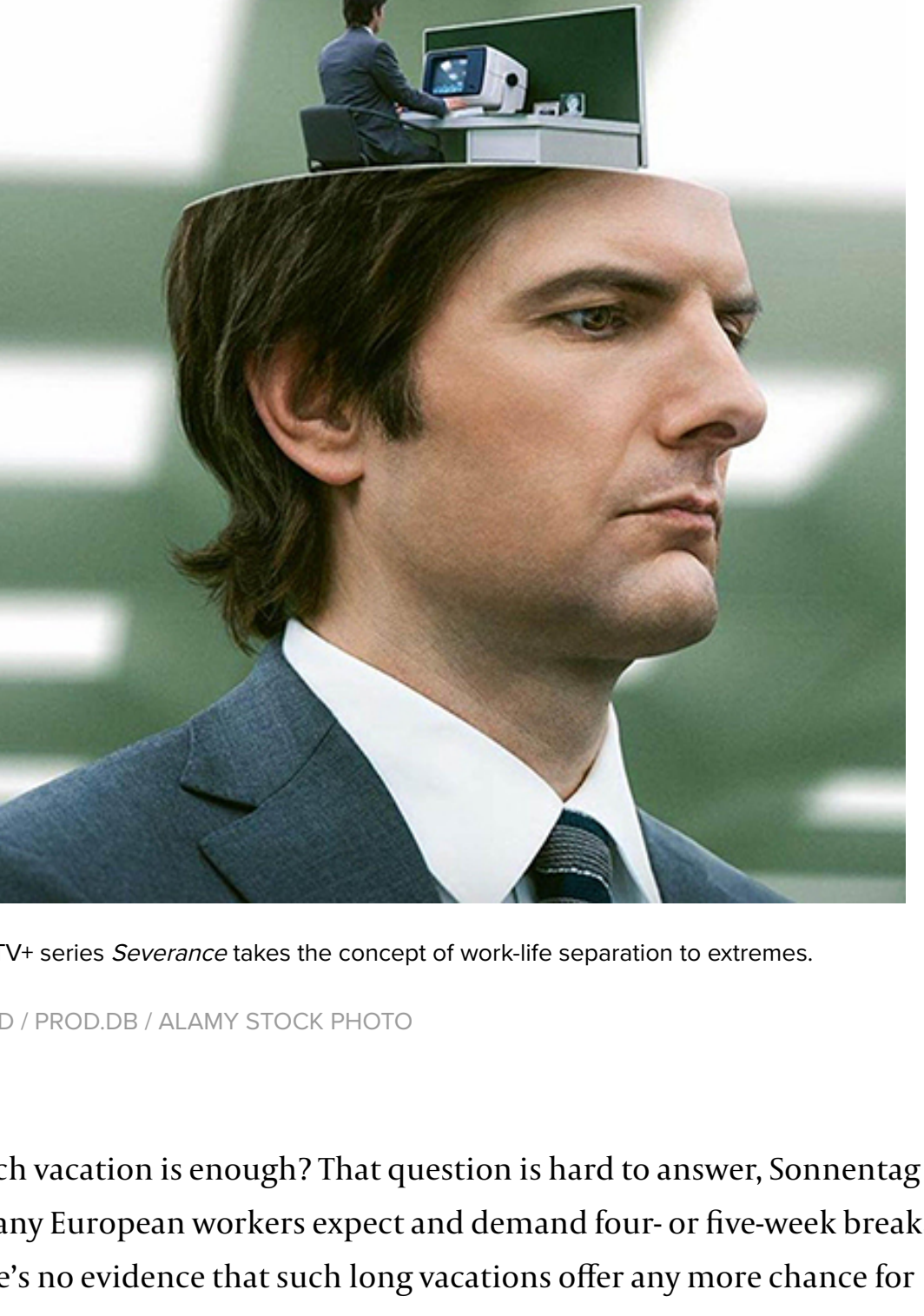
Mastery, meanwhile, can be achieved through any activity that challenges a person to be good (or at least passable) at a new skill. Just as painting helped Bergen cope with stress, workers can find relief in their accomplishments. "Anything associated with learning can be helpful," Sonnentag says. "It could be some kind of sport or exercise. It can be something like learning a new language or trying new cuisines when cooking." A 2019 study that followed 183 employees over 10 workdays found that people who achieved some sort of mastery during their off time were more energetic and enthusiastic the next morning.

For people who need a break, the "why" behind a particular activity can be as important as the "what." A 2013 study that followed 74 workers for five days found that people who spent their off time with activities and tasks that they actually wanted to do — whatever they were — were more lively and energetic the next day than those who felt obligated or forced to do something.

Whether they're relaxing or creating during their time away from the office, Bennett says stressed-out workers should strive to think about something other than their jobs, a process that psychologists call detachment. (The TV show *Severance* takes this concept to extremes.) It's OK to have great ideas in the shower and regale your partner with office anecdotes, but research shows people with stressful jobs tend to be happier and healthier if they can achieve some mental and emotional distance from work.

The benefits of tuning out became clear in a 2018 report involving more than 26,000 employees in various lines of work, including judges, teachers, nurses and office workers. The analysis, coauthored by Bennett, found that detachment was a powerful buffer against work-related fatigue. Workers who said they were able to think about things other than work while at home were less worn out than their colleagues. On the other hand, workers who carried on-the-job thoughts throughout the day were more likely to feel exhausted.

Vacations can also help erase work stress and prevent burnout, to a point. Sonnentag coauthored a 2011 study that used questionnaires to track 131 teachers before and after vacations. The teachers returned to work feeling refreshed and engaged, but those benefits tended to fade after only a month. The post-vacation high was more fleeting for teachers with especially demanding jobs, but it lingered a bit longer for those who managed to fit relaxing leisure activities into their regular routine.



The Apple TV+ series *Severance* takes the concept of work-life separation to extremes.

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How much vacation is enough? That question is hard to answer, Sonnentag says. While many European workers expect and demand four- or five-week breaks, she says there's no evidence that such long vacations offer any more chance for recovery than a vacation of one or two weeks. She does feel confident saying that most workers will need at least occasional breaks that are longer than just a weekend, especially if that weekend is largely eaten up by household chores and other non-work obligations.

Perhaps an extra day off each week would make a big difference. That's the premise driving an ongoing four-day-workweek experiment involving 70 companies in the UK. The businesses, including banks, robotics manufacturers, and a fish and chips restaurant, are all expecting employees to maintain their productivity despite working one day less each week. The full results won't be available until 2023, but early data suggest that the four-day workweek has decreased signs of burnout and stress while improving life satisfaction and feelings of work-life balance, reports Wen Fan, a sociologist at Boston College who is helping to conduct the experiment. "The results are very encouraging," she says.

Fan says it's too early to know if the employees and companies were able to stay as productive as ever during the experiment, but she notes that most jobs could be done more efficiently with a little extra planning and streamlining. "A lot of time is wasted on distractions and meetings that go on too long," she says.

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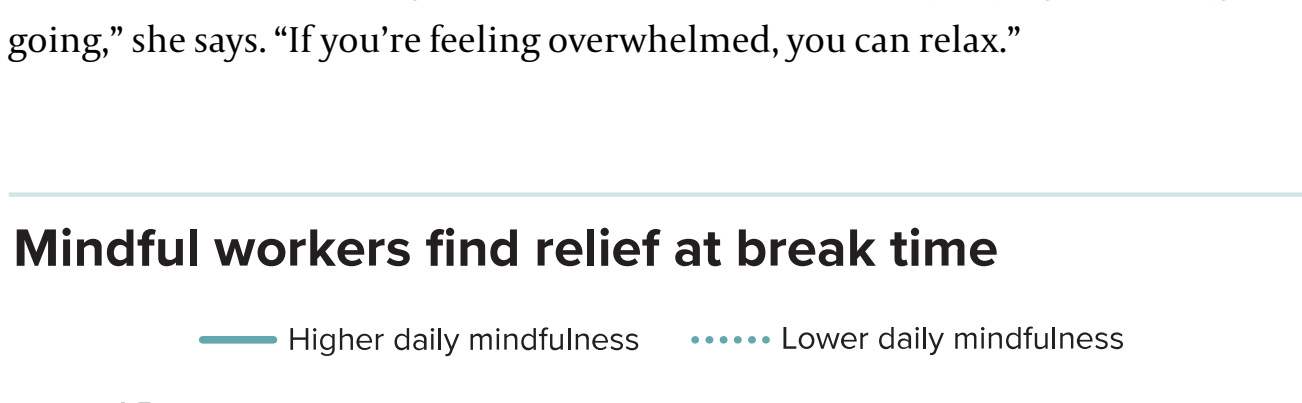
No matter how many days a week a person has to work, minibreaks during the day can help, too. A 2020 survey-based study involving 172 workers in the US found that subjects tended to be in better moods and were less emotionally exhausted toward the end of the workday if they had breaks that allowed them to briefly detach from work. The study also tracked mindfulness, the degree to which people are conscious of their present emotions and circumstances. They did this by asking the participants how much they agreed with statements such as "Today at work I was aware of different emotions that rose within me." Employees who were the most mindful were also the most likely to truly check out and relax during their breaks from work.

A 2021 study of college students took a closer look at relaxation and exercise during work breaks. Those who tried progressive muscle relaxation, a low-stress activity that involves tensing and releasing muscles, reported more detachment during the break, while students who got their blood pumping on an exercise bike had more energy for the rest of their day. Study coauthor Jennifer Ragsdale, now a research psychologist at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Cincinnati, says that a better appreciation for the nuance of work breaks can help people choose the right approach for a given day. "If you need some sort of pick-me-up, you can walk round the building to get your energy going," she says. "If you're feeling overwhelmed, you can relax."

Mindful workers find relief at break time



SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM S.H. CHONG *ET AL* / *ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND HUMAN DECISION PROCESSES* 2020 KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Breaks (the more the better) can help anyone escape work stress, but the most mindful employees — those most aware of their emotions — tend to get the most relief.

As many people have discovered during the pandemic years, it can be challenging to fully check out from work when your living room is also your office. Speaking with at-home workers, Bennett has collected tips for separating work life and life life. Something as simple as wearing a collared shirt or other office attire during work hours and changing into casual wear at the end of the day can help establish boundaries, he says. Using a dedicated laptop for work and putting any work-related materials out of sight at the end of the day can also create much-needed distance.

Ragsdale says that technology can be both an escape and a tether. The same devices that help us play games, listen to podcasts or struggle with online word puzzles also make it possible to receive work emails and other reminders of life outside of the home. Ragsdale cowrote a 2021 commentary calling for more research into the impacts of cell phones on work recovery. "When you're continuing to be exposed to work through your cell phone, it's harder for that recovery process to unfold," she says. The very sight of a work email can trigger thoughts that are just as stressful as the actual job, she adds.

Not many people can completely let go of their phones when they're at home, but they can take steps to protect themselves from intrusive work pings. "You can adjust your settings in a way that make your phone less appealing," she says, including turning off notifications for things like email and Twitter.

Bergen can't be away from her phone when she's on call, but she can still feel like she's in her own world when she's working on a new "Rosie" painting. Psychologists may call it mastery, but for her it's a validation and an escape. She has recently started painting women first responders who were on duty for both 9/11 and Covid. "I started out painting one thing for myself and it blossomed," she says. "It's turned into something beautiful."

Lea en español

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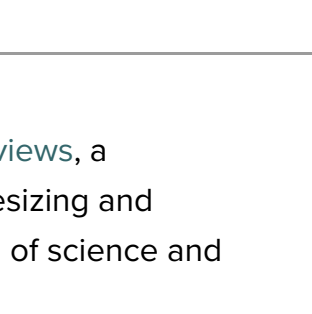

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