

Psychological detachment

– how to get the most benefit from your down time

by GAYNOR PARKIN

Most of us would agree that time away from work is important to our wellbeing, and to restore our ability to perform well when we return. But in our hectic lives it can be hard to switch off and properly recover. How often have you got to the end of your weekend only to feel as though you need another one?

Psychologist Sabine Sonnentag has researched a particular skill called “psychological detachment”, which helps to maximise the benefit of our time outside work. In her research, psychological detachment was a better predictor of positive mood and less fatigue than the amount of time people spent in non-work-related activities. These findings indicate that being able to mentally switch off from work is more important for our ability to recover than the activity we do or how long we do it for. Psychological detachment is therefore defined as the ability to mentally disconnect from work and not think about job-related issues when you are away from your job.

It sounds like a simple concept, doesn't it?! In your experience, how often do you catch yourself thinking about work in the middle of the night? Or when you're out with friends or family?

Dr Sonnentag's research found that those who were able to psychologically detach outside of work experienced many benefits – less fatigue, more positive emotion, greater overall wellbeing, improved relationships outside of work, and less conflict between the demands of their work and their family.

Importantly, the type of psychological detachment we are talking about here is mentally switching off from work in your personal time, not detaching and stopping caring when you are at work. Feeling detached and disconnected in the workplace, and not caring about your work, can be signs of burnout. The skill of psychological detachment helps to create the opposite, enabling you to recover more effectively and benefit more from your down time, so that when you are back at work you feel restored and able to actively engage.

Research shows a few factors that make it more difficult for people to detach from work. Work factors include constant high-pressure work demands, and unusually long working days. Personal factors, such as a tendency to ruminate and worry, having stronger and more intense difficult emotions (such as anxiety, sadness, frustration), and viewing work as central to our identity, also make it harder for people to switch off.



Keeping these factors in mind, there are some effective steps we can take to assist our detachment:

1. Identify what activities help you to detach. They are likely to be the things you find most engaging – perhaps exercise, being outdoors, time with friends or family, playing a game, cooking, or listening to music. Try to do just that one thing at a time and really absorb yourself in it.
2. Set up routines and habits that help you to disconnect from work. See if writing a to-do list at the end of the day or switching off your work phone and email make a difference. You may want to develop a “transition ritual” where you do a particular activity that helps you switch gears after work every day, such as listening to music or a podcast you enjoy on your commute. The goal with these routines is to “park” your thinking about work, so that it is less likely to intrude into your thinking later on. If you work from home, setting up good habits is likely to be especially important as it’s even easier to drift back to work. Find some ways to close the door on work (literally!).
3. Practise checking your focus, so that you know when you are detached from work and when you aren’t. You may also want to ask the people closest to you for feedback – they will notice if you are physically present but mentally at work. Make a deliberate effort to check if you are present in what you are doing and to notice where your thoughts are. Skills like mindfulness are useful for helping to build this awareness and for bringing our attention back to the present.

Finally, in order to detach, you need to actually switch off from work. For example, if I am on call, it is likely to be significantly more difficult to psychologically detach as I could be pulled back into work mode at any time. With more people carrying work phones, being available outside of their usual working hours, [working remotely](#), and working across different time zones, switching off is harder than ever before. Many of us will find we have little predictable time off where we know for sure that work won’t intrude. As a result, even if the work phone never rings, it limits the quality of our recovery. Think about and plan with your leader and your team how you can take predictable, unplugged down time.

We all need effective recovery in order to maintain our wellbeing, avoid burnout, and function well in our work time. Do take some time to think about your recovery and psychological detachment plan, and talk with your team about how you can set up routines and systems that allow you to detach well.