Rest outside working hours matters too

Why recovery time is essential for workplace wellbeing

Regularly working beyond contracted hours, checking messages during evenings or weekends, or remaining mentally connected to work can gradually reduce opportunities for psychological and physical recovery. Rest is not simply the absence of work. It is the opportunity to recover, reconnect with other parts of life and return with renewed capacity.

Many people leave their workplace physically but continue working mentally. They replay difficult conversations, anticipate tomorrow's demands, monitor emails or feel guilty for not doing more. This hidden extension of the working day can be especially difficult to recognise because it may become normal.

Why switching off matters

Our attention, emotions and bodies need periods in which the demands of work can ease. Recovery helps protect sleep, concentration, energy, relationships and the ability to respond flexibly to stress. When rest is repeatedly interrupted, even enjoyable work can start to feel relentless.

There is an important difference between occasionally staying late for an unavoidable task and feeling permanently available. The concern is not a single busy day; it is a pattern in which work consistently takes priority over recovery.

What being mentally connected to work can look like

- Checking work emails or notifications just in case, even when off duty.
- Mentally drafting replies, solving work problems or rehearsing conversations at home.
- Finding it difficult to enjoy family time, hobbies or rest because of unfinished tasks.
- Feeling pressured to respond quickly to colleagues, managers or customers outside agreed hours.
- Using holidays or days off to catch up instead of taking a genuine break.

The effects of prolonged overwork

Insufficient recovery may contribute to fatigue, disturbed sleep, irritability, reduced motivation, headaches, muscle tension and problems with concentration. Some people become more emotionally reactive, while others feel detached or find that activities they once enjoyed no longer offer the same sense of relief.

These experiences do not automatically mean someone has burnout or a medical condition. They can, however, be useful signals that the balance between demands and recovery needs attention. Persistent symptoms deserve a supportive conversation and, where appropriate, advice from a healthcare professional.

Why switching off is not always straightforward

People may feel compelled to stay available because of excessive workloads, staffing shortages, caring responsibilities, unclear expectations, insecure work, perfectionism or concern about letting others down. Remote and hybrid working can blur the boundary further when the same device or room is used for both work and home life.

For some people, ADHD, anxiety or other differences in attention and emotional processing can make transitions and unfinished tasks particularly difficult. There is no single right way to unwind. Recovery strategies should be flexible, accessible and realistic.

Practical ways to protect your recovery time

- Create a closing routine. Spend a few minutes recording unfinished tasks, identifying the first priority for tomorrow and putting work materials away.
- Agree on availability. Make clear when you work, which situations genuinely require contact and when a response can wait.
- Reduce unnecessary notifications. Where appropriate, silence work alerts and keep work apps separate from personal devices.
- Plan a transition. A short walk, change of clothes, stretching, music or quiet time can mark the move from work to personal time.
- Choose restorative activities. Recovery might mean movement, creativity, connection, gentle activity, solitude or simply doing very little.
- Notice guilt without obeying it. The feeling that you should be doing more does not always mean there is more you need to do.

A five-minute end-of-day reset

- Minute 1: Name what you completed today, however small.
- Minute 2: Write down outstanding tasks so you do not have to hold them in your mind.
- Minute 3: Choose a realistic first step for your next working day.
- Minute 4: Close or silence work channels in line with your responsibilities.
- Minute 5: Ask yourself, “What would help me feel more settled this evening?”

A routine should reduce pressure, not become another standard you feel you must meet. Adapt it to shift work, caring roles and the boundaries available in your circumstances.

What employers and managers can do

Healthy work boundaries cannot rest entirely on individuals. Organisations influence whether recovery is possible through staffing levels, workload planning, communication norms, management behaviour and the way performance is assessed.

- Set realistic workloads that can ordinarily be completed within contracted hours.
- Make expectations about out-of-hours contact explicit, including genuinely urgent exceptions.
- Encourage managers to model healthy boundaries and avoid rewarding constant availability.
- Support the full use of breaks, annual leave and time off, with sensible cover arrangements.
- Invite honest discussions about work pressure without blame or stigma.
- Offer reasonable adjustments where needed and review them as circumstances change.

When work regularly spills into personal time

If you repeatedly need extra hours to complete ordinary duties, consider noting when this happens, the tasks involved and the impact on your wellbeing. This can support a constructive discussion with a manager about priorities, deadlines, redistribution of work and what can reasonably wait. Where relevant, seek guidance from HR, an employee representative or occupational health.

Reflection: three questions to ask yourself

- When does my working day actually end, both physically and mentally?
- What makes it difficult for me to disconnect? Is the main barrier workload, expectation, habit or worry?
- What is one small, realistic change that I could try this week, and what support would help?

A final reminder

Rest is not a reward for having completed everything. In most roles, there will always be more to do. Sustainable wellbeing depends on making room for recovery alongside work, not postponing recovery until work is finished forever.

Your value does not depend on being available every hour of the day.

This educational resource supports reflection and workplace wellbeing. It does not replace individual clinical advice, professional occupational health assessment or advice about employment rights.