

“Time Off is Great, but I Dread Before & After” Easier Transitions between Work and Vacation

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We're in the midst of summer, and many of you are planning to take some vacation time soon. In the days leading up to well deserved time off, are you rushing around trying to get everything done before you leave? If so and you're feeling stressed, notice the thoughts going through your mind. Are they similar to "If I get my work done, then I can relax" or "I can't leave until I clear off my desk and catch up on my emails"?

Thoughts like these fuel behaviors and actions that are unnatural and unsustainable. Let's look at how these thoughts affect your transitions between work and vacation.

What's Going On?

Following up on the last article, when you think you have to get all your work done before you can relax and you've got some time off planned, that probably drives you to work long and hard right up until you leave. This triggers the fight or flight response, releasing cortisol, raising adrenaline levels, and creating muscular tension. You may also skip lunch breaks, exercise, and other self-care practices in the effort to get things done, thinking you'll be able to relax.

However, it takes a while to slow down, relax, and clear stress-related chemicals from your system, which could be well into your vacation if you've pushed yourself beforehand. About that time, you have to return home and get back to work. When you walk into the office and see the huge stack of things to do, it's easy to automatically jump in and start playing catch up. Working in this way creates unnecessary tension and stress in your body, depleting the reserves gained during your vacation.

What Do You Want?

Instead of the above scenario, would you like to work at a more natural, sustainable pace, feel good about what you accomplish, and create easier transitions between work and vacation? Imagine what that would feel like. It sounds much more healthy and fun, doesn't it?

Even if a goal like this seems unrealistic or impossible from where you are, it's important to be clear about what you really want so you know where you are headed.

What Can You Do?

Once you know what you want, come up with small steps you can take right now to begin to change your situation. Here are some ideas to get you started.

When planning time off:

- Consider giving yourself an extra day off after your return before you go back to work. So often people want to make the most of their time off, so they stretch their vacation to the max to avoid "wasting" a vacation day. However, this extra day gives you more time to ease back, settle into your daily routine, and take care of personal errands.
- Look ahead at deadlines you'll need to meet when you return from vacation, and plan how to meet them without working by crisis. Options include: requesting an extension, delegating the task or project to someone else, or booking time on your calendar to complete the project when you return.
- On your calendar dedicate the last day before you leave to wrap up loose ends, clear off your desk, and meet with your staff and/or boss. This will allow you to leave the office on time instead and start your vacation on a more restful note.

- While you're at it, block out the first few hours (or ideally the whole day) you return for reading mail and emails, listening to voice messages, and checking in with your boss and coworkers about key work-related developments that took place during your absence. Also, ask not to be booked for any meetings on that day.

Before you leave:

- Delegate work to coworkers several days in advance to give them time to ask you questions before you leave. If you wait until you're rushing out the door and writing a last-minute sticky note to them, you risk getting a phone call or email with questions or risk the task not being done to your satisfaction.
- Change your phone message, letting callers know you'll be available one day after your actual return. It gives you that first day back to ease in without having to respond to so many calls.

On your first day back:

- Keep your phone forwarded or be selective about the calls you answer (using caller id).
- Go through all your email and voice messages before responding. You may find that some of them have been resolved in your absence. After reviewing your messages and talking with your boss and coworkers, you can decide which tasks to handle first.
- Do something to help you enjoy being back at work. For instance, play quiet, relaxing music, buy flowers, take a break and go for a walk, or treat yourself to a nice lunch.

These are a few ideas. What would work for you? Start where it's easy.

Planning for a smooth exit, an easy re-entry and a soft landing helps you retain the benefits gained from your vacation. You'll find you have more energy and enthusiasm to work productively without stressing your system unnecessarily.

Pass this along by supporting your coworkers and employees when they take vacations. Give them the same courtesy- refrain from asking too much of them just before they leave and on their first day back.

Live well,

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