

Psychological Detachment From Work During Leisure Time: The Benefits of Mentally Disengaging From Work

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Abstract

Psychological detachment from work during leisure time refers to a state in which people mentally disconnect from work and do not think about job-related issues when they are away from their job. Empirical research has shown that employees who experience more detachment from work during off-hours are more satisfied with their lives and experience fewer symptoms of psychological strain, without being less engaged while at work. Studies have demonstrated that fluctuations in individuals' psychological detachment from work can explain fluctuations in their affective states, and have identified positive relations between detachment from work during off-hours and job performance. Trait negative affectivity, high involvement in one's job, job stressors, and poor environmental conditions are negatively related to psychological detachment from work during off-job time.

Keywords

psychological detachment, mental disengagement, job stress, well-being, job performance, leisure time

For many people, work is a major cause of daily stress. In the fast-paced 24/7 economy, many people are constantly busy and find it increasingly difficult to unwind and relax. Being continuously occupied with job-related issues without mentally disengaging from time to time might seem necessary for employees in many organizations, but it can have negative side effects. This article reviews research on mental detachment from work during off-job time. It summarizes studies on the benefits of such psychological detachment for well-being and job performance and discusses individual, organizational, and environmental factors that are associated with detachment. It combines topics from environmental psychology and leisure studies with topics from research on job-related stress—a field that has mainly focused on people's reactions to job stressors, but not at how people recuperate from these stressors.

Knowledge about the role of psychological detachment from work contributes to various areas of psychology: It contributes to organizational psychology, by demonstrating how job-related factors may impair mental disengagement; to (occupational) health psychology, by showing how work-related situational factors may harm well-being and health; and to family psychology, by suggesting why lack of detachment from work might impede mindful social interaction within families.

The Detachment Concept

In a report on the restorative effects of reserve military service as respite from work, Etzion, Eden, and Lapidot (1998) described psychological detachment as an “individual's sense of being away from the work situation” (p. 579). More generally, psychological detachment refers to mental disengagement from work during off-hours. Being psychologically detached from work entails both refraining from job-related activities (e.g., not checking job-related e-mails) *and* not thinking about job-related issues (e.g., temporarily forgetting about a difficult task or a social conflict with a coworker) during off-job time. Detaching from work can be seen as essential to leisure. In everyday terms, the experience of psychological detachment could be described as “switching off.”

It is important to note that mental disengagement from work during off-hours does not imply a generally detached attitude toward one's job. Studies have shown that the degree to which people are engaged at work (e.g., their level of dedication to their work) is not related to their degree of

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detachment from work during off-job time (Kühnel, Sonntag, & Westman, 2009; Siltaloppi, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2009).

Relevance of Psychological Detachment for Well-Being and Job Performance

Empirical studies have supported the idea that psychological detachment from work during off-hours is beneficial for workers' well-being and for various aspects of job performance. Well-being is a broad concept that comprises both favorable short-term affective states (e.g., enthusiasm, relaxation) and more long-term aspects of psychological health (e.g., life satisfaction, absence of burnout).

Specifically, research on psychological detachment has yielded four insights so far. First, employees who detach from work during after-work hours report higher levels of psychological well-being than employees who remain mentally attached to their work. Employees who feel more detached from work during off-hours are more satisfied with their lives and experience less emotional exhaustion and lower levels of other symptoms of psychological strain, such as poor sleep (Moreno-Jiménez, Mayo, et al., 2009; Siltaloppi et al., 2009; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). Critically, psychological detachment from work is associated with changes in well-being over time. A longitudinal study with human-service employees showed that lack of psychological detachment from work during after-work hours was associated with increased emotional exhaustion 1 year later (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). In another longitudinal study using surveys of faculty members, researchers found that during a sabbatical, life satisfaction and positive affect increased more and feelings of burnout declined more for those who detached from their work than for those who could not mentally disengage from it (Davidson et al., 2010).

Second, the effects of psychological detachment from work are evident on a day-to-day basis. Beyond research demonstrating that employees who detach from work are generally better off in terms of well-being, studies comparing employees' affect on days during which they feel high levels of detachment versus days during which they feel low levels of detachment have shown that employees' affective states are more favorable on high-detachment days. For instance, a diary study with well-educated professionals demonstrated that participants felt more content and cheerful and less fatigued and depleted at bedtime when they experienced greater detachment from work in the evening (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). A study with public-service employees showed that the benefits of psychological detachment during the evening last until the next morning: The more employees detached from work, the less tired and the less irritated they were the next morning, even when hours of sleep and subjective quality of sleep were statistically controlled for (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008). These findings imply that when employees detach from work during the evening, they return to work in a more favorable affective state that helps them to perform better during the day (Rothbard & Wilk, 2011).

Third, psychological detachment is particularly important in stressful job-related situations. For instance, a study with telecommunication workers showed that psychological detachment can buffer the negative association between experiencing workplace bullying (i.e., being harassed or offended by coworkers or supervisors) and symptoms of psychological strain (e.g., difficulty sleeping, depressive symptoms). Although there was a general increase in symptoms of psychological strain among employees who experienced bullying at work, this increase was less pronounced for workers who detached more from work during off-hours (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Munro, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel, & Garrosa, 2009). Similarly, the longitudinal study with human-service workers mentioned above (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010) showed that time pressure on the job was not related to an increase in psychosomatic complaints over the course of 1 year when workers detached from work during off-job time. When workers continued to think about work during off-hours, however, high levels of time pressure were associated with an increase in psychosomatic complaints. These findings suggest that psychological detachment from work during off-job time protects employees from developing symptoms of psychological strain in response to stressful work situations.

Fourth, psychological detachment is related to various facets of job performance, such as task performance (i.e., fulfilling explicit task requirements) and proactive work behavior (i.e., addressing problems at work and coming up with solutions for them). A study in which weekly surveys were collected over the course of four workweeks revealed that when employees detached from their job during the weekend, they felt more refreshed at the beginning of the next workweek and showed more proactive work behavior throughout the week (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2010). Another study, however, suggested that psychological detachment might be beneficial only up to a certain point. Fritz, Yankelevich, Zarubin, and Barger (2010) reported a curvilinear relation between psychological detachment, on the one hand, and task performance and proactive work behavior on the other: Both low and high levels of psychological detachment during off-work hours were associated with poor task performance and low levels of proactive work behavior, whereas intermediate levels of psychological detachment were associated with comparably high levels of task performance and proactive work behavior. This pattern of findings suggests that high levels of detachment from work may cause decrements in performance, presumably because people who detach too much from work during off-hours need additional time and effort to become sufficiently immersed in their work when returning after off-job time.

What Hinders Detachment, and What Supports It?

Individuals differ in the degree to which they detach from work during off-hours. For instance, people higher in trait negative affectivity (i.e., people who generally react more strongly to negative events) tend to detach less from work

during off-job time (Kühnel et al., 2009; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). It seems that such people continue to ruminate about what happened during the workday and to worry about what might happen at work during the days to come. People with a high level of job involvement (i.e., people whose jobs play a central role their lives) also report relatively low levels of psychological detachment from work during off-job time (Kühnel et al., 2009; Sonnentag & Krueger, 2006).

In addition to these individual-difference variables, work-related situational factors, particularly job stressors, play a role in detachment. A heavy workload and high time pressure are the strongest predictors of low detachment from work (Kinnunen, Feldt, Siltaloppi, & Sonnentag, 2011; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). A synthesis of published and unpublished data (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010; Sonnentag, Unger, & Nägel, in press) showed that as time pressure at work increases, the percentage of people who do not detach from work during off-job time increases as well (see Fig. 1). Thus, people who are given more work at their jobs than they feel they can accomplish during the workday switch off less from work when they are at home. It is probable that a heavy workload and high time pressure increase people's general level of arousal, such that people find it difficult to unwind when leaving their workplace at the end of the workday and instead stay cognitively busy with work-related matters. In addition, the combination of a heavy workload and high time pressure implies that tasks remain unfinished when employees leave the workplace, which might increase their tendency to continue thinking about work-related issues. Finally, a heavy workload and high time

pressure may cause people to anticipate high demands for the next day and, consequently, to mentally prepare for or even worry about the day to come.

The findings on the relation between job-related stressors and lack of psychological detachment are noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, this relation points to one possible pathway by which stressors at work translate into poor health and well-being. It is possible that not only the exposure to such stressors but also prolonged activation after the immediate response to a stressor lead to health impairments in the long run. For instance, a study with dental health care workers showed that inability to withdraw mentally from work during off-job time mediated the relation between high job demands and high fatigue 6 months later (von Thiele Schwarz, 2011). Second, the empirical association between job-related stressors and poor psychological detachment from work suggests a problematic situation in which recovery and recuperation processes are particularly impaired when they are needed most: It is when job stressors are high that it should be most important to disengage mentally from work in order to rejuvenate. However, in this situation, mental disengagement from work is difficult, which decreases the likelihood of recovery and recuperation—a situation that might lead to a downward spiral in which job stressors lead to increasingly severe symptoms of strain when people are unable to experience even temporary detachment from work.

Moreover, the ways and places in which people spend their off-job time is an important factor in their degree of psychological detachment from work. For instance, involvement in meaningful off-job activities (e.g., volunteer work) helps people to detach from (paid) work (Mojza, Sonnentag, & Bornemann, 2011). Research on restorative environments has suggested that specific environmental features facilitate psychological detachment and recovery from work. When describing how environments can help people recover from fatigue associated with directed attention, Kaplan (1995) argued that restorative environments enable fascination and the experiences of being away are characterized by extent (i.e., richness, coherence, and scope) and have features that are compatible with people's specific momentary interests about how to spend time in the environment. The most important component of restorative environments, fascination, is the experience of effortless attention in a setting (e.g., a natural environment) that provides "soft" stimuli, which allow for reflection, so that inhibitory mechanisms needed for directed attention can be restored. Thus, factors that are crucial for psychological detachment include not only aspects of individuals and work situations, but also the settings in which people spend their off-job time.

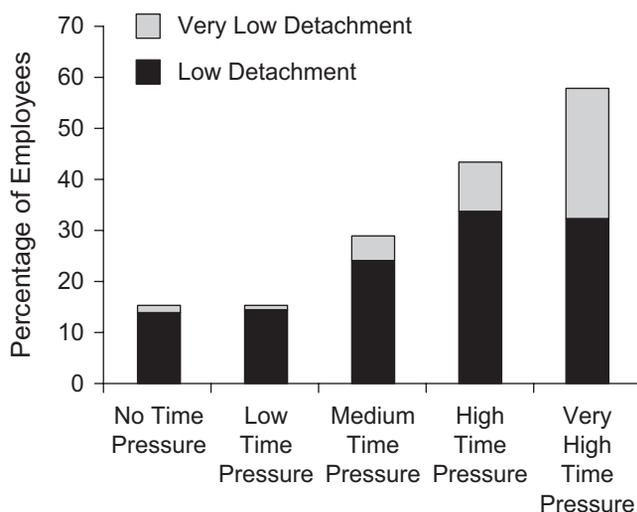


Fig. 1. Percentage of employees with low and very low levels of detachment from work during off-hours, depending on the degree of time pressure at work. Data from 1,709 Swiss and German employees from a broad range of occupations showed that, as time pressure increased, a higher percentage of employees experienced low or very low detachment from work during off-job time.

Directions for Future Research and Implications for Practice

Studies have shown that job stressors, failure to detach from work during after-work hours, and poor well-being are closely interrelated phenomena. However, important questions remain to be answered.

First of all, the question of causality needs to be addressed explicitly. Because most studies on psychological detachment have used a correlational design, there is still no clear evidence that lack of psychological detachment *leads* to impaired well-being, even though major alternative explanations (i.e., third variables, reversed causation) have been ruled out. Experimental studies are needed in which psychological detachment is deliberately manipulated. In addition, field studies should test the effects of detachment interventions.

Second, studies are needed to examine whether lack of detachment is detrimental for everybody and in all situations. For instance, people who experience their jobs as highly meaningful might find detachment difficult to achieve, but lack of detachment might be less of a problem for such people. Similarly, for a person whose supervisor successfully demonstrates the relevance of his or her job for a higher-order goal, lack of detachment might not matter so much; in this case, continuous thinking about work might even be a source of inspiration and personal fulfillment. Thus, leadership and job features might attenuate the relation between detachment and well-being.

Third, the predictors of psychological detachment need more attention. Until now, most studies have examined individual-difference variables, job stressors, and environmental factors in isolation. Future studies should address these factors in combination and test whether individual-difference variables, job stressors, and environmental factors compensate for each other. Critically, future research should identify factors that buffer the association between job stressors and lack of detachment. For instance, being highly engaged in one's family or highly enthusiastic about a hobby might help people to detach from work when they are at home—even after facing stressors during work.

Fourth, detachment should be studied explicitly in nontraditional work environments. It should not be taken for granted that all employees work outside their homes and that their homes are a place for restoration. Telework settings and modern technology have made it possible for more and more employees to work from their homes. Future studies should examine how such people can detach from their work from time to time. Moreover, research should examine detachment during work breaks.

As for practical implications, the research reviewed here suggests that employees benefit from psychologically detaching from work during off-job time. Employees can attain psychological detachment by having clear physical or mental boundaries between work and nonwork life and by bringing tasks to completion before leaving the workplace at the end of the workday. Pursuing off-job activities in restorative environments may also enable psychological detachment. Because heavy workloads and high time pressure seem to hinder detachment, addressing these job stressors is a necessary task for organizations, albeit not an easy one. Organizations could further support their employees' detachment from work during off-hours by clearly communicating that employees are encouraged to switch off from work while at home. Company

policies should explicitly spell out that 24/7 employee availability is not necessarily what defines a committed and highly performing workforce.

Recommended Readings

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- Etzion, D., Eden, D., & Lapidot, Y. (1998). (See References). An early study examining psychological detachment from regular work in a sample of male reservists who either were or were not called for military reserve service.
- Sonnentag, S., Binnewies, C., & Mojza, E. J. (2008). (See References). A daily-survey study that tested how psychological detachment from work during the evening is related to affective states during the following morning.
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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared that she had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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