

Burning out? Try logging off

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You might think that a long vacation is the way to beat job burnout. But the kind of vacation you have is just as important – if not more important – than its length, concludes Prof. Dov Eden, an organizational psychologist from Tel Aviv University’s Faculty of Management.

The key to a quality vacation, he says, is to put work at a distance. And keep it there.

“Using work cell phones and checking company email at the poolside is not a vacation,” Prof. Eden says. “Persons who do this are shackled to electronic tethers which in my opinion is little different from being in jail.”

For the past ten years, Prof. Eden has been studying “respite effects,” which measure relief from chronic job stress before, during, and after vacations away from the workplace. Electronic connectivity exacts a price from those who stay wired into the office while away from work. It marks the end of true “respite relief,” says Prof. Eden, and is a cause of chronic job stress.

“If I were a manager, I would insist that my employees leave their cell phones at work during vacation and not check their email while away,” Prof. Eden warns. “In the long run, the employee will be better rested and better able to perform his or her job because true respite affords an opportunity to restore depleted psychological resources.

“Employees who feel compelled to be at the beck and call of work at all

times are unlikely to recover from the ill-effects of chronic job stress. This is a causal chain that eventually gets internalized as psychological and behavioral responses that can bring on serious chronic disease.”

Recently Prof. Eden, his student Dr. Oranit Davidson, and Prof. Mina Westman (all at Tel Aviv University) surveyed 800 professors from eight universities in Israel, the United States, and New Zealand. The researchers measured stress and strain before, during, and after a sabbatical leave of a semester or a whole year. They found that those who took a long sabbatical break experienced about the same amount of relief (and returned to pre-sabbatical levels of stress and strain in just about the same amount of time) as people who had taken either a week-long or long-weekend vacation.

Stress and psychological strain before, during, and after the respite were measured using a questionnaire and those on sabbatical were compared to a similar group of university academics who did not go on sabbatical. Participants included professors at Berkeley, Florida State University, and The University of Texas at Arlington, among others.

Whether a vacation was as short as a long weekend or as long as a year, within three weeks back at work (and possibly even before that), the respite-relief effect had virtually washed out, Prof. Eden observed.

“Among many employees we have studied over the years we have found that those who detach from their back-home work situation benefit the most from their respite,” says Prof. Eden. “Moreover, these individuals are probably less likely to experience job burnout. It’s the ones who can’t detach from the constant flow of job demands that are most likely to burnout.

“If I could choose,” concludes Prof. Eden, “my educated guess is that I would prefer to have vacations more often, but shorter in length.”

And does Prof. Eden have a cell phone? “I refuse to enslave myself to one of those devices,” he says. “I only use one on the days I visit my grandchildren.”

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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