

'Weekend effect' makes people happier regardless of their job, study says

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Richard Ryan is a professor of psychology, psychiatry and education at the University of Rochester. Credit: University of Rochester

From construction laborers and secretaries to physicians and lawyers, people experience better moods, greater vitality, and fewer aches and pains from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, concludes the first study of daily mood variation in employed adults to be published in the January 2010 issue of the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. And that 'weekend effect' is largely associated with the freedom to choose one's activities and the opportunity to spend time with loved ones, the research found.

"Workers, even those with interesting, high status [jobs](#), really are happier on the weekend," says author Richard Ryan, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. "Our findings highlight just how important free time is to an individual's well-being." Ryan adds. "Far from frivolous, the relatively unfettered time on weekends provides critical opportunities for bonding with others, exploring interests and relaxing — basic psychological needs that people should be careful not to crowd out with overwork," Ryan cautions.

The study tracked the moods of 74 [adults](#), aged 18 to 62, who worked at least 30 hours per week. For three weeks, participants were paged randomly at three times during the day, once in the morning, the afternoon and the evening. At each page, participants completed a brief questionnaire describing the activity in which they were engaged and, using a seven-point scale, they rated their positive feelings like happiness, joy, and pleasure as well as negative feelings of anxiety, anger, and depression. Physical symptoms of stress, such as headaches, digestive problems, respiratory ills, or low energy, also were noted.

The results demonstrated that men and women alike consistently feel better mentally and physically on the weekend. They're feel better regardless of how much money they make, how many hours they work, how educated they happen to be, or whether they work in the trades, the service industry, or in a professional capacity. They feel better whether they are single, married, living together, divorced, or widowed. And, they feel better regardless of age.

To tease out exactly why weekend hours are so magical, the researchers asked participants to indicate whether they felt controlled versus autonomous in the task they were engaged in at the time of the pager signal. Participants also indicated how close they felt to others present and how competent they perceived themselves to be at their activity.

The findings indicated that relative to workdays, weekends were associated with higher levels of freedom and closeness: people reported more often that they were involved in activities of their own choosing and spending time with more intimate friends and family members. Surprisingly, the analysis also found that people feel more competent during the weekend than they do at their day-to-day jobs.

The results support self-determination theory, which holds that well-being depends in large part on meeting one's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study, conclude the authors, "offers one of the first substantive and theory-based explanations for why wellbeing tends to be more favorable on the weekends: People experience greater autonomy and relatedness, which are, in turn, related to higher wellness." By contrast, write the authors, the work week "is replete with activities involving external controls, time pressures, and demands on behavior related to work, child care and other constraints." Workers also may spend time among colleagues with whom they share limited emotional connections.

The study also raises questions about how work environments can be structured to be more supportive of wellness. "To the extent that daily life, including work, affords a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence, well-being may be higher and more stable, rather than regularly rising and falling," the researchers conclude.

Provided by University of Rochester

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