

Will you check your emails over Christmas? The out-of-hours practice that could cost you your health

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Employees who respond to digital work communications out of hours are more likely to suffer from burnout, psychological distress, and poor physical health.
Credit: Joshua Mayo on Unsplash

When the holiday season rolls around, will you get to relax, or do you let work creep into your down time? If you fit in the latter category and can't seem to keep work at bay, you may be putting your health at risk, according to research from the University of South Australia.

Surveying more than 2200 academics and professional staff across 40 Australian universities, researchers found that employees who responded to digital work communications out of hours were more likely to suffer from burnout, [psychological distress](#), and poor physical [health](#).

Researchers found that in 2021:

- 26 percent felt that they had to respond to work-related texts, calls, and emails from supervisors during their leisure time;
- 57 percent of employees said that they'd sent work-related digital communications to other colleagues in the evenings;
- 50 percent reported that they often receive work-related texts, calls and emails from colleagues on the weekend;
- 36 percent reported in their organisation it was the norm to respond immediately to digital [communication](#).

UniSA researcher Dr. Amy Zadow says that the expectations for employees to be available 24-7 is putting pressure on Australian workers.

"Since COVID-19, the digitalisation of work has really skyrocketed, blurring work boundaries, and paving the path for people to be contactable at all hours," Dr. Zadow says.

"But being available to work both day and night limits the opportunity for people to recover—doing things such as exercise and catching up with friends and family—and when there is no [recovery period](#) you can start to burn out.

"Our research shows that high levels of out-of-hours work digital communication can have a significant impact on your physical and mental wellbeing, affecting work-family relationships, causing psychological distress, and poor physical health.

"Conversely, workers who kept their work boundaries in check experienced less stress and pressure."

The research showed that those who were expected to respond to after-hours communications from colleagues on the weekends reported higher levels of psychological distress (56 percent compared to 42 percent); emotional exhaustion (61 percent compared to 42 percent); and poor physical health (28 percent compared to 10 percent).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [reported that nearly one in two](#) Australians will experience a mental health condition at some time in their life.

UniSA's Professor Kurt Lushington says that dealing with work-related stress is increasingly important.

"Managing out-of-hours communications can be challenging, but organisations do have the power to discourage 'work creep'," Prof Lushington says.

"Setting up policies, practices and procedures to protect psychological health by developing a strong Psychosocial Safety Climate is likely to limit damaging out-of-hours digital communication. And, on a broader scale, this is already being considered in various Enterprise Bargaining Agreements and National Employment Standards.

"The starting place is measuring work demand so that an organisation can mitigate the risk in the first place. Once they do this, they can

develop protective actions that can prevent the development or continuations of harmful workplace norms.

"At the end of the workday, everyone should have the right to disconnect."

Provided by University of South Australia

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