

How to Recover from Work Stress, According to Science

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July 5, 2022

The workforce is tired. While sustainable job performance requires us to thrive at work, only 32% of employees across the globe say they're thriving. With 43% reporting high levels of daily stress, it's no surprise that a wealth of employees feel like they're on the edge of burnout, with some reports suggesting that up to 61% of U.S. professionals feel like they're burning out at any moment in time. Those who feel tense or stressed out during the workday are more than three times as likely to seek employment elsewhere.

Because of this, employees increasingly demand mental health support, and more employers have responded by offering benefits like virtual mental health support, spontaneous days or even weeks off, meeting-free days, and flexible work scheduling. Despite these efforts and the increasing number of employees buying into the importance of wellness, the effort is lost if you don't actually recover. So, if you feel like you're burning out, what works when it comes to recovering from stress?

Understanding stress recovery

Recovery is the process of restoring symptoms of work stress (anxiety, exhaustion, and elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol) back to pre-stressor levels. We refer to recovery as a *skill*, because knowing how and when you can best recover from stress requires both knowledge (of what works for you) and practice (actually doing it).

The skill of recovery is well known in fields that require performance under extreme pressure or are characterized by the need for prolonged periods of intense concentration, where errors can be costly or even deadly. Consider a pilot on a critical mission or an athlete who has their entire career hanging on a single performance. These people learn quickly that physical and mental recovery is crucial for achieving and sustaining high performance under pressure. Pilots are even officially *required* to recover for defined time periods during and between duty in order to maintain safety standards, and a wealth of research explores how athletes can best recover.

Importantly, recovery in these fields doesn't just happen when individuals feel depleted or burned out — it's an essential part of the training and performance strategy. Effectively recovering from periods of stress, performance, or concentration is important for emotions, moods, energy, learning integration and growth, and ultimately performance, mental and physical health, and relationships.

The paradox of recovery

The process of recovery introduces a paradox. Research shows that when our bodies and minds *need* to recover and reset the most (i.e., when we're most depleted), we're the least likely — and able — to *do* something about it. For example, when work is demanding and we're feeling overwhelmed, we quickly slide into a negative cycle of working longer hours and taking fewer breaks. During those stressful times, we also tend to eat less healthily, even though adequate nutrition and hydration are important to replenishing energy levels. Further depleted, we have less energy and motivation to take time out to relax or engage in exercise, leading to low recovery and in turn further exhaustion the next day. Rinse and repeat. Organizational cultures that celebrate working on little sleep or that work in a constant state of emergency can exacerbate this, because despite your body begging to recover, there's an underlying assumption that you can (and should) push through it.

To overcome this paradox, you must learn what works best for you and devise a recovery plan. It's important to note that what actually works for stress recovery is not always as intuitive as you think. Here are five ways to make recovery work for you based on industry- and research-based insights.

1. Detach psychologically from work.

“It sounds silly, but after a long, intense surgery, what I do to relax is play some video games to disconnect before I go home,” described an orthopedic surgeon participating in an executive class on stress management. Regardless of your preferred recovery activity (reading, running, video games, cooking, etc.), it's important that you mentally disconnect or “switch off” your thoughts of work (or the particular stressor at hand). Workday stress accumulates throughout the day, meaning that we ruminate about work well into the evening. You may be physically present at an exercise class, but your mind is replaying the events of an earlier client meeting. Research shows that even thinking about work detracts from your ability to recover from it, and the mere presence of your mobile phone distracts you, leaving you unable to detach from “the office.”

As recovery can only occur when our minds return to pre-stressor levels, we need to facilitate that process by cognitively withdrawing from thoughts of work, essentially giving our minds a break. Detachment leads to better recovery and even improvements in work-related outcomes, such as performance and engagement. This is counterintuitive to the notion that more time spent working leads to better performance.

To harness this principle, dedicate a fixed (and if needed, short) time each day when you can fully devote attention to a non-work-related activity. Even starting with a few minutes will reap benefits for recovery. Practicing mindfulness as a supplementary activity helps with this — over time, you're training your brain (and its tendency to ruminate) to focus on the present moment. Learn which triggers prevent you from psychologically detaching from work. If, for instance, the presence of your phone prompts you to check work emails during off hours or breaks, turn it off or shut off notifications temporarily.

2. Harness the power of micro-breaks during the workday.

“During the work week, I set my phone alarm to ring once every two hours as a needed reminder to step away from my computer, stretch, walk around, and get a drink of water,” an EVP of a multinational technology company recounted. Contrary to common assumptions that recovery can only happen *after* work or during a long holiday, research shows that micro-breaks — short breaks of approximately 10 minutes — taken during the workday are surprisingly effective for recovering from daily work stress and various job demands. For example, short moments of meditation or relaxing, taking time to eat a nutritious snack, enjoyable social interactions, or activities that require some degree of cognitive attention (such as reading) are strategies that can improve motivation and concentration, shape your mood, and sustain your energy during the day. Also, taking longer breaks in combination with more frequent short breaks can provide more energy, motivation, and concentration than infrequent short breaks. Interestingly, micro-breaks taken earlier in the workday contribute to greater recovery.

It's important to resist the urge to push through the day assuming that it will be easier to recover later, or to “save up” your recovery for the weekend or even for that holiday that's still months ahead. To maximize your recovery, ensure you have a recovery plan that you can enact on a daily basis through the use of micro-breaks that you can schedule into your busy workflow with dedicated smartphone apps.

3. Consider your preference for recovery activity.

“I used to partake in my partner’s hobby during my free time so that we could spend quality time together. Then I realized I dreaded going to guitar lessons. Now, we do our own hobbies: I do my gardening while my partner learns guitar, and we carve out time to spend together afterwards.”

Although having a choice over your recovery activity sounds like common sense, this experience, described by the CFO of a global events company, highlights the challenges of applying this principle. Perhaps you’ve felt pressured into going to a group exercise class, or maybe your company organized a group wellness activity during the weekend when you really just wanted to be at home with your family.

Not having a choice in your own recovery can sometimes do more harm than good. For example, one study showed that when workers *wanted* to sit with coworkers and chat over the [lunch break](#), it boosted their stress recovery. On the other hand, when workers were less keen about socializing over lunch but did so anyway (perhaps due to peer pressure or norms of the particular company culture), they found their energy highly depleted at the end of the day. The same pattern of depletion was also identified for working lunches. For most people, working over lunch is draining. Yet, if you personally choose to stay in a productive workflow during lunchtime (and get energized by accomplishing important tasks), there *can* be recovery benefits. Just keep in mind that relaxing is an important recovery activity that affords benefits, even when it’s not your most preferred lunch break activity. In sum, be mindful about how you use your lunch breaks. If you feel pressured to socialize or continue working, talk to your manager about how you can get more autonomy over how you schedule and use your break. Then, spend those free slots doing recovery activities that you prefer.

4. Prioritize high-effort recovery activities.

“I may not be rah-rah about it ahead of time, but there has never been a gym session I’ve regretted afterwards,” proclaimed a senior executive of a multinational health care company. While it may seem that relaxing, watching TV, or other “passive” or “low-effort” activities are best for recovery, on the contrary, [research](#) shows that more active activities can be even more effective for recovery. If you don’t enjoy going to the gym or playing team sports, find a type of exercise that you do enjoy, such as a fast walk, a hike, or a swim.

Beyond exercise, other activities that work well for recovery are engaging in effortful activities, or “mastery experiences.” [Mastery](#) experiences require high levels of dedication, focus, and time — resources that usually zap you of energy during the workday. While it seems counterintuitive that further drawing on these resources during non-work periods will benefit your recovery, mastery experiences such as pursuing a hobby (learning a new language, learning to play the violin, volunteering, etc.) helps you generate new skills and replenishes depleted resources that can be applied back to your work, thereby approaching recovery from a different, productive, angle.

Beyond the “standard” recovery activities like exercise or yoga and meditation, it may be time to add a new tool to your recovery toolkit. Why not sign up for that kickboxing class? Or maybe it’s time to dust off that old guitar.

5. Shape your environment for optimal recovery.

One underrated, critical element of recovery is your surrounding environment. Some companies have [caught on](#) and are building direct and indirect exposure to natural elements [into the workplace](#). Indeed, [research](#) on direct exposure to nature, such as through [park walks](#) during workday lunch breaks, shows that it can enhance your recovery from stress in as little as 10 minutes. In addition to short-term effects, being exposed to [nature at work](#) contributes positively to your well-being and

lowers the likelihood of burnout. Exposure to daylight and having a window view or indoor greenery at the workplace have been shown to have a positive impact on your sleep quality, perceived stress, and overall health. Interestingly, indirect exposure to nature (for example, even looking at nature scenes on a screen) can also have benefits for recovery. In a nutshell, getting some nature into your workplace makes you more happy and energized at work.

No need to book a trip to the mountains. You can try to stay connected to nature while at work by using any outdoor facilities your employer provides (like cafeteria terraces or green spaces at the building entries), opening windows regularly to bring in fresh air, taking short walks in a nearby park during your micro-breaks, and even suggesting outdoor walking meetings when possible. If all else fails, try to get some exposure through nature photography or videos.

The benefits of devising and enacting an intentional recovery plan are clear: Recovery can sustain your energy, well-being, positive moods, and motivation and boost cognitive and physical performance and your overall life satisfaction. However, when you most need to recover is when you're least likely to actually engage in recovery activities. By following these strategies for recovery, you can better create and enact an intentional recovery plan to help sustain your energy and performance over time.