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Why striving for work-life balance is an impossible and ineffective goal.

by Rebecca Bland

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The idea of achieving work-life balance is an appealing but elusive, and unrealistic goal. If you're working from home, the boundaries between work and life range from blurred to non-existent. And even if you're office based, chances are you're not effectively achieving the psychological dis-engagement your brain needs when you're not 'in work'.

That's because, here in the UK, we have a highly educated 'brains' workforce. Gone are the days when the majority of people worked in 'brawn' industries, when walking away from work at the end of the day created the physical rest their aching bodies needed.

Most people I work with in both corporate and public sector industries find that even when they are not in work, and their line managers insist they 'switch-off', it's an impossible task; their minds are constantly 'switched-on', evaluating what's already happened, and planning for what happens next.

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"Instead of striving for work-life balance, we need to discover our own unique ways to effectively dis-engage from work, and provide our brain with the rest it desperately needs."



ENGAEMENT AND DIS-ENGAGEMENT

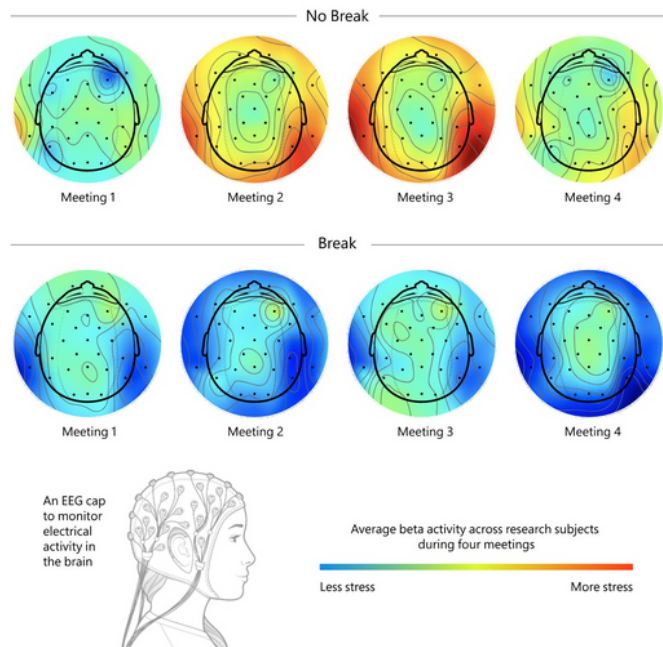
Engagement and disengagement are two sides of the same coin. Instead of striving for an impossible work-life balance, we need to be thinking about how we can be engaged and effective when we're in work, and effectively dis-engage when we're not.

We all have our own, unique ways of creating psychological detachment from work, but it's not always about time and distance; research shows that the restorative effects of a two week holiday are not particularly long-lasting, even when people are lucky enough to not be thinking about work.

Our brain needs both frequent, short bursts of psychological detachment, as well as longer periods. Recent research in Positive Psychology, the science of human flourishing, is showing that sitting for long periods on back-to-back meetings is as harmful as chain-smoking, and that multi-tasking is both an ineffective, and psychologically draining way to operate.

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Imaging data show increased stress on the brain from back-to-back meetings with no breaks.



ACHIEVING PSYCHOLOGICAL DIS-ENGAGEMENT

1. Take frequent breaks away from your desk throughout the day. Don't just hope for these to happen, they won't. You need to proactively schedule breaks in between meetings, and after focusing on a task for 40 minutes or more.
2. When you're taking a break, move away from your work environment, avoid looking at screens or discussing work-related topics, hydrate, and if possible, head outdoors for a little fresh air. Taking a few mindful breaths, is a great way to psychologically re-nourish. Mindful colouring or any other creative tasks, are quick, easy ways to rest your brain from work.
3. When you've finished work for the day, if you're experiencing negative emotions as a result of work-related incidents, remember that moving your body is the quickest way to lift your mood. Going for a walk, physical workouts, and dance are great ways to psychologically detach from your job.

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ACHIEVING PSYCHOLOGICAL DIS-ENGAGEMENT CONTINUED ...

4. Leisure-craft your weekend and longer periods away from work to boost your wellbeing. Plan opportunities to experience positive emotions, engage with hobbies you enjoy, spend time with people you love, and focus on your physical and mental wellbeing.

5. Remember that what you DO for a job isn't who your ARE.

Whilst work is a huge part of our identity, it's important to recognise our other identities too; as parents, carers, partners, runners, triathletes, travellers, readers, musicians, and everything in between!

You are a human being, not a human doing. We need to rest our minds as much as our bodies, and support others in the workplace to do the same.

If you'd like more information about supporting yourself or your team members to effectively engage and disengage, why not book my workplace training programme?

More information can be found on the Inspiring Organisations page of my website: www.becbland.com.
