Why You Should Stop Working on the Weekends – for Your Health

Working too much can lead to emotional exhaustion and other health repercussions.

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Some employees may think logging weekend hours is good for their career, but plenty of research suggests it's bad for their health. (GETTY IMAGES)

How often do you fire up your laptop on weekends – not to watch a movie or show on Netflix but to toil on an office assignment? Is it part of your routine to work on Saturday or Sunday to get a jump on that Monday afternoon deadline?

Do you ever put off typical weekend errands like grocery shopping or picking up your dry cleaning in favor of responding to emails from clients, work contacts or your boss? Does work take over your weekend to the point you curtail or even forgo recreational activities like riding a bike or going for a swim?

If you said yes to any of these questions, you've got plenty of hard-working company. A recent survey by Enterprise Rent-A-Car of 1,000 Americans ages 25 and older found that 67 percent of respondents worked on a typical weekend, primarily by reading and answering work-related emails. For many U.S. residents, working on weekends has become normalized, the survey found. For instance, 63 percent of respondents said their employers expect them to work on weekends, and 61 percent said they have a difficult time not thinking about work over the weekend.

Some employees may think logging weekend hours is good for their career, but plenty of research suggests it's bad for their health. One study by Marianna Virtanen of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and colleagues, for example, found that people who work long hours are 12 percent more likely to become heavy drinkers. Similar research found an association between overwork and sleeping problems, depression and heart disease. And another study found an association between overwork by low-income workers and Type 2 diabetes. "If you don't have a start and an end to a week, then it's just one long continuous work week, which can be problematic," says Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist and performance coach in New York City and author of the book "Be Fearless: Change Your Life In 28 Days." "People need time to reset, recharge and catch up on things. Simply put, if they don't have a life, then they should get one."

Working excessive weekends hours can also damage your mental health, says Mayra Mendez, a licensed psychotherapist and program coordinator for intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health services at Providence Saint John's Child and Family Development Center in Santa Monica, California. "Studies have shown that people who typically work long hours over an extended period have a higher risk of experiencing depression," Mendez says. "Taking work home contributes to long hours involved in work-related activities that adds to a prolonged experience of stress, interrupts social plans, results in less time spent with loved ones and creates distance in relationships. If work is stressful, demanding and restricting, taking it home will interfere with mind-body recovery and the recuperation process. The mind needs to decompress and clear."

Many people think they need to put in weekend hours to achieve their career goals, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. "I have many patients who struggle with this, particularly people in the early and middle stages of their careers who are trying to establish themselves as professionals," she says. "Some professions demand more than others, particularly attorneys, medical workers and accountants during tax season. It is often difficult to set and maintain boundaries around your time when you work in an office culture that expects everyone to be available at all times." The ubiquity of cellphones, laptops and tablets in recent years has made it even harder to unplug from work, she says.

Lawmakers in France have provided legal protections for workers who wish to disconnect from their offices on weekends. A French law that took effect in January requires companies with 50 or more employees to give their workers the right to disconnect and not send or respond to work-related emails during certain hours, typically weekends. French officials said the law would protect the health and well-being of employees. Some U.S.

employers are trying similar approaches. For example, Pomona College in Pomona, California, enforces a policy telling employees not to be on email after working hours and to avoid downloading email to their personal electronic devices. Similarly, a Philadelphia-based health care consulting firm installed a policy discouraging employees to work on emails on weekends and between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.

In a 2016 study published in the Academy of Management Journal, researchers analyzed data collected from 365 employed adults. The study found that "both the actual time spent on emails and organizational expectations regarding employee availability to monitor work emails after hours lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn negatively affects perceptions of work-life balance and work identification."

If you're one of the majority of people who works on at least some weekends, here are strategies experts recommend to help you put aside your work on Friday evening so you can enjoy your days off and decompress:

1. Change your thinking. Focusing on negative thoughts like "I'm so busy" and "the weekend is too short" contributes to feeling overwhelmed and prevents you from enjoying your weekend, Alpert says. Instead, shift your thinking to "I can only do so much in a day, so I'll accomplish what's reasonable today while making sure I relax, too."

2. Give yourself (and work) a rest. Turn off your work mode on Friday evening. Imagine you're stepping out of the work version of yourself into your lighthearted weekend persona, Alpert says. Be OK relaxing – without guilt. You'll turn your devices on soon enough.

3. Manage your stress. If you're feeling anxious about work, "destress the machine" on weekends by getting massages, meditating, practicing yoga, going to sporting events, getting regular exercise, eating well and seeking out cultural activities like art shows or live music events, Gadhia-Smith says. "If you're a foodie, consider taking a cooking class on weekends," she says. "This is an excellent way to meet new people, cultivate a new hobby and take care of your nutrition."

4. Seek balance in your life. Ask yourself whether work is crowding out other major parts of your life, like exercise, on weekends. If so, you may be working compulsively, the way someone with an addiction can't help himself or herself from using drugs, Gadhia-Smith advises. You can become more balanced in your life by making small and gradual changes, such as spending an hour on your weekend answering work emails instead of four or five hours.

5. Change your routine. Keeping a regular schedule can be good, but you don't want your weekends to become monotonous. Challenge yourself with new physical activities, like learning a new sport, Alpert says. Rent a car and take a weekend or day trip to a fun and interesting place.

6. Give your devices the weekend off. Try not to use your laptop, unless it's to watch a movie or a show or to buy concert or movie tickets, and give your cellphone a rest on weekends, too. Being constantly connected to smartphones and social media like Facebook and Twitter can keep you preoccupied with world events, what other people are doing and your own job. This can sap your mental energy when you should be recharging. Unplug for all or most of the weekend, and focus on things you want to do.

7. Don't oversleep. It may be tempting to sleep half the day on weekends, but doing so robs you of precious time to go out and do activities you care about, Alpert says. If you sleep too much on weekends, it will eventually disrupt your sleep schedule for the rest of the week. If you're tired, instead of sleeping in until early afternoon, get up in the morning and take a short power-nap later.