

Take time out



There is a thin line between acute stress and chronic stress, and that thin line is recovery.

Recovery time or down time is essential; you need to take time out to avoid burnout.

Acute stress is the stress that we all experience in our hectic days. The call from your manager asking you to go directly to his/her office even before you have arrived at work, the irate call from a client that you have to reply to, the unexpected presentation you have to give because a colleague has fallen ill, the project review meeting trying to explain missed deadlines

However, between these daily storms there are periods of calm; we are back at our place of work and, albeit, unconsciously, winding down – talking to a colleague, having a coffee, doing some routine work, preparing for a meeting tomorrow, etc.

Stress becomes chronic when the down time disappears, when we are rushing from crisis to crisis, putting out fires left, right and centre, the coffee break disappears, the chat with a colleague disappears, routine work is put on the back burner (only to blow up later), lunch is reduced to the strict minimum, we stay a bit later, training is cancelled, and, we become irritable, anti-social, impatient, isolated, anxious, we forget things or lose things, we eat more or eat less, small illnesses creep in and then, like the stretched elastic band, we break – with, apparently, no warning!

This is often an insidious process, and we convince ourselves, and those around us, that *“everything is ok, I’m strong and I can cope”*.

Weekend down time is great, eating with family, finding time for hobbies, going out with friends and exercising is great but we also need regular down time during our working days – which for many, if we include stressful travel time (traffic jams, delayed public transport, potholes, etc.) can easily make up almost 60% of our waking days.

Down time or recovery time can come in many forms, physical, mental, social, creative, emotional, spiritual and we can need to “find the time” for small doses of these.

Physical recovery is about going for short walks, stretching regularly and some deep breathing; not sitting hunched over your desk for long periods. Rather than leaving your desk and going directly to a meeting, take “the long route”; go outside and take a few minutes to breath in some fresh air and do some simple body movements – you don’t have to find a quiet place in a forest and sit crossed legged “breathing in the future and breathing out the past.”

Mental recovery is about scheduling short breaks throughout the day; switching off from your problems for a few minutes and maybe, listening to your favourite music or watching one of your favourite comedy sketches (mine are invariably Monty Python). Your problems won’t go away, but you will be in a better mood to deal with them.

Creative recovery is about getting involved in new & different activities; maybe take part in a cross-functional working group or get involved in a project in an area new to you.

Emotional recovery is about finding a place to freely express your emotions; maybe with an understanding colleague or maybe going into a room (or outside) on your own and letting off steam.

Social recovery is about surrounding yourself with supportive & positive people. Be choosy about who you have coffee or lunch with, avoid those who only want to talk about, wars, famines, politics and everything bad in your company.

Spiritual recovery is about engaging in something, either greater than yourself, or something that has real meaning for you. This could mean putting time "aside" to consciously carry out those tasks & activities that connect you to your values, "donating" some of your time to a charitable cause or maybe mentoring a younger colleague.

Down time doesn't mean long periods listening to music, watching videos, wandering around, drinking coffee with colleagues; it's about getting short doses to replenish your mind and body.

Working at 100% all the time is, at the end of the day, unsustainable. Creating downtime will help support your wellbeing, your creativity, and, paradoxically, your productivity.