

Letting Go After Work

Strategies for Transitioning Out of Work Mode

For those working in high-pressure, mission-driven roles, the boundary between work and personal life can be hard to find, and even harder to hold. Many of us carry work around in our heads long after the workday ends – replaying conversations, mentally drafting emails, or lying awake thinking through unresolved problems.

This kind of mental overspill is more than just tiring. Research on burnout consistently shows that the inability to psychologically detach from work is a significant risk factor for chronic stress, exhaustion, and reduced wellbeing over time. For people in caring, crisis-focused, or mission-driven roles, switching off can sometimes feel irresponsible – even when rest is exactly what allows us to keep doing the work well. Letting go after work isn't a luxury – it's a core part of sustainable wellbeing and performance.

Why switching off can be hard

Many factors can make it difficult to mentally disconnect from work, including:

- **Constant connectivity** – when messages and notifications continue after hours, there is rarely a clear signal that the day is done
- **Perfectionism and responsibility** – worrying that stepping away means something important will be missed
- **Blurred boundaries** – especially when home is also the workplace
- **The emotional weight of the work** – exposure to crisis, distressing material, or high-stakes decisions can make the mind hold on longer

Which of these factors sounds familiar? Now, let's think about things that can help.

1. Create a Shutdown Ritual

A shutdown ritual is a brief, repeatable sequence of actions that signals to your brain: work time is over. Without a clear ending, work simply bleeds into the rest of your day.

Your shutdown ritual might take as little as five minutes and could include:

- **Capture what's unfinished.** Write down unfinished tasks or concerns. This helps reassure your brain that you haven't forgotten them and can return to them tomorrow.
- **Set your top priorities for tomorrow.** Knowing where you'll start gives your brain a sense of direction and closure, rather than leaving the day feeling open-ended.
- **Manage your notifications.** Turning off work notifications or setting a status message at the end of the day sends a clear signal, to yourself as much as anyone else, that you're off the clock.
- **Mark the end clearly.** Close your laptop, tidy your workspace, or say a phrase to yourself – something as simple as *"Work is done for today."* Over time, these small cues train your brain to shift gears.

2. Build a Transition Into Your Evening

Shutting down work is only one part of the picture. How you move *from* work *toward* your personal life matters just as much. Research by leadership researcher Nick Petrie identifies three common patterns:

- **Level 1 – Still in work mode:** You're physically away from work, but mentally still there – replaying meetings, anticipating tomorrow, problem-solving in the background.
- **Level 2 – Distraction:** You've shifted attention away from work – scrolling, listening to news, watching TV – but may not feel genuinely restored.
- **Level 3 – Active reconnection:** You're not just stepping *away* from work, you're stepping *toward* your personal life by paying attention to the people, activities, and spaces that replenish you.

You don't have to aim for Level 3 every evening. But the more often you can move in that direction – even briefly – the more restorative your time outside of work becomes.

If you work from home, or live and work in the same physical space during deployment, there is no natural commute to bridge the two worlds – which means the transition requires more deliberate effort, not less. Consider creating a "psychological commute": a short walk, a change of clothes, making a cup of tea – any consistent ritual that marks the shift from work to personal time.

3. Give Your Brain Something Else to Do

When work thoughts keep intruding, one effective strategy is to give your mind a different task to focus on – something that requires enough attention to crowd out the mental background noise. Creative activities, physical movement, social connection, puzzles, games, gardening, etc. can all serve this purpose. The key is engagement. Activities that require active attention are often more restorative than passive distraction alone.

A note on practice

None of these strategies work instantly. Think of them as habits to build gradually – choosing one or two to experiment with, practicing consistently, and noticing what helps you feel more grounded in your personal time. The more you do them, the more automatic they become.

Small transitions, practiced regularly, create space for real rest – and real rest is what sustains us over time.

One thing to try today

At the end of your next workday, take five minutes to write down your open tasks and your top three priorities for tomorrow. Then close your laptop and do something that signals – to yourself – that the workday is over.