

# Why you're checking work emails on holidays (and how to stop)

14 January 2021, by Dan Caprar and Ben Walker



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Finally, the holidays are here—the break you've been waiting for. You want to leave work behind, kick back and enjoy time with family and friends.

But you're still checking work emails and taking work calls. Even if you are at a [remote location](#) that screams holiday, you're still thinking about work, or even doing work, although you promised yourself this time would be different.

If this sounds familiar, you're not the only one [struggling to switch off](#) on holidays.

One reason is you, like many others, might derive a strong sense of self from your work.

## Work helps shape your identity

Humans crave answers to the question "who am I?". One place we find these answers is in the activities we do—including our work. Whether we work by choice, necessity, or a bit of both, many of us find work inevitably becomes a source of our identity.

We develop [professional identities](#) ("I'm a lawyer"), [organizational identities](#) ("I'm a Google employee"), or as we discovered in our research, [performance-](#)

[based identities](#) ("I'm a top performer").

Such identification can be beneficial. It has been linked with [increased motivation and work performance](#), and even [better health](#). But it can also prevent us from switching off.

## Your work identity can make it harder to switch off

We all know people who are mentally "on holidays" even before the holidays have started. But for others, switching off from work is not so easy. Why?

One factor is our identity mix. We all have multiple identities, but the range and relative importance of our identities [vary](#) from person to person.

If work-related identities occupy a central place in how we see ourselves, they're likely to shape our thinking and behavior beyond work hours—including during holidays. In other words, we stay mentally connected to work not because the boss or the job necessarily requires it, but because it's hard to imagine other ways of "being ourselves."

Equally important to why some of us struggle to switch off on holidays are [environmental cues](#). That relaxing chair by the pool or the company of family tell us we're off work. But email alerts or phone calls, or even the simple sight of our laptop, can activate work identities and associated mindsets and behaviors. No wonder our plans for switching off are doomed.

## Yes, but what can I do about it?

It's worth considering all that obvious advice you've heard on the benefits of [digital detox](#).

This is even more important in the new normal of working from home in 2020 and beyond. For many of us, the office and home are now one and the

same, meaning we have to work even harder to protect non-[work time](#) from work-related incursions.

From an identity perspective, though, there's a lot more we can do.

First, we can scan the environment and remove any cues that might activate our work identity (beyond switching off email alerts). This might be something as simple as hiding your laptop in a drawer.

At the same time, introduce cues to activate other identities. For instance, if you're a [tennis player](#) or an aspiring artist, keep your gear visible so your brain is primed to focus on those aspects of your self.

Second, research suggests we can engage in "[identity work](#)" and "[identity play](#)". That's deliberately managing and revising our identities, and even experimenting with potential new ones. Imagining and trying new and more complex versions of ourselves takes time, but it can be an effective antidote to an overpowering work identity.

But simply trying to not think about work over the holidays is likely to do more harm than good. Much research shows trying to suppress certain thoughts [tends to have the opposite effect](#), making us not only have the thought more, but also feeling worse afterwards.

A better approach may be to [accept the thought](#) for what it is (a simple mental event), and naturally let your mind move to the next carriage in your train of thought.

In the long term, it's worth reflecting on whether you might be [over-identifying](#) with work.

One way to test this is by assessing how you feel about doing the unthinkable of completely unplugging for a while. Does that make you anxious?

What about the idea of retirement—that final "[holiday](#)" we've worked towards our entire life? This too [can be challenging for identity reasons](#): giving up work can feel like giving up a part of ourselves.

We can prevent that, and ensure we enjoy retirement and all other holidays, by considering what else we could use as equally valid sources of [identity](#).

Ultimately, the aim is to see ourselves as the complex creatures we indeed are, defined by more than just our work, so we can make the most of our precious time away from it.

Disclaimer: We wrote part of this article on holidays. Academics [are perhaps the best \(or worst?\) example](#) of over-identifying with work. Time for us to really practice what we preach.

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