

# Tea & Toast

## When and how to take a break

Presented by: Kristen Gyorgak



### Do the mahi, get the treats

We live in a society that values hard work and productivity. There are a lot of well known phrases which reinforce this:

*"Do the mahi, get the treats."* (William Waiirua)

*"Idle hands do the devil's work."*

*"The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary".* (Vidal Sassoon)

However you say it, we've had messages about work ethic and productivity drilled into us. A strong work ethic helps us thrive. It's helped us survive. But we can't sprint forever.

And unfortunately, in the name of productivity, we have created unhealthy work environments that promote unhealthy habits.

### The paradox of breaks and work

We need to slow down, to speed up.

We can think of hard work and productivity as continuously moving through the slog. We want people to do more with less. Work through. Keep going.

But we're humans, not robot resources. We're physically and mentally unable to be our best unless we have breaks.

Hell - we're designed to spend 1/3 of our life doing nothing but sleep and take a break. The better our breaks, the better our work.

### TAKING A BREAK CAN LEAD TO BREAKTHROUGHS.

-RUSSELL ERIC DOBDA

I've yet to meet someone who doesn't think taking breaks is important. We all know it is. Science shows taking breaks isn't a waste of time at all; it's a necessity for your well-being and career.

Good breaks can:

- reduce or prevent stress and are fundamental to recover from stress
- helps maintain performance throughout the day
- allows time to process memories
- increases oxygen and blood circulation
- disrupts poor posture
- improves engagement
- boosts feelings of positivity and creativity
- increases levels of physical and mental energy
- decreases the development of fatigue, sleep disorders and cardiovascular disease.

And the list goes on. So why isn't everyone a good break taker?



# Good vs bad breaks

To be simplistic, let's define good breaks as helpful ones. They fill your energy bucket in some way. Good breaks should **add** to your energy levels or wellbeing. They are productivity building.

Bad breaks do the opposite. They drain or detract from your energy or wellbeing and they're productivity draining. It hinders you.

These might be different for different people. What fills your bucket, may drain from mine. And vice versa. But there are many aspects that are universal:

- Our brains can only focus on a task for a limited amount of time.
- We have physical needs! We need to move.
- We don't have endless energy. We need to recharge
- Our brain is a stage and has its limits.

Resilience researcher Lucy Hone suggest we use a simple question to ourselves to guide us: *Is what I'm doing helping me or hindering me?* If the answer is hindering, the follow up question is: *Then why am I doing it?*

Marta Brzosko at Better Humans defines two factors needed for perfectly productive timeouts:

1. It's completely different from your work or what you were previously doing.
2. It's something you actually enjoy.

## Are we bad break takers?

**We make all sorts of excuses.** Maybe you've heard these or used some of them yourself:

- I'm too busy
- I'm too needed
- I don't have enough time
- I don't need a break

**We take breaks, but they aren't good ones.**

Again, everyone's best break will look different. But often our breaks include mindless scrolling on our phones. That's fine if you weren't previously looking or staring at a screen. But often we are.

[Refer here for notes from our Tyranny of metrics webinar](#) (2021).

**We don't psychologically detach.** Sabine Sonnentag coined the phrase psychological detachment and defined it as *the process of 'switching off' from work mode to let you brain and body relax and recover from your job's stressful demands.*

Back in pre-Covid world many 'office' jobs were... you know...office based. And in 2022 this is no longer the case. Place and time flexibility is the new regime. (See notes from Dinah's [Employee engagement for new ways of working](#) webinar)

Employees who feel more detached from work during off-hours are more satisfied with their lives and experience less emotional exhaustion and lower levels of other symptoms of psychological strain, without being less engaged while at work.

-SABINE SONNENTAG



# What can we do?

## Change your mindset, change your habits

I've recently finished the book, [Atomic Habits](#) by James Clear. Clear talks about the power of building identity based habits as part of your behaviour change. Once our pride is involved, we're much more committed. Here's his simple two step process:

1. Decide who is it you want to be
2. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

## Just do it – take breaks

At some point, we just have to go beyond thinking about taking breaks – and just do it. Here's a lovely Irish proverb to remind us:

**YOU WILL NEVER PLOUGH A FIELD IF YOU ONLY TURN IT OVER IN YOUR MIND.**

**-IRISH PROVERB**

## Grow your awareness

Awareness is always the first step to progress. Be more aware of:

- when your energy and bandwidth levels are best
- what tasks put you into the flow
- what your wider context is
- when your 'break cues' come up: *low energy, difficulty focusing, grumpy, bored, distracting*

## Leave loudly

We'll never get better at collectively taking breaks if we feel guilty about taking breaks. Lead by example. Be open and honest about when and how you take breaks.

This may be the perfect opportunity to remind people of the benefits of break-taking and to set some team expectations around breaks.

## Use time boxing

Self-awareness isn't always enough. Use techniques that can give you prompts on when to take breaks.

Pomodoro method	25 minutes on, 5 minutes off. Every fourth rotation extend to 15-30 minutes off.
Ultradian Rhythm	90 minutes of activity, 20 minutes of rest. This was developed by sleep researchers William Dement and Nathan Kleitman to match our nightly sleep cycle.
52-17 method	As it sounds, 52 minutes on, 17 minute breaks.
Day-breaks	This is the absolute minimum starting point. 15 minutes in the morning, 60 minutes for lunch, 15 minutes in the afternoon.
Task time boxes	Block out time for specific tasks, like emails, reading, deep thinking.

*(Note: these are only good if you use them. Think of them as appointments to yourself. Give them the same importance as you do appointments to others).*



## Breaks that add to your wellbeing

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a Māori health model that focuses on the four cornerstones of people’s health and wellbeing:

- Taha tinana | **physical** health
- Taha wairua | **spiritual** health
- Taha whānau | **family / relationships** health
- Taha hinengaro | **mental** health

If our wellbeing is a balanced roof, these four areas of health are the walls that hold the roof up. When one gets weak or starts to crumble, it often impacts and brings the others down as well. Equally, when you strengthen and build one area of your health, it can help strengthen the others.

Let’s look at actions we can take to take breaks **and** add to our wellbeing. Many of these are interconnected and could fit under different areas:

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ BREAKS	
<p><b>Physical health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a walk (2-30 minutes)</li> <li>• Physically leave the space you work</li> <li>• Take (nutritious) snack and lunch breaks</li> <li>• Stretch regularly</li> <li>• Increase your heart rate – get your blood flowing</li> <li>• Deep breathing exercises</li> <li>• Get some fresh air</li> <li>• Take a nap</li> <li>• Drink some water</li> </ul>	<p><b>Spiritual health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make time for things that lift connect to your purpose and why</li> <li>• Go outside and connect with nature (even looking at plants has shown work benefits!)</li> <li>• Look at the sky</li> <li>• Walk barefoot through the grass</li> <li>• Make time for activities that align with your values</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family / relationships health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have lunch with a friend / loved one</li> <li>• Call or video chat someone you care about</li> <li>• Send a text message to someone you haven’t talked to in a while</li> <li>• Go for a walk with others</li> <li>• Give someone a (genuine) compliment</li> <li>• Thank someone for their support or help</li> <li>• Write a handwritten note or letter to someone</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mental health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal / write down your thoughts</li> <li>• Make a list of what’s on your mind</li> <li>• Stop and say three gratitudes</li> <li>• Watch something funny / humorous</li> <li>• Celebrate your successes and team successes</li> <li>• Take empathy breaks from others – and focus on what empathy for yourself looks like</li> </ul>



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# Thanks for coming!

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