

# 7 Strategies to Maximize a Break While Working From Home -- Ellen Hendriksen, Ph.D

**Working from home is a skill in itself. Here's how to balance work and breaks.**

Ellen Hendriksen, Ph.D., is a psychologist at Boston Posted Jun 18, 2020

We could all use a break. Due to the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, for many of us, work now takes place at home. On the upside, that means zero commute and easy access to the pantry for unlimited handfuls of Cheez-its.

Unfortunately, though, it also probably means you're logged on for longer periods of time and not getting the same downtime or facetime you would at the office. Taking a stroll to fill up your water bottle in the office kitchen or spending a few minutes rehashing *Queer Eye* with Gabrielle from HR just aren't part of your new 9-to-5. Add endless Zoom meetings, question-mark-above-your-head emails, demanding bosses, [guilt](#), and quite possibly, bored kids on their umpteenth week of quarantine (though that's an entirely different blog post!), and it's hard to even consider taking a break. We eat a quick lunch, scarfing down a peanut butter sandwich before signing into our next video call, and consider a powerwalk around the block a luxury.

On the other hand, even if we value and prioritize breaks, sometimes they go off the rails, unintentionally shape-shifting into a momentum-killing two-hour online search for hand sanitizer, one more round of Snake vs Block, or BuzzFeed quizzes. A round of "[Rate These 20 Foods and We'll Tell You How Fancy Your Tastebuds Are](#)," anyone? By noon, we're horizontal, waving the white flag from our potato chip-covered couch.

Stopping to stare out the window or cuddle with your dog can feel lazy, guilt-inducing, [willpower](#)-taxing, or logistically impossible. However, done right, breaks can boost focus, recharge your batteries, and make you more productive, not to mention happier.

How to do it right? Should we meditate, knock out some burpees, thumb through a few Instagram stories, stare out the window, text a friend, or none of the above? Here are seven ways to make those few minutes really count.

## **Tip #1: The basics: any break is better than no break.**

For anyone who's so overscheduled that lunch consists of wolfing down cold pizza in front of the open fridge, let's make clear that taking a break—any break—is better than powering through.

A [study](#) in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* ran a head-to-head comparison of five different kinds of breaks. Everyone was asked to focus on a task that required sustained [attention](#) for 45 minutes.

In the middle, participants took a 5-minute break to play on their phone, sit in silence, listen to a Coldplay song, watch a Coldplay video (apparently even researchers crush on Chris Martin), or choose between the song and the video. Compared to the group that took no break at all, performance was better in every single one of the break conditions.

This makes sense. After all, how much [productivity](#) do you realistically get out of that fifth straight hour of studying for your calculus exam? Taking any break, whether it's quiet or loud, mindless or mindful, is likely better than nothing.

## **Tip #2: Take a break that feels different from your work.**

For so many of us, a break from staring at our desktop display means... staring at our phone. We'll watch YouTube, scroll through Twitter, or catch the latest *SNL* cold open. It's fun, but then we turn back to... another screen.

article continues after advertisement

Instead, try something that feels 180 degrees different from work. Move your body, get outside, or both. No need to change, shower, or make it a big production. Even just a cuddle session with your cat can make a difference.

## **Tip #3: If your breaks frequently go off the rails, take breaks that keep you in a work mindset.**

Does “just five minutes of TikTok” morph into three hours? If your breaks frequently go off the rails, do something quick and easy that's not work-related but keeps you in a productive mindset. Check off something from your personal to-do list like unloading the dishwasher or getting your Instacart shopping done. It feels like you're getting something done, even if it's not the big thing with the looming deadline you're supposed to be working on.

When we do these things to *avoid* our work, this is called *productive procrastination*, but the very same types of tasks—productive but easy things like sorting the mail or searching online for open parks with ample parking—can also be perfect for taking a break. Productive tasks that don't require much brainpower but still provide contrast to your work can downshift your gears without taking you out of a work mindset.

## **Tip #4: Take a microbreak.**

A break doesn't have to be elaborate or lengthy. Especially if you're trying not to break momentum, an under-a-minute microbreak might be just what you need.

[Researchers from the University of Melbourne](#) asked participants to complete a tedious task that required close attention—specifically, pressing a computer key when any numerical digit except '3' appeared on their computer screen. In the middle of the task, half the participants were shown

a picture of a building with a bare concrete roof for just 40 seconds, while the other half were shown a picture of a flowering green roof for 40 seconds. Those who saw the green roof made fewer mistakes on their subsequent task, providing a shout-out for both microbreaks and for green city roofs.

article continues after advertisement

## **Tip #5: Trade the midafternoon slump for a morning break**

Most of us head for the snack cabinet or tune into the latest Tiny Desk concert during the 3 p.m. midafternoon slump, but [a study](#) out of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that a break in the morning was more productive. Why? Essentially, by 3 p.m., it may be too late. You're already drained and are good only for brainless administrative tasks or cleaning out your email inbox. But in the morning, you can still regain your 9 a.m. levels of focus after a rejuvenating break. Many of us focus better in the morning, so extend your peak productivity by taking a break around 10 or 11.

## **Tip #6: Don't break flow.**

As great as breaks are, you don't need to follow your Pomodoro timer slavishly. If your work seems to be doing itself, your ideas are flowing as fast as your adrenaline, or if you're so absorbed you've lost track of time, rock on. Don't take a break just because you think you "should."

The dirty secret about breaks is that it can be hard to get your mojo back, so if you're happily chugging along, there's no need to step on the brakes.

## **Tip #7: But when it's time to rest, rest like you mean it.**

After your work is over, rest like you mean it. If your work week keeps you tethered to your email, dare to leave it behind on the weekend, or at least until Sunday night. Use evenings and weekends to put away your to-do list, do activities that take you out and away from work completely, and see friends and family.

article continues after advertisement

Here's another way to think about it: Be inspired by your cat or dog. When they rest, they rest full-on. They don't check email or think about Monday morning. They find a sunny spot and rest like it's the only thing on the agenda. Because it is.

In short, go ahead and hum the Kit Kat jingle to yourself as you take a walk around the block, find the exact right piece to complete the corner on your newest puzzle, stay productive by making a grocery list, or, of course, listen to Coldplay. No matter what you do, you'll be glad you took a break.

