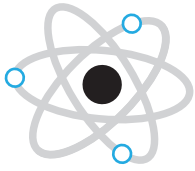

TIME MANAGEMENT

How to Benefit More from Breaks

Lots of research shows that taking a breather can help you stay focused and prevent long-term burnout. But how you organize your tasks may be just as important as the break itself.

Across five studies researchers examined what happened when people took a break between two tasks or in the middle of one long task. In one, 398 U.S. adults performed the same word-search activity. Half were told they were doing a single 10-word puzzle. The others were told they would do two separate five-word puzzles. After finding five words, all participants watched a short, relaxing video. They then reported how much they'd thought about the puzzles during the break and how stressed or




ideaWatch

anxious they felt. Those in the group tasked with one long puzzle thought about the task significantly more and expressed higher levels of stress and anxiety than the group assigned two shorter puzzles.

Next the researchers tested performance. They ran the word-search experiment again, but this time they measured how quickly participants were able to find words after the break. Those in the group that solved two short puzzles performed significantly better after the break than those solving one long puzzle. This was largely due to less time ruminating about the puzzle during the break, the researchers say. Finishing the first puzzle provided a kind of closure that allowed participants to more fully unwind before their next assignment.

The researchers also found that the type of break mattered: Only passive breaks, such as watching a scenic video of the Swiss Alps, drove better performance. Active breaks, like engaging with an interactive tour of Buckingham Palace, produced no performance gains after the break.

Beyond just taking breaks—or encouraging your employees to do so—it's important to categorize the work surrounding downtime, the researchers say. Treating tasks before and after breaks as distinct projects can make stepping away more restorative—and your return to work more productive.

 **ABOUT THE RESEARCH** *"Categorizing Tasks Around a Break Reduces Rumination and Improves Task Performance," by Rebecca L. Chae, Kaitlin Woolley, and Marissa A. Sharif (Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 2025)*



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