THE IMPACT OF A SHORT RESPITE ON
WELL-BEING AND PERFORMANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how a short respite contributes to well-being and job performance. We collected data from 105 nurses before and after a long free weekend. Results indicated a decrease of job stress exhaustion and negative affect after the respite but no increase in positive affect and vigor. The respite effects are discussed.

PRESS PARAGRAPH

Organizational reality exposes employees to stressful conditions that affect mental and physical well-being and performance. Taking a respite is a measure organizations may adopt in order to protect employees' health. We examined the impact of short respites (long free weekends) on the performance and well-being of hospital nurses and found a decrease in stress, exhaustion and negative affect after the weekend. Our findings corroborate Conservation of Resources theory, which maintains that periodic removal from work-related demands allows individuals to restore depleted resources and decrease negative states. By giving short respites weekends to their employees organizations can prevent counterproductive effects of job stress.

Keywords: Job-stress, Exhaustion, Vigor, Short respites, Free weekends, Hospital nurses
The Impact of a Short Respite on Stress and Performance

The empirical evidence consistently shows that exposure to stress at work, at home and in the environment is detrimental to individuals’ functioning and leads to increased levels of mental and physical illness (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Sonnentag & Frese, 2003; Steptoe, Cropley, & Jockes, 1999). One solution to protect health and well-being in the long run is to have the opportunity to take a respite and recover from stressful demands.

Respite impact

There is increasing empirical evidence that vacations, weekends, and other respites that provide opportunities to recover from work result in decreased perceived job stress and burnout (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Westman & Eden, 1997; Westman & Etzion, 2001; Etzion 2003). In addition to the relief from the negative consequences of work, vacations and other kinds of respite may increase positive outcomes such as well-being (Eden, 2001) and effort expenditure (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005). The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a short respite from work in the form of a long free weekend on the decrease of negative experiences, such as job stress and exhaustion, and the increase of positive experiences, such as vigor and improved performance. An additional aim was to develop a measure for nurses’ performance.

Compared to the enormous amount of research on the effects of stress on the individual and his/her family, research on respite and recovery is still sparse. However, the evidence suggests that off-the-job experiences that offer the opportunity to recover have an impact on individuals’ well-being and on-the-job behaviour (Etzion, Eden, & Lapidot., 1998; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2001, 2003; Westman & Eden, 1997; Westman & Etzion, 2002). The cumulative results of several studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of respite in decreasing stress and strain (see meta-analysis by Etzion & Boklis, 2007).
Westman and Eden (1997) examined the relief from job stressors and burnout afforded by a 2-week company-wide vacation, twice before the vacation, once during the vacation, and twice after the vacation. They demonstrated substantial declines in burnout during the vacation and a return to pre-vacation levels three weeks after returning to work. Vacation satisfaction moderated the impact of vacation on outcomes: the higher the satisfaction, the higher the decrease in burnout. Comparing men on active reserve service to matched controls who continued working during the same period, Etzion et al. (1998) found a decline in job stress and burnout among reservists, and no change among the control group. Among reservists, quality of reserve service and degree of psychological detachment from work interacted in moderating the respite effects: the greater the detachment the stronger the relieving of stress and burnout. Etzion (2003) studied the impact of an annual vacation with matched controls and found that among the vacation group stress and burnout decreased after returning from the vacation. Three weeks later, stress had reverted to its initial level but burnout remained low. Extending the previous respite research, which focused on the impact of vacation only on psychological strains, Westman and Etzion (2002) also examined a behavioral strain, absenteeism, studying the impact of vacation on blue-collar employees before and after vacation and again four weeks later. The findings showed that vacation alleviated job stress and burnout and decreased absenteeism.

When resources are continuously threatened and lost individuals strive to restore them and the need for recovery is created (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). Recovery, the unwinding and replenishment process, may be achieved in two complementary ways: by cessation of demands which allows for psychobiological recuperation (Sluiter, Frings-Dresen, Van der Beek, & Meijman, 2001) and further investment in other resources (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006). Hence, a respite from work may not only enable a halt of the resource loss cycle, but may also be an opportunity for acquiring
new resources and returning to work with a stronger resource pool. This positive angle presents an additional direction in respite research, focusing both on the decrease in job stress and strains as well as on intensifying engagement. Indeed, recovery research has indicated that recovery alleviates good mood, restores individual well-being and contributes to work engagement and proactivity at the same time (Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005).

Westman (1999) proposed embedding respite research within the conservation of resources (COR) theory of stress. Whereas most stress theories focus on how people react to stressors, Hobfoll’s (1989, 2001) COR theory makes the novel predictions that stress occurs when individuals are threatened with resource loss, actually lose resources, or fail to gain resources following a significant resource investment. Hobfoll (2001) suggests that resource gains in themselves have a modest effect, but when they follow resource loss. The ability to obtain resources becomes of increasing importance, providing emotional respite and an increased ability to sustain goal pursuit. Thus, a vacation is fertile ground for resource gain as it usually takes place after a period of chronic resource loss in the job.

Short respite

Short respites may enhance well-being through several mechanisms (Westman et al., 2004a). First, they may relieve stress and burnout by distancing one from the job and thus halting the resource loss cycle. Second, as Hobfoll and Shirom (1993) suggested, a relaxation period between stress episodes allows regrouping of resources, replenishing resource reservoirs. Third, according to COR, gaining resources creates a gain cycle. Those who possess strong resource pools often experience spirals of resource gain because initial gain begets further gain. The cycle of gain generates its own
positive energy because resource accretion means that more resources can be invested in obtaining still further gains.

Fritz and Sonnentag (2005), investigating weekend experiences of 87 emergency service workers, focused on three different weekend experiences that have an impact on health and job performance. They examined both negative experiences that draw on the individual’s resources and more positive experiences that help to regain and build up lost resources, according to COR theory. Their results indicated that non-work hassles, absence of positive work reflection, and low social activity during the weekend predicted burnout and poor general well-being after the weekend. Weekend experiences also predicted different aspects of job performance after the weekend.

In sum, respite may release one from potential loss cycles and slow down actual drain cycles, where resource loss occurs through a kind of chronic day-to-day seepage. It also provides time for replenishment of sleep and leisure, as well as opportunities for reattachment with family and friends, thus building family and friendship resources. Nevertheless, some weekends may be characterized by negative circumstances; for instance, being alone or busy to the extent of being stressed and unable to reconnect can sabotage such gains.

*Nurses’ Job Stress*

Characterized by constant exposure to sickness and death, the job of the nurse is very stressful. Moreover, the poor work environment in terms of irregular work schedules and shortage of personnel means that many nurses are overloaded. Shift work, which is often an unavoidable component of the nursing work schedule (Jamal & Baba, 1992), mandatory overtime, being on-call, and working without breaks, coupled with excessive patient loads, make this profession a breeding ground for occupational stress (Jenkins & Elliot, 2004; Weyers, Peter, Boggild, Jeppesen, & Siegrist,
2006) and high levels of job dissatisfaction and turnover (Cho, Laschinger, & Wong, 2006; Greco, Laschinger, & Wong, 2006).

The stress of the nursing profession is associated with increased levels of absenteeism due to sickness (Bird, 1995), poorer physical and psychological health (Bakker, Killmer, Siegrist, & Schaufeli, 2000; Van Vegchel, de Jonge, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2002), higher turnover rates and higher probability of leaving the job (Hasselhorn, Tackenberg, & Mueller 2003). It is, moreover, likely to threaten the provision of care. Several studies have linked poor working conditions of nurses to negative patient outcomes, most dramatically, patient mortality and increased occurrence of adverse events (Tourangeau, Giovanetti, Tu, & Wood, 2002). International studies (Aiken et al., 2001) show that a stressful work environment is the lot of nurses in different countries with different health care systems. Kühnel, Sonnentag and Westman (in press), examining the impact of a short respite on nurses’ well-being, demonstrated an increase of work engagement after the respite. In addition they found that detachment from work during the respite showed a higher increase in work engagement.

The aim of this study was to determine whether stress and exhaustion decreased and well-being and job performance improved as a result of a non-working weekend. Another focus of the study was the development and testing of measures of nurses’ performance. We hypothesized that respite will help decrease stress and strain and increase positive effects.

Method

Sample

We collected data from a sample of 105 emergency room (hereinafter ER) nurses and internal medicine nurses in several hospitals in Israel using self-report questionnaires. The sample included 59 women (56 %). The average age of the nurses was 33.67 years, 55 were married (52%), 40 single (38%), 6 separated (6%) unknown (4%) About 50% had children. As collection of data was
relatively difficult because of the special nature of shift work in a hospital, sample size was reduced for several analyses due to missing data.

Procedure

**Preliminary stage:** In order to gather initial information, the first phase of the study included meetings with head ER nurses of three hospitals. In one hospital we conducted a focus group with four head ER nurses. The aims of the interviews and the focus group were to learn about (a) the work of the nurses in the ER; (b) the stressors they experience; and (c) ER nursing performance criteria. We then conducted four observations of ER nurses at work, followed by two in-depth interviews with ER nurses of different tenure. All nurses in the target divisions were informed of the study through a letter and notified that coupons for prestigious restaurants would be raffled among the participants. A research assistant was in charge of handing out and receiving the questionnaires before and after hospital shifts.

**Data collection**

In the before-after quasi-experimental design with a repeated measurement factor that we employed, nurses scheduled for a long free weekend or at least two consecutive days off work, completed a self-report questionnaire after the last shift prior to the days off work and another questionnaire at the end of the first shift after returning to work.

**Measures**

We used existing self-report questionnaires with established reliability and validity. For nurses’ performance, a specific new measure was designed on the basis of the interviews in the preliminary stage.

*Perceived control* was measured by four items from Karasek’s questionnaire (Karasek, 1979). A sample item was “To what extent do you have the freedom to decide how to organize your work?”
scored on a five-point scale (1 = to a very little extent; 5 = to a very great extent). The α coefficients were .80 before the weekend, and .86 after the weekend.

*Self efficacy* was measured using the 8-item New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen, Gully and Eden, 2001). A sample item was “Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well”. The items were scored on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The α coefficients before and after the free weekend were .89 and .90, respectively.

*Emotional exhaustion* was measured using five items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter 1996). A sample item of this index was: “How often do you feel burned out from your work?” The items were measured on a 7-point frequency scale (1 = never; 7 = every day). The α coefficients before and after the free weekend were .83 and .80, respectively.

*Vigor* was measured using five items of the Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker (2001). A sample item was “During my work, I feel vital and strong”. The items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = never; 7 = always). The α coefficients before and after the free weekend were .80 and .81, respectively.

*Negative and Positive Mood* was measured using 20 items from the Negative Positive Affect (PA) scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen 1988). Respondents indicated, on a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all; 5 = extremely), the extent to which they had experienced each mood state recently. The α coefficients for positive mood before and after the free weekend were .85 and .87, respectively. For negative mood, the α coefficients were .86 for both occasions.

*Work Characteristics* were measured using 18 items from the Work Characteristics Scale (Etzion, Kafry, & Pines, 1982), based on Hackman and Oldham (1976). Respondents indicated, on a 5-point scale (1 = very little; 5 = very much) the extent to which the statement described their work.
Sample items were: “To what extent do you feel pressure and difficulties in your decision making during work?”; “What is the level of variety you have in your job?” The $\alpha$ coefficients for positive work characteristics were .81 on both occasions.

For the negative work characteristics (a proxy for job stress), the $\alpha$ coefficients were .70 on both occasions. In the next sections we relate to the measure negative characteristics as stress.

*Performance* was assessed by 20 items developed specifically for this study by the authors. The questionnaire was based on the interviews with the head ER nurses in Israel, interviews with ER nurses of different tenure, the focus group and observations of ER nurses at work. Respondents indicated on a 5-point scale the degree of agreement with such items as “Had contact with the patients”, “Ensured the patients privacy”. The $\alpha$ coefficients were .87 and .88, respectively, for the two occasions.

*Demographic variables* were collected, including gender, age, and number of children, following previous research that indicated the relevance of these variables in recovery from work (e.g., Sonnentag, 2001, 2003).

**Results**

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations between the variables before (Occasion 1) and after the weekend (Occasion 2).

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First, it has to be noted that the correlation between the performance measures on the two occasions (before and after the weekend) was .69 ($p > .01$), indicating a rather high stability of

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1 The questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.
2 These are preliminary results.
performance ratings. Findings show that performance before and after the weekend was moderately to strongly related to a range of other variables such as self-efficacy, work engagement, positive work characteristics, and positive affect. For example performance after the weekend was positively related to control, self-efficacy, vigor and positive work characteristics ($r = .43, .49, .53, .52$, respectively, $p > .01$). In addition, the nurse’s resources before the weekend were positively related to the positive outcomes after the weekend. For example control was positively related to vigor and positive work characteristics ($r = .48, .47$, respectively, $p > .01$) and self-efficacy was positively related to vigor, positive work characteristics and positive affect ($r = .43, .36, .41$, respectively, $p > .01$).

Table 2 shows the differences in the research variables before and after the weekend. There was significantly less exhaustion after the weekend ($M = 3.16$) than before the weekend ($M = 3.02$; $t = 2.65, p < .01$), evidencing the predicted impact of the weekend on exhaustion. The analyses also show that stress decreased significantly (from $M = 4.21$ before the weekend to $M = 4.09$, after the weekend; $t = 2.07, p < .05$). There was a marginally significant decrease in negative affect after the weekend ($M = 2.23$) than before the weekend ($M = 2.29$; $t = 1.84, p < .07$). None of the positive variables showed a significant difference between the two measurements, nor did the performance measure.

**Discussion**

As the literature review shows, most respite research has focused on respites of several days. Our study contribution is that it is one of the very few to focus on a weekend. Moreover, by examining the impact of a short respite on the stress (negative work characteristics), strain (burnout), performance and well-being of hospital nurses it focuses not only on decreasing stress and strain but also on enhancing well-being.
Our results demonstrated significant differences in pre- and post-weekend exhaustion and stress, indicating a decreased on these measures after the weekend. In addition, there was a marginally significant decrease in negative affect. The present results expand previous findings that a respite may help to prevent exhaustion and stress. These findings are consistent with COR (Hobfoll, 1989) theory’s view that the psychological removal of work-related demands allows individuals to restore depleted resources which then become apparent in a decrease of negative states. Thus, during the free weekend the nurses may have gained resources that helped them stop the resources loss. The findings also corroborate Fritz and Sonnentag (2005), findings that non-work hassles and other negative experiences during the weekend predicted burnout and poor general well-being after the weekend.

Contrary to our predictions, the weekend off had no positive impact, either on the nurses’ resources (control, self-efficacy) and well-being (vigor or positive affect) or on the quality of their performance. These results indicate that a weekend may be insufficient to help nurses cope with the resource losses created by their stressful working conditions. It may be sufficient to stop resource loss and enable recovery from the experience of stress and exhaustion, but it is not sufficient for developing positive affect or vigor. Our inability to detect any significant changes in vigor and positive affect, leads us to assume that the gain was not strong enough to increase the nurses’ well-being. The evidence consistently indicates the primacy of loss in the human experience: Tversky and Kahneman (1974), in their prospect theory, noted that the gradient of loss is steeper than the gradient for gain; according to COR theory loss is more salient than gain; “People must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses and gain resources” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 349). This implies that people can take proactive steps in advance of the occurrence of anticipated
stress, thereby gaining resources that reduce their vulnerability to the effects of potential or actual
future losses.

The nurses had a long weekend that may have helped them to gain new resources and
decrease their stress. There is a possibility that the nurses gained resources that were not measured in
this study like social support but this did not increase their well-being. However, they clearly
benefited from the weekend in terms of stress and strain relief.

Interestingly, the resources (control and self-efficacy) are more highly correlated with positive
outcomes (vigor, positive work characteristics and positive affect) than negative ones. Nurses with a
large resource pool reported more vigor and other positive outcomes. This finding is consistent with
COR theory and may demonstrate that there were probably other resources that affected the decrease
in stress and strain.

Our hypothesis that performance improves after respite was not supported, possibly attesting
to the complex relationship between potentially stressful events and behavior (Cooper, Dewe, &
O’Driscoll 2001). Furthermore, performance is a highly complex multi-dimensional construct, which
can be measured in many ways. Our new self-report measure may not have been sensitive enough to
detect change after such a short period of time (2-3 days).

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Future Research

One limitation of this study is that most of the data were obtained by self-report and,
consequently, the results may be contaminated by common method variance. A second limitation
concerns the issue of generalization of the results. The fact that the present study of a long weekend
as an effective way to decrease stress was conducted in the reality of a hospital emergency room
contributes to its external validity but at the same time limits its generalizability to other
organizations. Apart from replicating this study in other environments, future research should also explore additional resources that may alleviate stress and strain and introduce a control group of nurses who stayed at work during the weekend.

Implications

In today’s complex and often unpredictable organizational environments, employees constantly face stress. Understanding the impact of long weekends on employees’ stress may contribute to the welfare of both the organization and the employees. This is especially true for hospital personnel who are overloaded and work several shifts without a break. Hospital should try to accord long free weekends to nurses whenever possible to prevent the counterproductive effects of job stress.

From a more practical point of view, the conditions under which a respite affords greater or lesser relief from the ill effects of chronic job stress need to be further studied because such knowledge could guide the planned use of respites for stress abatement. Organizations can use vacations as a tool for improving the well-being of employees, thus enhancing organizational effectiveness. Knowledge of the important characteristics of successful vacations (length, about the respites that are detachment, voluntary or collectively enforced activity during vacation) will help in advising individuals and organizations most beneficial for both parties.
References


Table 1
Correlations among Study Variables Before and After the Weekend

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N = 105. *p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01.
Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations and t-tests of Study Variables
Before and After the Weekend (N = 81-99)

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* p < .05  # p < .07