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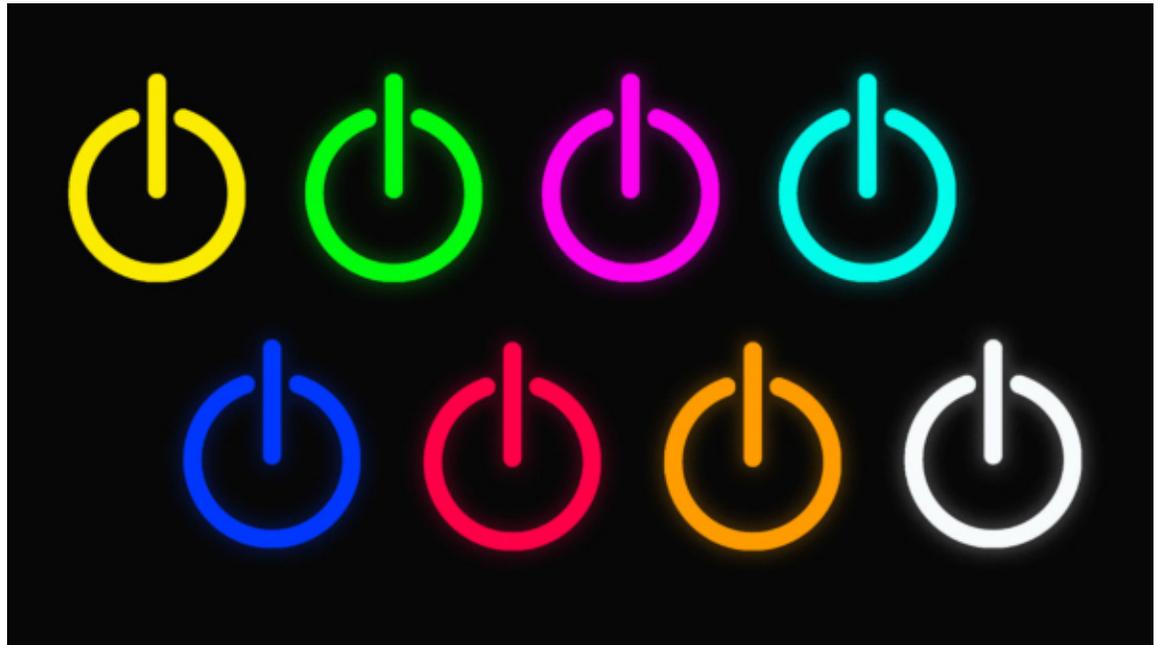
How to Cope with That “Always-On” Feeling

*by Charn McAllister, DJ Steffensen, Pamela L. Perrewé, C.
Darren Brooks and Gang Wang*

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How to Cope with That “Always-On” Feeling

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HBR STAFF

Tools allowing for instant communication have given us the ability to work from anywhere. With employees being only an email or Slack message away, organizations are now omnipresent in the lives of employees. And now, with many working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, managers and coworkers who were once in the office down the hall, are now in your living room, kitchen, or bedroom (wherever you can find a quiet place to plug in your laptop).

This has opened a door into our personal lives that can be quite difficult to close. The negative effects of this “always-on” lifestyle were becoming apparent even before the pandemic, with [research](#)

demonstrating that spousal resentment and work-family conflict increased the more often employees checked smart devices during family time.

Now that constant connectivity is our new normal, it is even more important that we learn to set clear boundaries for ourselves, in order to sustain our productivity and our families' well-being.

So, what are we to do? While we're all experiencing greater job and family stress in this new normal, [our recent research](#) has found there are steps that employees can take to protect their well-being.

1. Build Your Willpower

Employees with a strong ability to self-regulate can mitigate the stress of constant connectivity. Also known as “willpower,” self-regulation represents our ability to resist temptation. Anyone who has been expecting an update on Slack while eating dinner with the family knows that the “need” to check for that update is a very *real* temptation.

The good news is that self-regulation is a muscle that gets stronger the more you use it. In other words, no one is cursed to live a life without willpower — it can be [improved](#). Even better, self-regulation is universal; the willpower used to resist that second piece of cheesecake is the same willpower that can keep you from checking your phone for the 14th time this hour.

To improve your willpower, we recommend starting with the basics. With your new work environment being the home, it is easy to grow lax when it comes to daily chores and following basic routines. Not making the bed anymore? Make your bed. Instead of slouching at your desk chair — sit up straight. Diet gone out the window after your third week in quarantine? Get back on the healthy eating wagon. All of these little, minor disciplines are small workouts that strengthen your overall willpower and will ultimately help you in separating your work life from your home life.

2. Set Boundaries — and Stick to Them

Of course, there will come a time when your willpower runs out. Current [research](#) suggests willpower is slowly depleted throughout the day as we resist temptations and only recharges once we go to sleep. In other words, our ability to self-regulate continually decreases throughout the day and leaves us at our weakest point in the evening. Temptations like that one extra slice of cheesecake or answering just “a few” more emails are nearly irresistible at night simply because we no longer possess the willpower necessary to resist. In our new normal, especially for parents who attempt to work *after* their children go to bed, this is a perfect storm of weakness that makes evening work sessions so unproductive.

Our recommendations for combatting this lack of willpower are twofold. First, don't give your willpower a chance to falter. Set a hard cut-off for checking your messages from work and then physically enforce it — close Slack, log out of Teams, turn off your phone. At a minimum, turn off all notifications so that you don't hear or see the “incoming” message alert. Remember, if you don't have cheesecake in your refrigerator, you can't eat it — similarly, if you can't see the messages, you

can't check them. Note that this may mean you need to “[manage your boss](#)” to set realistic expectations as to how quickly you will be able to respond after certain hours.

Second, as the pandemic continues to wear on, some people may begin to feel like they are struggling with a lack of willpower and an absence of motivation. This is a vicious cycle because [willpower requires motivation](#). This makes intuitive sense; there is no reason to self-regulate your behavior if you have no motivation to do so. Thus, if you are feeling unmotivated right now, it is going to be incredibly difficult to self-regulate. No one is going to fault you for failing to stay motivated during this pandemic, especially when the vast majority of us have been labeled “unessential.” However, this is the time to take a moment and [reflect on why your job is “essential” to you](#), to your clients, and to the greater community. Try not to forget that all of us are contributing to something bigger than ourselves.

3. Communicate Directly and Deliberately

In a time of social distancing, when we live in our own echo chambers, it is not surprising that many of us crave being able to bounce our ideas off of others. We no longer have the opportunity to run into someone in the hall or break room. In lieu of walking over to a colleague's desk, we send a Slack message and hope they are available (e.g., not chasing a toddler around their house).

The result of this [asynchronous communication](#) is that every time we return to our computers or phones, we have numerous unread messages — many time-sensitive — waiting for us. What would have been a quick stop by a friend's office now becomes a series of 10 or more messages exchanged over the course of a day or two — all of which both you and your colleague feel require immediate responses. Worse, what if the colleague you are asking for a second opinion is already swamped with work? In the past, you may have sought out that colleague at work and found them at their desk, head in hand, and decided to walk away so as not to burden them with another problem.

Now more than ever, as we work in an office-less environment, it is imperative that we try to communicate deliberately and not in a haphazard fashion. Send the messages that *need* to be sent and try to limit those that are unnecessary.

Leaders have a special responsibility to set an example and act deliberately. Sending emails and messages at all hours of the day *and* night will set an expectation that employees need to do the same. Instead of spending time with their family in the evening, employees will have one eye on their phone awaiting that inevitable next message. A more effective approach is to actively choose what to request of your employees and work with them to determine a realistic timeline for that task's completion. This aids in establishing standards of “how” work will be done, not just “what” work will be done. Setting such expectations acknowledges the stresses employees are experiencing and likely will result in reduced stress and higher quality job performance.

As we reflect on the Covid-19 pandemic response to date, an unprecedented level of digital connectedness for both employees and leaders has emerged. As social distancing continues and we

adjust to these new work demands, it is critical that employees retain (or regain) some level of control over their work. If employees work to improve their willpower and set appropriate work-to-life boundaries, and if leaders communicate standards and expectations effectively, working from home during this pandemic can be a universal positive for everyone lucky enough to be able to do it.

Charn McAllister is an assistant professor of management and organizational development in the D'Amore-McKim College of Business at Northeastern University. His research focuses on interpersonal mistreatment, organizational politics, and stress in the workplace. Dr. McAllister is an author of *Political Skill at Work: How to Influence, Motivate, and Win Support*.

DJ Steffensen is an assistant professor of management in the Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University. His research focuses on the overlap between leadership and human resource management. Specifically, he is interested in the role that leaders play in designing, implementing, and evaluating human resource practices and strategy.

Pamela L. Perrewé is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor and Haywood and Betty Taylor Eminent Scholar of business administration at Florida State University. She has focused her research in the areas of occupational stress and well-being, politics, and social influence. Dr. Perrewé has published over 40 books and book chapters and over 140 journal articles in the organizational behavior and human resource management fields.

C. Darren Brooks is the assistant chair in the department of management and the executive director for the Center for Human Resource Management at Florida State University. His research interests are in human resource management, complex learning, social influence, conflict management, and innovation. Prior to his academic career, Dr. Brooks spent more than 20 years in public and private executive and leadership roles.

Gang Wang is an associate professor at Florida State University. He is interested in the role of leadership in follower, team, and organizational success. His research has been published in top tier journals and won prestigious awards in organizational sciences.
