

How disruptions to our morning routines harm daily productivity, and what we can do about it



Since the onset of COVID-19, a common topic of conversation with family, friends, and colleagues has been the challenge of getting back to pre-pandemic levels of daily productivity. In this transition period between their old work lives and the new normal that has not yet arrived, many begin their mornings with the best of intentions, but by the evening, their daily goals often remain unachieved. This is problematic because it causes some to fall further behind at work, and leads others to sacrifice sleep, exercise, or other personal well-being in an effort to catch up. Despite coming from all walks of life, these people ask us the same two questions: What happened to my productivity? And how do I get it back?

One answer to the first question has to do with daily routines. For most of us, by closing schools and workplaces, the pandemic disrupted our daily lives at home and at work. As countries grapple with reopening, these disruptions continue. The effect has been that the routines upon which we relied to organise our day and facilitate our productivity have been altered. But what is the cost of these broken routines on our daily lives? As it turns out, researchers know quite little about the consequences of routine disruptions. This was surprising to us, because it doesn't take a pandemic to disrupt one's daily routine. Indeed, routines are quite fragile and can be thrown off by mundane aspects of everyday life such as a power outage, a sick child, or a construction delay. We therefore set out to examine why these routine disruptions affect us so greatly, and what can be done about it.

How do routines help us function at work?

To understand why routine disruptions hinder daily progress, it helps to understand why intact routines are beneficial. Think about a series of tasks that you routinely perform: over time, our brains become adept at performing those tasks automatically, which allows us to focus our attention on non-routine tasks such as planning a last-minute pitch or dealing with an unexpected personnel issue. This may explain why some of the most productive individuals in history have followed strict morning routines. Winston Churchill woke at 7:30 a.m. each morning and followed a consistent routine of eating breakfast, reading the newspaper and mail, and then dictating to his secretaries—all from his bed. Jennifer Aniston rises at 4:30 a.m., has a cup of hot water with lemon, washes her face, meditates, drinks a protein shake, and then exercises. Oprah Winfrey wakes at approximately 7:10 a.m., brushes her teeth, then walks her dogs before meditating. Beethoven's morning routine consisted of waking up at 6:00 a.m. and brewing coffee using exactly 60 beans. As these examples, along with popular articles, websites, and books suggest, routines (particularly morning routines) provide a foundation for a productive day.

What happens when routines are disrupted?

Because routines automate basic elements of daily life, they help conserve energy to dedicate toward achieving goals during the day. But when a routine is disrupted, what was previously automated requires conscious thought. Consider the manager who dedicates the first hour of every workday to checking in with each of her employees. Over time, this hour of making the rounds becomes routine, and provides an anchor around which she (and her employees) can structure the rest of the day. However, if one morning she received an unexpected call from her largest customer that caused her to skip the rounding that represents her daily anchor, she would have to spend extra energy throughout the rest of the day to stay on track. By introducing a mentally-demanding wrinkle into what is usually an automated process, she may actually be *less* productive because that day did not follow its normal pattern.

To quantify the effects of routine disruptions, [we conducted a series of studies](#), surveying nearly 400 administrative employees every weekday for three weeks. In an initial study, we found that something as simple as missing one's regular morning cup of coffee led employees to begin their workday less calm and more mentally exhausted (even after accounting for the effects of caffeine). This broken link in their morning routine rippled throughout the workday, ultimately leading those employees to be less productive. In subsequent studies, we expanded beyond coffee to study disruptions to any component of morning routines (e.g., waking up on time, making breakfast, or commuting to work). Overall, we found the same pattern of results—whatever the routine, disruptions to it leave employees feeling less engaged and being less productive over the course of the day.

What can you do to address routine disruptions?

Regarding the second question—how do I get my productivity back?—our findings point to several ways that employees and managers can alleviate the effects of routine disruptions. For employees, a first and obvious step is establishing a routine and sticking to it. This is good advice for any situation, and is doubly important as the effects of the pandemic linger. We encourage employees to start with their morning routine, and start small. Find something predictable around which to anchor the morning, such as waking up at the same time, taking the dog for a walk before having the first cup of coffee, or spending 20 minutes on meditation or yoga. This can provide a predictable foundation around which to structure the rest of the morning. However, it may not always be possible to avoid disruption to routines—indeed, COVID-19 seems to create novel disruptions daily. When that happens, it is critical to get back on track. While it may be easier said than done, if employees experience a disruption to their morning routine, they should try to avoid working through lunch to catch up. Instead, they should have lunch at the same time, in the same place, and with the same people as usual, thereby resetting their routines for the afternoon ahead.

As for managers, the best step they can take is to avoid being a source of disruption to employees' routines. For example, while it may be tempting to call employees first thing in the morning, doing so may disrupt a critical component of their morning routine. Answering that call could throw off the typical flow of the morning, causing the employee to forget to pack a lunch for their child, and forcing them to temporarily leave work later in the day to bring their child lunch. In this way, one disruption can snowball into lower productivity across an entire workday. Managers can also take steps to correct for disruptions to employees' morning routines—even if those disruptions happened outside of work. In the case of the manager who “makes the rounds” every morning, she should recognise that her morning check-in with her employees may be part of each of their routines. Thus, on days when she is unable to make the rounds, instituting a virtual meeting that serves the same purpose may help her employees' routines stay intact, thereby fuelling their daily productivity.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Stumbling out of the gate: The energy-based implications of morning routine disruption](#), *Personnel Psychology*, 2020;1–38.
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