Subject: Can I call a timeout?
Date: Thursday, August 3, 2017 at 6:03:02 AM Central Daylight Time
From: The Cohort (sent by The Cohort <katie=poynter.org@mail40.wdc01.mcdlv.net>)
To: Simons, Amy B.

On April 21 at 5:30 p.m., I began the process of unplugging for three months. I sent a final email to my colleagues and turned on my out-of-office reply. I deleted Twitter and Slack from my phone. I reminded myself over and over to not check work-related messages or participate in journalism-related discussions on social media. I shut my work laptop and kept it closed.

My three-month sabbatical — which I took after my husband unexpectedly died — was the longest I've ever been away from the office. Deciding to take that time off was difficult. Would people forget about me or assume I couldn't handle the pressures of work? Did taking a break mean I'm weak or not as capable as my colleagues? Would I be out of touch? What if I didn't want to come back?

I returned to work on July 25, and I'm happy to report that none of those fears came true. After spending the past three months doing some major soul searching and learning how to take care of myself, I feel better equipped to excel at my job and escape burnout than I did in the disorienting weeks after Jamie died. I now appreciate the routine, distraction, purpose and stability that work provides. And I'm more grateful than ever for my colleagues and the journalism community at large for their support during an impossibly difficult time.

Like many people who take a maternity or paternity leave to learn how to be a parent and adjust to a wildly different life, I spent my time off learning how to be a widow and adjust to a solo life.

But returning to work can be awkward, especially if it's rare for people in your office to take time off or truly disconnect during evenings, weekends or vacations.

Newsrooms, like many American workplaces, can demand notoriously long hours and provide little flexibility when it comes to balancing work and life. Katherine Goldstein's Neiman Report story from last week explored [how hard it can be for journalists who are parents](#). And last year, Poynter's 40 Better Hours project examined [ways to avoid burnout in the news industry](#).

[Time](#) and [again](#), research has proven that taking breaks from work is good for employees' productivity, morale, and health. And yet, we worry that working "normal" hours or going on vacation can be seen as slacking.

It's time to fight that stigma and reclaim our lives outside of work.

So what can we do when we're at a crossroads and need time off? Whether we experience loss or birth, illness or some other major event, life isn't always tidy. Sometimes we have no choice but to stop and recharge.

As employees, we can:

- **Prepare for a smooth absence.** Before you leave for a vacation or longer break from work, make sure there's a plan in place. Identify a contact person, or people, who can handle questions and tasks while you're gone. Include those contacts in your out-of-office reply. And take those folks out for coffee or lunch beforehand to thank them, talk through details and alleviate their concerns.

- **Truly break away.** Stay away from email, Slack and the like. Jumping in and out of work not only takes away from your own well-deserved time off, but it sends mixed messages to your colleagues. Use this as an opportunity to show that you trust your co-workers to carry the torch while you're gone.

- **Be transparent.** Explain why and how you're unplugging from work. This [mental health day email](#) went viral in part because we aren't always so honest about needing a break from our jobs. If you've decided to take some time off or figured out a flexible schedule arrangement, talk with your colleagues instead of doing it in secret.

As managers, we can:

- **Help employees succeed upon their return.** My boss challenged me to [write an article](#) within my first four days back on the job — a reasonable goal that helped me to get back in the swing of work. Identify projects that employees can participate in once they're back in the office, check in often on their transition back and help identify incremental goals for the coming weeks and months to challenge and invigorate them.

- **Be consistent.** If you allow one employee to work a flexible schedule, that freedom should be offered to everyone. Setting aside some time to identify an arrangement that works for everyone on your team will avoid awkwardness and accusations of preferential treatment.

- **Set a good example.** Your employees look up to you. By sending emails at all hours and not taking true vacations, you're setting an unhealthy expectation. Try to model good behavior and if you can't — the news doesn't follow normal business hours — be clear with your team on what you expect from them in terms of responding to work when they're off the clock.

And for all of us, there are smaller things we can do on a daily basis:

- **Turn off notifications.** I [did this](#) during my sabbatical and liked it so much I'm keeping them off.

- **Send emails at normal hours.** Outside of breaking news, most other emails can wait. If you want to write something now but can wait for people to read it until tomorrow, [use Boomerang](#).

- **Commit to healthy routines.** For me, that's meditating every day before work and playing volleyball on Wednesdays. When I don't do those things, my mood and energy plummet.

I'm lucky that Poynter allowed me to go on sabbatical. If you're in a position where you can set a similar example — whether by taking time off, leaving work at normal hours, or truly unplugging while on vacation — do it. Taking care of yourself helps you take care of your colleagues and teammates. And speaking of taking, please oh please, [take all of your vacation days](#).

xoxo
KHG