

Using 'Golden Rules' to Protect Well-being

Working in schools can be overwhelming and all encompassing. It feels like there is always more that we could do and our work can feel never ending.

It can also be difficult to disconnect and switch off. Thinking about work and the challenges we face at school can be all consuming. It is important to set boundaries and limits to stop school work from encroaching on the other things in our life that are important to us eg your partner, family, friends and other interests.

Whilst developments in technology should help us, they have also resulted in us becoming more 'connected' than ever. For example, many staff members check their work emails at home at night, on the weekends and even the holidays. They justify this behaviour because they "don't like surprises" the next day and their email "IN Box becomes unmanageable" if they don't keep it under control. This connectivity makes switching off and taking a break from thinking about work, even more challenging.

Whilst I'm not against checking work emails at night (if that works for you), I would highly recommend setting boundaries around this behaviour. Do you have to check your emails EVERY night (including Friday and Saturday night) or could you limit the checking to Sunday to Thursday nights during the term? I'd also recommend setting a timer to limit the amount of time spent each night on work email (eg 15 minutes). If you don't set a limit you can become buried in your IN box for two hours. That is two hours that school work has taken you away from your family and the other things that are important in your life.

Developing a set of "Golden Rules" that protect what is important to you from school work taking over our lives is a useful strategy.

The only person to have his work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe.

For example, getting out of school at a 'reasonable' time one particular afternoon per week to do something that is important to you, is a useful strategy to prevent school work taking over. It might be Thursday afternoons I make sure I am out of school by 3.30 pm to watch the latest release movie, to meet up with friends, to play golf, go to the gym, take my son or daughter to their sports training.

Another example of a Golden Rule can be, "I don't take work home with me! I stay at school as long as it takes to get it done and then I leave it there!"

If that doesn't work for you and you need to take some work home at the weekends to get it done, then another golden rule can be to 'quarantine' the work to a particular time at the weekend. Many people who take work home to do at the weekend 'pollute' their whole weekend. On Friday night they feel guilty about the school work they have to do but are too tired to do it. They might start on Saturday morning but then have other things to do (eg washing, take kids to sport etc) and don't get the work finished. On Saturday afternoon they procrastinate and feel guilty that they aren't doing the work. Saturday evening they are thinking about the work whilst they are out and have to go home early to be ready for the next day. On Sunday they multi-task trying to get things done around the house for the week ahead and feel guilty about the school work they are yet to do. They finally sit down to complete the school work late on Sunday afternoon and rush to get it completed. As a result the school work has 'polluted' their whole weekend and given them no respite from thinking about work.

Instead, if they do have to do some school work on the weekend, they should allocate a specific time to get the work done, (eg 9 to 10.30 am Sunday), stay focused and work hard during that time and give themselves permission to not worry about the school work during the weekend.

It is vital to set boundaries and give yourself permission to disconnect.

Key points

Technology means we are more connected than ever.

It can be difficult to disconnect and switch off from thinking about school.

If you check your work email at home at night, do you have to do it EVERY night?

Developing a set of "Golden Rules" protects what is important to you from work taking over.

If you do have to do some school work on the weekend, allocate a specific time, stay focused and get it done during that time rather than pollute your whole weekend.

Steve Francis MScM, BEd, DipT

www.SteveFrancis.net.au

Steve is an expert in school leadership and work-life satisfaction. Steve was a Principal for 20 years and is the author of four books, 'Time Management For Teachers', 'A Gr8 Life...Live it Now!', 'First Semester Can Make or Break You!' and 'Attitude is Everything'. Steve lives in Brisbane with his wife and family but works with school leaders and staff in schools across Australia and internationally.

