TO CONNECT, WE FIRST HAVE TO DISCONNECT

Why giving ourselves permission to step away helps us return with more to give

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We are more connected than ever.

We can be reached almost anywhere, at almost any time. We carry our work, our relationships, the news, and much of the world in our pockets.

But being constantly connected does not necessarily mean we are meaningfully connected.

Sometimes it means we are never fully anywhere.

We answer work messages while sitting with our families. We scroll while watching television. We think about the conversation we just had while pretending to listen to the one happening in front of us. We take time away but continue mentally working through the problems we left behind.

We are technically resting but not really resting.

We are physically with people, but not completely present.

We become caught somewhere in between, never fully disconnected and therefore never fully able to connect.

If we want to change that, we may need to begin with something that feels counterintuitive:

We need to give ourselves permission to disconnect.

WHY DISCONNECTING CAN FEEL SO HARD

Many of us have learned to associate being available with being responsible.

Good employees respond quickly.

Good leaders are always accessible.

Good parents remain attentive to everyone's needs.

Good friends show up.

Hard-working people keep going.

We remain available long after our attention has disappeared. We push through when our bodies are asking us to stop. We stay plugged into conversations, problems, and information because stepping away can feel selfish, lazy, or irresponsible.

Even when we stop working, we may feel guilty about it.

There is also a strange sense of security that comes from being constantly occupied. Busyness can protect us from uncomfortable thoughts, emotions, and questions. As long as we keep moving, we do not have to notice how depleted, overwhelmed, or disconnected we may have become.

The result is that we rarely give ourselves permission to be fully in one place or the other.

We do not completely step away.

And we do not completely arrive.

DISCONNECTION IS NOT AVOIDANCE

Intentional disconnection is different from avoidance.

Avoidance is stepping away because we do not want to face something.

Intentional disconnection is stepping away so we can return better able to face it.

It is not abandoning our responsibilities, relationships, or goals. It is recognizing that we cannot remain continually engaged without eventually losing some of our ability to engage well.

Every one of us has limited physical, emotional, and mental capacity.

When that capacity is depleted, we may still be present in the room, but our ability to connect changes.

We become less patient.

Less curious.

Less flexible.

We listen for the purpose of replying rather than understanding.

We rush people.

We react more strongly.

We miss important signals.

We may begin to experience ordinary requests as demands and normal conversations as one more thing being asked of us.

That does not mean we are uncaring people.

It may simply mean we are tired people who have not allowed ourselves to step away.

WHAT DOES YOUR SYSTEM NEED A BREAK FROM?

When people think about disconnection, they often imagine taking a vacation or escaping from everything for a long period of time.

Sometimes we do need that.

But disconnection does not always require a plane ticket, an empty calendar, or several days away.

It begins by noticing what is draining us.

Perhaps your body needs physical rest.

Perhaps your brain needs a break from making decisions.

Perhaps you need silence after spending the day surrounded by noise.

Perhaps you need to put down your phone and stop absorbing the thoughts, opinions, and lives of hundreds of other people.

Perhaps you need space from being the person everyone turns to.

Perhaps you need to walk, create, breathe, listen to music, spend time outside, or do something that has no measurable outcome.

Different forms of depletion require different forms of recovery.

A quiet evening will not necessarily restore someone who feels isolated.

A social event will not restore someone who has spent the entire week interacting with people.

Mindless scrolling may feel like taking a break, but it can continue to fill our system with stimulation and information.

The important question is not simply:

How do I stop working?

It is:

What does my system need a break from, and what would genuinely restore me?

THE SMALL MOMENTS MATTER

We often wait until we are completely depleted before allowing ourselves to disconnect.

By then, a small break no longer feels sufficient. We want to cancel everything, turn off our phones, and disappear.

But recovery does not need to begin only when our battery is flashing red.

Small, intentional moments of disconnection can keep us from reaching that point.

Close the laptop before beginning dinner.

Sit in the car for two minutes before entering the house.

Take a slow breath before answering the next call.

Walk around the block without your phone.

Turn off notifications for a period.

Finish one interaction before moving into another.

Let silence exist without immediately filling it.

Create a clear ending to the workday, even when you work from home.

These moments can seem insignificant, but they create transitions. They tell our minds and bodies that one thing has ended and something else is about to begin.

Without those transitions, the last meeting follows us into the next conversation. Work follows us home. Yesterday's frustration enters today's interaction.

We may be in a new place, but we have not actually arrived.

Disconnection helps us put something down before asking ourselves to pick something, or someone, else up.

DISCONNECTION CREATES CAPACITY FOR CONNECTION

Real connection requires more than proximity.

It requires attention.

It requires enough internal space to notice another person.

It requires the capacity to listen without immediately shifting the conversation back to ourselves.

It requires curiosity about what someone else may be experiencing, even when it differs from our own experience.

It also requires a willingness to let ourselves be known.

None of that is easy when we are exhausted, overstimulated, distracted, or mentally somewhere else.

When we intentionally disconnect, we create the possibility of returning with more patience, openness, and attention.

We can ask a question and stay for the answer.

We can put down the phone.

We can notice the change in someone's voice.

We can laugh without simultaneously checking an email.

We can have a difficult conversation without simply trying to get it over with.

We can allow the person in front of us to feel that, for this moment, they matter.

How we enter and leave conversations matters.

Every interaction can strengthen a relationship, maintain it, or slowly erode it. Often, the difference is not whether we said exactly the right thing. It is whether the other person experienced us as present.

That presence begins before the conversation.

It begins with whether we have created enough space to show up.

GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION

Many of us are waiting for someone else to give us permission to stop.

A manager.

A partner.

Our family.

The completion of the to-do list.

A time when everyone else no longer needs anything.

That moment may never arrive.

There will always be another task, message, problem, or person who could use our attention. At some point, we must recognize that protecting our capacity is not separate from caring for other people.

It is part of how we care for them.

We are allowed to be unavailable sometimes.

We are allowed to need quiet.

We are allowed to pause before responding.

We are allowed to have limits.

We are allowed to do something restorative without first becoming completely depleted.

Giving ourselves permission to disconnect does not mean we care less.

It helps us return capable of caring well.

RETURN WITH INTENTION

Disconnection is only one half of the practice.

The purpose is not to remain removed from our lives or from one another. It is to return intentionally.

When you come back, come back.

Put down what you were carrying.

Notice the person in front of you.

Ask the question you have been meaning to ask. Listen without preparing your response.

Share something real.

Be willing to go first.

Connection does not need to be dramatic. It can happen in a few honest minutes. It can begin with shared laughter, a thoughtful question, or the simple decision to give someone our complete attention.

But it becomes much harder when part of us is still somewhere else.

A SIMPLE CHECK-IN

When you notice that you are physically present but mentally absent, ask yourself:

What am I still carrying?

What do I need to put down?

What would help me genuinely arrive here?

Then create the smallest possible transition.

One breath.

Two quiet minutes.

A closed laptop.

A phone placed out of reach.

A short walk.

A clear decision that, for the next little while, you will be where you are.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

We do not need to choose between caring for ourselves and connecting with other people.

The two are related.

Stepping away can help us return.

Resting can help us listen.

Creating space can help us become available for what, and who, matters.

The goal is not to disconnect from our lives.

It is to stop living perpetually between places: never fully resting, never fully working, and never fully present.

Give yourself permission to step away.

Then, when you return, bring all of yourself back. Because sometimes the first step toward meaningful connection is having the courage to disconnect.

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