

Rethinking Rest



Reflect & Refocus



“Too much to complete in what feels like too little time.”

School staff member
Peer Education Project

Often, it can feel like there is not enough time in the day to complete the mounting tasks ahead of us, usually with something or someone requiring our attention and time. We may feel like there is little to no time for rest.

Yet, no matter what our work schedule or personal situation might be, creating opportunities to rest is important, not only for our physical health, but our mental health and wellbeing too.

Without prioritising ourselves and finding moments for our own mental health, we can experience burn-out. We all understand the importance of rest, but it can feel impossible at times to unplug and take time for the rest we need.

We hope this resource will support you to rethink what rest means to you and build pockets of time into your day for you.



Time to rest

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What is rest?

The pace of life and demands of work can place rest at the bottom of our priority list.

Holistic rest focuses on refreshing our whole self, both physically and psychologically. It encourages us to regularly top up our energy tank in different areas of our lives.

We rarely have leeway for the unexpected, such as health problems, relational breakdowns, or bereavements. By building in time to rest and reflect on our energy levels, we can better respond to life's demands.

How do we thrive in life rather than just survive?




In 2017, the Mental Health Foundation released the report: [Surviving or Thriving? The state of the UK's mental health.](#)

Read the report to find out more about the steps we can all take to support our own mental health and that of our friends, families and neighbours.



Why is rest important for our mental health?

Daily rest and relaxation can:

-  Reduce stress and anxiety.
-  Improve mood.
-  Decrease blood pressure.
-  Provide chronic pain relief.
-  Improve immune health.
-  Increase strength of the cardiovascular system.
-  Improve critical thinking.
-  Increase empathy and compassion.
-  Improve the ability to dream for the future.
-  Improve problem-solving skills.
-  Provide space for fresh creativity.



Our relationship with rest

TEACHING IS NOT 9-5

Lesson planning, marking, supervising after-school clubs, and other day-to-day work tasks, take up evenings, weekends, and even holiday periods. Then, on top of the pressures from the job, our personal lives, families, and the steady trickle of life admin, also demand our constant attention. No wonder rest is being squeezed out of modern-day life!



Ever feel like if you miss a beat you might spin uncontrollably?

Rest offers us a chance to step off that wheel, to breathe and reorientate before stepping back on, refreshed.

For many of us there is a sense of shame attached to the idea of rest, making us feel that we can't, and don't deserve to, take time out. While we all have very real to-do lists, it is important to hold a cut-off time so that the opportunity to rest doesn't disappear before our eyes.

We may feel guilty when we take time off; that it's selfish, irresponsible, and excessive. This narrative is dangerous; it can drive us beyond the realm of tiredness and lead to burnout.

"I always have to be on go. Even if I finish work I feel like I can't relax ... it becomes very frustrating and mentally draining."

Respondent
OPEN network

A big part of rest is being able to surrender. Surrender our need to be productive, surrender the hesitation to prioritise self-care, surrender the desire to meet everybody else's needs. It is a moment to remind ourselves that we are not machines; we have physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual needs.



Ask yourself...

What does rest mean to me?

Are my rhythms of rest meeting my needs?

Try to protect the boundaries you place around your time and become more intentional with the smaller snippets of free time within your busy weeks.

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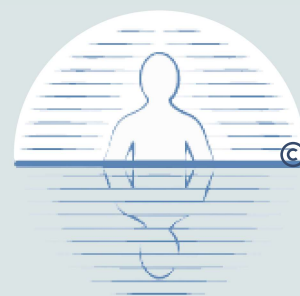
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**“Writing in a journal
can help my mind to
stop racing with lots
of thoughts!”**

School staff member
Peer Education Project

The power of reflection



HOW TO GET OUT OF DEFAULT MODE

Sometimes, we can have a “head down, and push through” mentality. When we’re in this survival mode, self-care often gets shelved for a while. Taking the time to reflect allows us to step back and get a full view of what is going on in our lives. We can begin to assess what little things help us to relax effectively.

Recognising what we are gravitating towards can tell us if our rest is off balance. Holistic rest requires us to reflect on the different aspects of tiredness we may experience. From this, we can then choose the type of rest that will truly refresh us.

It can take time and intentional rest for our body to revert to a relaxed state, particularly when we have gone through prolonged stressful periods.

Holistic rest is not about giving us more to do but about giving ourselves a renewed understanding of rest, better equipping us to top up our energy tank throughout each day, week, term, year and so on.

**YOU ABSOLUTELY
DESERVE REST!**

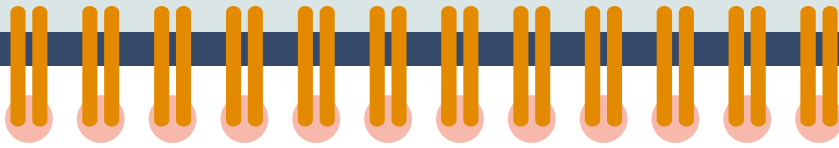
Your wellbeing is
more important than
the tasks in front of
you.

“

“It seems that living and loving with our whole hearts requires us to respect our bodies’ need for renewal. When I first researched the ideas of rest, sleep, and sleep-debt - I couldn’t believe some of the consequences of not getting proper rest.”

Brené Brown - The Gifts of Imperfection

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Ask yourself...

Which parts of me feel tired?

Is it my body, my mind, my heart, my soul, my connections, or my senses?

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Types of Rest

Rest your body



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR BODY

Resting the body is about recovery and restoration. There are days when it feels like we are constantly on the go. Even when we are sat still at our desks and fully absorbed in tasks all day, our body can experience fatigue.

Our bodies are designed to be moved. After being sat in the same posture for a long time, we may start to notice aches and pains in our bodies. Neck and shoulder tension, if left unchecked, can result in tension headaches, and stiffness in our legs can sometimes lead to lower back pain.

Long periods of busyness and stress can also have a physiological effect on our bodies.

"Fight or Flight" mode is our response to escaping a threat – our body increases our heart rate and levels of adrenaline and cortisol, and redirects blood away from our internal organs to our muscles. This gives us the energy and power to run away or fight the threat. There is nothing unusual about the body entering this state occasionally when we are stressed.

However, our bodies are not designed to live in this heightened state for long periods of time. While we can't always control the amount of work we have, we can make a conscious effort to regularly step out of "Fight or Flight" mode.

This is where our "Rest and Digest" response comes into play. This system restores balance; it lowers our heart rate, reduces adrenaline and cortisol in the body, and redirects blood back to the internal organs. In this "Rest and Digest" state, our bodies have a more effective immune response and natural ability to self-heal.

HOW TO REST YOUR BODY

When we think of resting our bodies, our first thought is often to sleep or take a nap. Whilst these are great options for physical rest, there is value in resting the body in a more active, conscious way.



Take a bath.

This can relieve aches and pains and slow the body down.



Try gentle movement.

For example, stretches, restorative yoga or walking. This can move and lengthen the muscles that may have become tight and stiff.

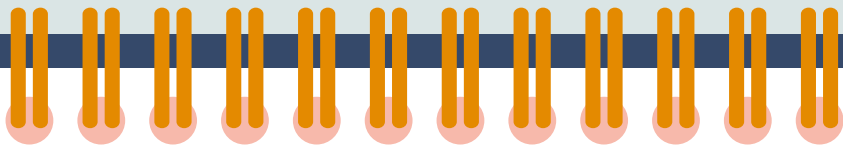


Practice breathing exercises.

For example, resonance breathing, to stimulate the body's 'Rest and Digest' response.

Resonance breathing is a simple exercise that helps us to stay present by focusing on our breath. It can be practiced when we are trying to fall asleep or as a meditative exercise when we feel our stress levels rising.

Inhale for 5 seconds, exhale for 5 seconds. Repeat.



Ask yourself...

How does my body feel after today?

Do I need to gently move my body or to rest it through stillness?

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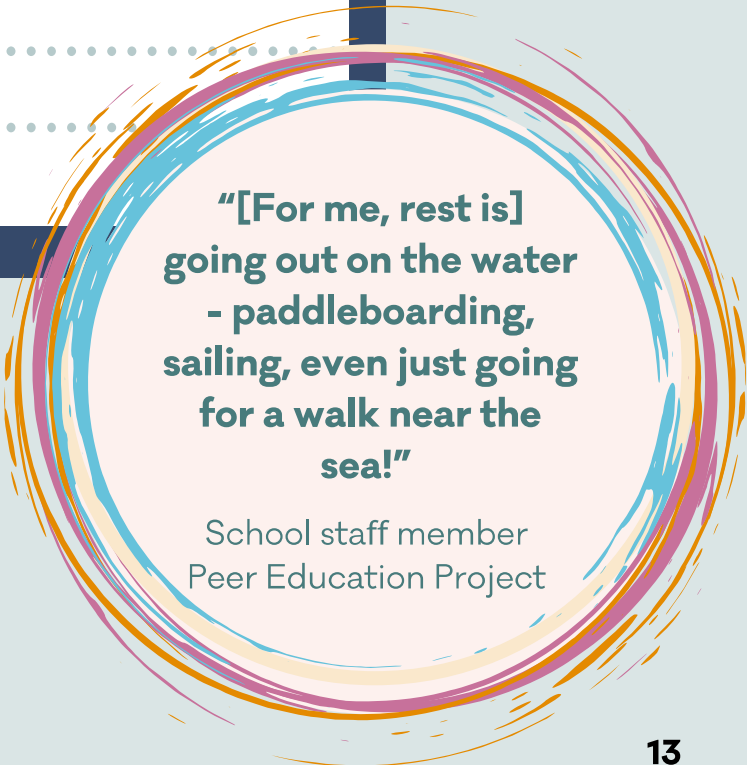
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"[For me, rest is] going out on the water - paddleboarding, sailing, even just going for a walk near the sea!"

School staff member
Peer Education Project

Rest your mind



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR MIND

We're all familiar with the feeling of juggling multiple balls at once: work, family, personal wellbeing. This takes mental effort, especially during busier periods of the academic year. The background chatter listing our endless tasks can seem constant, even when we are trying to switch off. It is not uncommon for our self-feedback to become increasingly negative in these times.

Mental fatigue can also cause forgetfulness, especially when we are nearing burnout, and we can start to 'drop the balls' without realising.

The reality is that our brain is never inactive, even whilst resting. However, there is a big difference in the way it functions.

Research shows that, when we rest, our brains go into Default Mode Network (DMN) – we move away from concentrating on the outside world, and towards inward-focused thinking and feeling. Our brains will subconsciously begin to problem solve; finding links and organising the information we have been taking in throughout the day.

Allowing time for our brains to be in DMN increases our capacity for self-awareness, while improving our memory recall, empathy, moral judgments, and ability to imagine the future. In short, resting our minds gives us perspective and creative vision.

HOW TO REST YOUR MIND

The key to giving our minds a break, is to find an activity that is all-consuming, but not too mentally strenuous.



Get engrossed in a good book or a TV show.

TV is often our default choice when resting. However, if we have spent all day in front of a screen, it may not be the most effective way to rest our minds. Try reading a book instead.



Try a hobby.

Simple tasks such as gardening, knitting, painting, simple DIY, and cooking can be effective ways of shutting down the background chatter and focusing on a simple task in front of us.



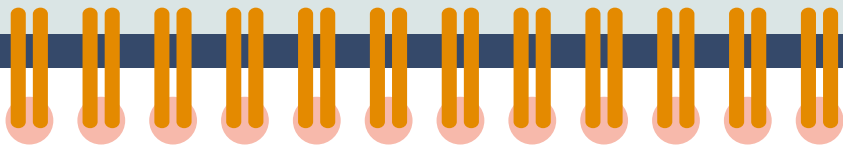
Take part in high-intensity activities.

For example, going to the gym or running.



Regularly practice mindfulness.

Apps such as [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#) can support you to learn and practice the skill of mindfulness through guided audio scripts.



Ask yourself...

What time of the day am I more prone to needing mental rest?

How do I need to rest my mind today?

Have I been working at a screen all day?

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“[I like] to relax in the spare room with a book, some music and a nice cup of tea with my cats.”

Respondent
OPEN network

Rest your 'heart'



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR 'HEART'

In a world of technology and constant connection, we often encounter triggers for a range of emotions – no wonder the area of emotional rest is where many of us feel depleted.

Resting your 'heart' isn't about resting your heart physically, it's about addressing the emotions we need to process each day. Sometimes we may bury our emotions, especially if we feel our capacity is limited and we need to get on with the task ahead. In some circumstances this can be useful, but eventually, we need to sit and recognise how we feel.

In our rest time, we may prefer screen time. Although this can rest our minds and shut down our internal dialogue, it can also lead to a numbing of our emotions. During these times, it is important to reflect on whether we need to process our emotions instead.



*Time to explore
my emotions*

HOW TO REST YOUR 'HEART'

We can often get stuck in emotions, playing them out over and over again. To truly move past these emotions, it can help to let them pass through us. In practice, this means leaning in and letting ourselves get curious about what exactly we are feeling and why. This can be a challenging part of emotional rest – it can be difficult not to judge ourselves as we acknowledge our emotions.

When we understand what is affecting us, we can begin to make changes. Similarly, by understanding what lifts our mood and gives us peace, we can be more intentional about seeking out those things in our lives.

Resting our 'hearts' is a way of cleaning off the muck that life can throw at us. Sometimes it takes a little effort to clean up, but we can feel much better for it afterwards.

External processing is talking through a situation to help clarify your thoughts and feelings.

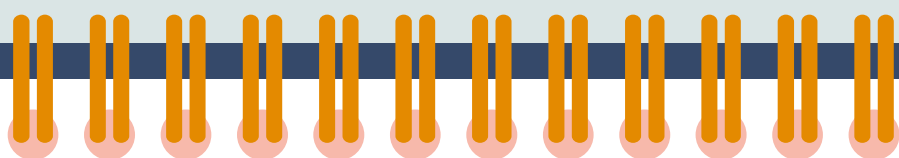
Rest your 'heart' by:

Talking with someone you know and trust, who lets you talk around an issue for some time as you emotionally process.

Internal processing is spending time alone to work through your thoughts and feelings.

Rest your 'heart' by:

Journaling, free-flow writing or following guided practices, such as an evening or morning reflective meditation.



Ask yourself...

Do I want to rest my 'heart' using external or internal processing?

What has been challenging today? How did that make me feel?

What has been joyful today? How did that make me feel?

What am I grateful for today?

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**"Talking to others
can help me rest."**

Respondent
OPEN network

Rest your 'soul'



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR 'SOUL'

You may not identify with the idea of a 'soul' or 'spirit', but this type of rest addresses the part of us that lies deeper than our fluctuating emotions. Even when a day appears to be going well, we may experience a deeper sense of unease. Some people describe this as 'losing their peace'.

When our 'soul' feels exhausted, we can often lose our sense of purpose. The "Why" behind what we do and who we are can feel shaken. For those who are spiritual, 'soul exhaustion' can feel like being distant from their faith expression.

Why does your soul get tired?



Big life shifts in our personal life, and/or workplace can trigger soul exhaustion. When this happens, it is natural to need a moment to steady ourselves and rest our soul. We may need to re-discover our purpose and drive for life and actively reclaim a sense of peace, which is often disrupted when we lose hope.

HOW TO REST YOUR 'SOUL'

Resting our 'soul' is another area of rest that requires us to dig deep. We need to reflect on the things in life that drive us, give us a reason to get out of bed and provide us with a sense of hope about our future.



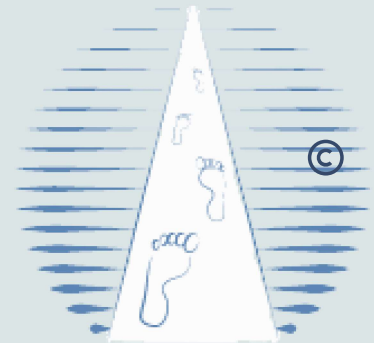
Journal and read more theological, spiritual or philosophical texts.



Find a safe space to raise questions and concerns.



For those with a spiritual practice, taking time for prayer and praise.



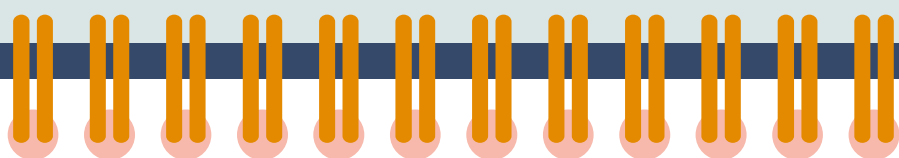
For some people, it can feel too much to start addressing these big questions.

If that is the case, then spending time appreciating creativity is a way to soothe the 'soul'.



Rest in nature, art, and music or things that make you sit back in awe – even nature documentaries can be helpful.

The resilience of the natural world and its ability to adapt to changes can be soothing when our own lives feel shaken.



Ask yourself...

Do I wake up with a sense of drive and purpose?

Am I going through a big life shift?

Do I crave being around nature/art/music to bring me a sense of stillness?

What am I grateful for today?

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**“Listening to music or
colouring
mindfulness pictures
[is restful].”**

Respondent
OPEN network

Rest your connectivity



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR CONNECTIVITY

Humans are wired for connection. Some connections in our lives feel effortless, even replenishing, and others can feel like they take continued input and energy.

As school staff, you may feel constantly connected throughout the working day with the different dynamics of pupils and staff. When the school day is over, there may also be your personal dynamics with a partner, parents, children, or friends. For some of us, this continuous connectivity with others can be tiring. We need to reflect on our own needs for connection, both with others and ourselves.

HOW TO REST YOUR CONNECTIVITY

It is important that our connections with others fill up our energy tanks. If you feel more refreshed by spending time on your own, it is essential to boundary this time - just because we have some free time doesn't mean we have to say yes to every plan!

Resting our connections requires being honest with those around us about what our needs are.

Rest your senses



RECOGNISING THE NEED TO REST YOUR SENSES

Life can be intense; for most of us, the only time our senses get a break is when we sleep. Our workplaces can be atmospheres where certain senses are overloaded – a playground is a place filled with loud sounds, a gym changing room can be an attack on the nose, computer-based workdays can be exhausting for our eyes!

Whether we are neurodiverse or neurotypical, it is vital that we turn down the sensory overload and rest our senses.

How often do you give yourself a sensory break?



HOW TO REST YOUR SENSES

We can go through each of the senses and find a way to actively reduce their sensory input, or we can reclaim sensory input by choosing to focus on one sense. If one of your senses is more heightened than others, drawing focus away from this sense throughout the day can be a great place to start.



Rest your sight.

If you are working at a screen, make sure you go outside and use your long-distance vision to rest the eyes. Take longer screen breaks a few times each day.



Rest your smell.

If your sense of smell has been overwhelmed, you may want to get some fresh air, light a scented candle, spray perfume, or fill the home with the delicious smell of your favourite meal.



Rest your hearing.

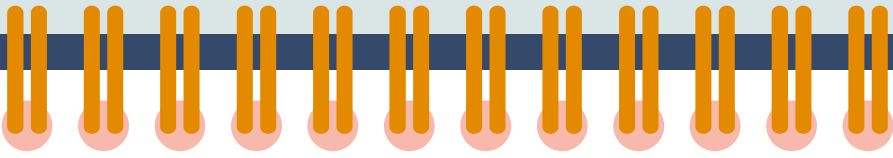
If you have been surrounded by noise, you may crave silence. If quietness is hard to achieve, you can reclaim this sense through positive sound, like music or laughter. Using tools such as earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones for small 10-minute breaks can also be a way of creating moments of calm.

In a culture where screens are used both for work and rest, it is vital to take a few hours a week to actively step away from technology.

Creating a ritual of a phone-free morning or evening can be a great way of creating a little oasis. It can challenge us to lean into stillness when, all too often, we distract ourselves rather than rest.



*Time to be still,
time for me*



Ask yourself...

Do I feel that one or more of my senses is over stimulated in my working day?

What can I do to reduce this over-stimulation?

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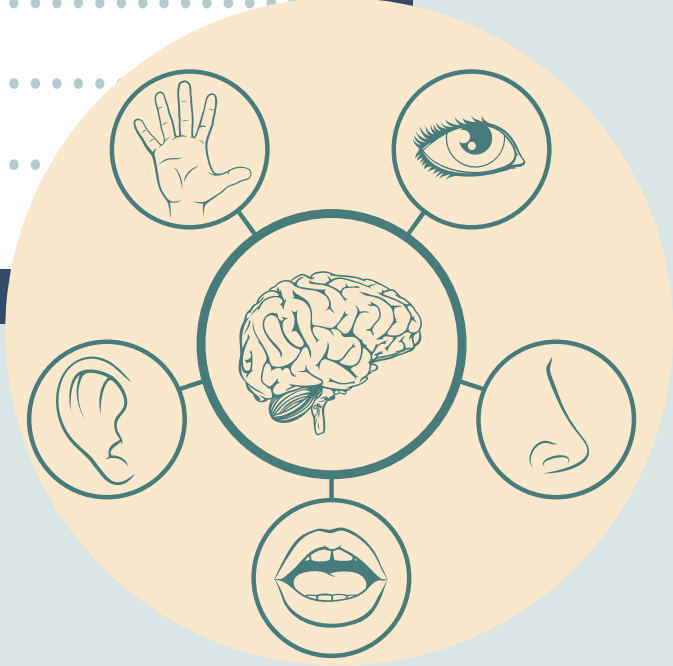
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Daily rituals

Many of us will have rituals without even realising it. They can be little routines we repeat that bring us a sense of calm or space. For example, the way we make our coffee in the morning, the mug we choose, or showering after work to symbolise that the working day is over.

When we repeat a task regularly, we build up more neural pathways around those actions. This is called neuroplasticity. Repeating a task/action at the same time every day or week can become a signal for our bodies to begin the process of unwinding. A ritual that links to our senses is often more powerful, such as having a bath or shower to create a physical sensation that helps the body decompress.



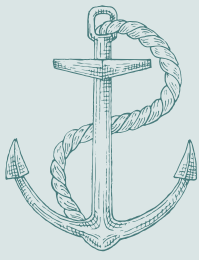
Bookending the day and the week with a little ritual can be an effective way to help the body psychologically prepare for and rest from the day.

Creating a ritual around a regular moment that is already part of your routine may be easier to stick to. Once you have decided on the moment you want to ritualise, allow yourself to become more present, letting the moment become more indulgent. This can then become a highlight of the day or week.

— “ —
“A life without periods of rest will not endure the daily grind.”

Saundra Dalton-Smith - Sacred Rest

— ” —



Weekly anchor points

Anchor points of rest are moments in the week when we prioritise our mental health and give ourselves the time to replenish – it is important they become our non-negotiables with strong boundaries. Picking three or four anchor points in a week ensures we drip feed healthy rest into our lives and stops us from relying too heavily on the weekend for rest – it is not unheard of for our weekends to also become busy!

Weekly anchor points need to be achievable – it's not about putting more pressure on ourselves; they should be things we look forward to. It is also important to communicate our anchor points with the people around us, especially if we are parents or carers. It can often take teamwork to protect these rhythms – try encouraging each household member to think of their own anchor points to get the conversation started. Once we all understand our individual needs for rhythms of rest across a week, we can support and encourage each other to keep our anchor points in place.

FINDING YOUR ANCHOR POINTS

Each anchor point should link in with a different type of rest, so it is helpful to identify which areas of rest we may be more depleted in. Once we have identified these, we can plan in anchor points that address those needs.

FINDING YOUR ANCHOR POINTS



REST YOUR BODY

Anchor point:

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REST YOUR MIND

Anchor point:

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REST YOUR 'HEART'

Anchor point:

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REST YOUR 'SOUL'

Anchor point:

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REST YOUR CONNECTIVITY

Anchor point:

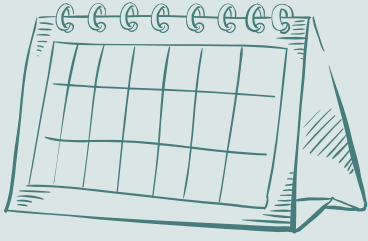
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REST YOUR SENSES

Anchor point:

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Annual Rhythms

For school staff, the calendar year follows some regular patterns, including holiday periods and exam-based terms. Taking stock of a full year can help us recognise which sections of a term we will need to prioritise more rest, so that we have enough energy to manage the busier periods.

What are your pinch points in the year?



Maintaining boundaries around weekly anchor points is still good practice during the busier times of the year. However, when energy and time is in more demand, these anchor points may need to change to enable more efficient and manageable types of rest.

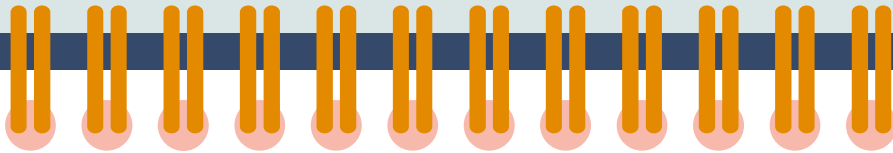
During summer, there tends to be greater opportunity for social anchor points, as people tend to have more time and energy for interaction. In the winter, the weekly anchor points may change into more introverted or home-based activities, like allocating time to read or run a bath.

Rest in a half-term can look very different to rest in school term time as we have a chance to build in more extended periods of rest ahead of time. By actively planning longer periods of rest for our bodies, minds, hearts, souls, connectivity, and senses, we will begin to feel more refreshed.



“Rest is not something that the world gives us. It’s never been a gift. It’s never been something you do when you’ve finished everything else. If you want rest, you have to take it. You have to resist the lure of busyness, make time for rest, take it seriously and protect it from a world that is intent on stealing it.”

Alex Soojung - Kim Pang – Rest



Ask yourself...

What are my basic rest needs during term time?

What types of rest can I do outside of term time?

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RESOURCES FROM THE MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION

SLEEP

- [How to sleep better \(guide\)](#)
- [Taking Sleep Seriously: Sleep and our Mental Health \(UK\) \(report\)](#)
- [How sleep and green space can help your mental health \(podcast\)](#)
- [Wellbeing and sleep: full works \(guided relaxation\)](#)

STRESS

- [How to manage and reduce stress \(guide\)](#)
- [Stress: are we coping? \(report\)](#)
- [Stress and the mind: full works \(guided relaxation\)](#)
- [How to support mental health at work \(guide\)](#)

MINDFULNESS

- [How to look after your mental health using mindfulness \(guide\)](#)
- [Three-minute mindfulness breathing space \(podcast\)](#)
- [Mindfulness: 10-minute practice exercise \(guided relaxation\)](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

GUIDED MEDITATIONS BY [REFLECT AND REFOCUS](#)

The reflective meditations are steps to start your journey of reflection. The meditations are 10-minutes long and cost £2.99 each.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON REST

- Sacred Rest by Sandra Dalton- Smith
- Oasis in Time by Marilyn Paul
- Rest by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang
- The Power of Rest by Mathew Edlund
- The Art of Rest by Claudia Hammond

EDUCATION SUPPORT

A UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities.

Check out their [Mental Health and Wellbeing Hub](#) for information, tools and resources on school staff mental health and wellbeing.



mentalhealth.org.uk

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