

**SundayReview**

# Stop Checking Email So Often

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Gray Matter

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IS email overload bad for you?

This is a complicated question. Although researchers have found a correlation between dealing with email and adverse well-being (for example, feeling stressed or emotionally drained), this does not mean that email itself is necessarily the culprit. (Perhaps a busier work schedule is what causes stress — and spending lots of time on email is a mere artifact of a busier work schedule.) Furthermore, such research suggests that, even if email is the culprit, the sheer volume of email that people handle might not be the problem.

This points to another possibility: Could the *frequency* with which you check your email play a role in causing stress? After all, three-quarters of workers report replying to email within an hour or less of receiving it, according to a recent survey of 503 employees at workplaces in the United States.

This question motivated us to design an exploratory two-week field experiment, the results of which will appear in next month's issue of the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.

We recruited a sample of 124 adults, ranging from students and professors to physicians and I.T. workers. In the first week of the study, we told half our participants — chosen at random — to check their email as often as they could each day, while keeping their mailboxes open and email alerts on. Meanwhile, we asked the other participants to check email only three times a day, while keeping their mailboxes closed and alerts off.

During the second week, we flipped the instructions, so the email-maximizers

became the email-minimizers, and vice versa. This design allowed us to compare how stressed the same individuals felt when they checked their email more versus less often, while keeping everything else constant.

At the end of each weekday, the participants reported how the day had gone on a wide range of measures. To assess stress, we asked them, for example, how often they felt unable to control the important things in their life and how often they had trouble coping with all the things they had to do that day.

Although the only thing we changed about the participants' lives was how often they checked their email, we observed a significant reduction in stress when they checked email less frequently. How much less stressed did people feel during their email-minimizing week compared with their email-maximizing week? The reduction in stress was about as large as the benefit people get from learning relaxation techniques (e.g., taking deep breaths, visualizing peaceful imagery). In other words, cutting back on email might reduce stress as much as picturing yourself swimming in the warm waters of a tropical island several times a day.

Checking email less often may reduce stress in part by cutting down on the need to switch between tasks. An unfortunate limitation of the human mind is that it cannot perform two demanding tasks simultaneously, so flipping back and forth between two different tasks saps cognitive resources. As a result, people can become less efficient in each of the tasks they need to accomplish. In addition to providing an unending source of new tasks for our to-do lists, email could also be making us less efficient at accomplishing those tasks.

Indeed, although the participants in our study sent and received roughly the same number of emails during both weeks, they reported doing so in approximately 20 percent less time during the week when they checked their email less frequently. Constantly monitoring our inboxes promotes stress without promoting efficiency. When it comes to checking email, less might be more.

But habits are difficult to break. Even when we asked participants to check email only three times a day, they typically admitted to logging in almost five times a day. And while writing this article about the value of cutting back on email, we found our own eyes drawn toward our inboxes.

For some individuals, though, checking email less frequently is simply not an option. The stockbroker who misses a million-dollar deal by logging off email is likely to feel more, not less, stressed. That said, most of us probably check our email

more often than is truly necessary to get our job done. A recent survey found that 55 percent of workers reported checking their email after 11 p.m. — and 6 percent reported checking email while they or their spouse were in labor. (One of the authors of this article admits to falling into this 6 percent.)

Far from offering a magic number that works for all, our findings simply suggest that making the effort to close the gap between necessity and compulsion is worthwhile. So if you're still hunting for a New Year's resolution, try to resist visiting your inbox as often as you feel compelled to do.

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