

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung)

Breaks 101: how to make taking a break work for you

1. Breaks are an important part of work – they help you work better

People who work all day without a break end up performing more poorly and feeling completely stressed and exhausted for their trouble. Working with attention, creativity and precision requires you to be rested and fit. It's important to get the rest you need.

If you are smart about taking breaks, you won't lose on performance – in fact, you'll perform better, because you'll be able to work faster and produce higher-quality output.

Occupational scientists advise taking a break from work before you get to the point of starting to make mistakes. Many people put off their breaks until they lose concentration. By that point it's too late – you may have started making mistakes that you then have to go back and correct.

If you're highly motivated for your work, you may not feel as if you need a break, although you're already physically tired – our feeling of tiredness is subjective and doesn't always reflect our true state.

All this means it makes sense to align your break-taking habits with studies which have found that people's performance fluctuates in cycles of approximately 90 minutes each. After around 70 minutes of concentration, our bodies switch into 'rest' mode for about 20 minutes. At this point, at the latest, we should take a break – our concentration has declined by now and having a break can help prevent overtiredness and boost our performance.

2. Breaks during study

Just a moment

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung), HAW Hamburg, Stiftstraße 69, 20099 Hamburg

We're here to answer all of your questions about your studies – by email, by phone or in person. You can find up-to-date contact information and office hours at bit.ly/HAW-ZSB.

For personal use only. Please ask the ZSB's permission before sharing.

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung)

This should not be longer than one minute. Don't leave your desk. Put down your pen or take your hands off the computer keyboard. Look out of the window, have a drink, stretch your limbs and back, and take a big yawn to boost the flow of oxygen to your brain.

Micro-break

After around 45 minutes, take a maximum of 5 minutes' break. Get up from your desk, walk around a little, have a drink and/or a snack, have a quick chat with someone else, do some brief exercises, or get a little fresh air.

Coffee break

After working for around 2 hours, a break of up to 15 minutes is a good idea. Leave the room you are working in, make yourself a coffee, water your plants or feed your fish – basically do something that doesn't involve using your brain; you could also make photocopies you need, meditate or do brief versions of relaxation techniques.

Rest break

After you have worked for about 4 hours, take a break of at least one hour and up to 2 and a half hours. Have something to drink and a meal, go for a walk outside, listen to calming music; do something that isn't work and preferably involves physical exercise (vacuum the flat or take your books back to the library), or have a short nap of up to 20 minutes – any longer and you may end up in deep sleep and you will feel 'groggy' when you get up.

3. Make your breaks work for you

It's best to plan your breaks for specific times and stick to them, even if you're struggling with your work. The more able you are to switch off for a while in your break, the easier you will find it when you go back to your desk.

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung), HAW Hamburg, Stiftstraße 69, 20099 Hamburg

We're here to answer all of your questions about your studies – by email, by phone or in person. You can find up-to-date contact information and office hours at bit.ly/HAW-ZSB.

For personal use only. Please ask the ZSB's permission before sharing.

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung)

- Spend your longer breaks away from your desk.
- Set an alarm to remind yourself to take your breaks – and to go back to work when it's time.
- If you're doing complex and challenging work, the total time you spend working per day should not exceed around 6 hours. Including breaks, that means a typical working day will be about 8 or 9 hours. It's usually ineffective to try and do more.
- When doing work that taxes your brain, don't spend your breaks using screens. The information overload they can cause may 'overwrite' your memory, so you don't retain the content of your revision.

The main message is that breaks are part of a strategy for successful working, and help you fill up your tank with energy for the next study session. If you're spending a lot of time in intense reading, writing or revision, you need to manage your resources carefully. People running a marathon don't expend all their energy on the first few kilometres – if they did that, they'd collapse long before the finish line. So do as marathon runners do and switch regularly between 'sprint' and 'steady' mode. It's a strategy that is sure to get you where you want to go.

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung), HAW Hamburg, Stiftstraße 69, 20099 Hamburg

We're here to answer all of your questions about your studies – by email, by phone or in person. You can find up-to-date contact information and office hours at bit.ly/HAW-ZSB.

For personal use only. Please ask the ZSB's permission before sharing.