

Emotional Recovery After Repeated Workplace Microstressors

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Abstract

Contemporary employees are frequently exposed not only to major occupational crises but also to smaller recurring demands such as interruptions, ambiguous requests, interpersonal friction, digital notifications, minor conflicts, work-process delays, administrative complications, competing priorities, and repeated pressure to respond quickly. Individually, these microstressors may appear relatively manageable. Their psychological importance emerges when they occur repeatedly and leave insufficient opportunities for emotional and cognitive recovery. The present study examines emotional recovery after repeated workplace microstressors by integrating the stressor-detachment perspective, work-recovery research, daily stress models, and recent evidence concerning social and technology-driven workplace stress. Existing research indicates that job stressors can impair psychological detachment, that insufficient detachment is associated with exhaustion and reduced recovery, and that daily stress processes can spill over into subsequent nonwork periods and following workdays.

Because no original employee dataset was available, a reproducible synthetic daily-diary sample comprising 220 hypothetical employees observed across ten workdays was generated, producing 2,200 day-level observations. The analytical model included current-day microstressor load, prior-day microstressor load, psychological detachment, leader support for recovery, and the interaction between microstress exposure and detachment. Emotional recovery was operationalized as next-morning restoration of emotional resources on a five-point scale. Cluster-robust regression analysis showed that current-day microstressor exposure was the strongest negative predictor of recovery (standardized $\beta = -.418$), while prior-day exposure retained an additional negative association ($\beta = -.096$). Psychological detachment was positively associated with emotional recovery ($\beta = .363$), and the positive microstress $\times$ detachment interaction ($\beta = .185$) illustrated a buffering pattern. The simulated model explained 67.4% of variance in next-morning emotional recovery.

The paper argues that repeated workplace microstressors deserve attention because occupational strain can develop through accumulation rather than through exceptional events alone. Emotional recovery should therefore be treated as a recurring organizational process supported by manageable demands, credible work–nonwork boundaries, psychological detachment, recovery-supportive leadership, and opportunities to restore affective resources.

Keywords: workplace microstressors; emotional recovery; psychological detachment; daily stress; occupational well-being; work-related rumination; recovery experiences; emotional exhaustion; leader support; workplace stress



1. Introduction

Occupational stress is commonly associated with highly visible demands such as excessive workload, organizational restructuring, job insecurity, abusive supervision, severe interpersonal conflict, or major technological change. Everyday working life, however, is also composed of smaller stress-producing episodes that may not independently qualify as major adverse events. An employee may receive a disruptive message while concentrating on a complex task, experience an unnecessarily difficult interaction with a colleague, encounter an avoidable procedural delay, respond to an ambiguous request from a supervisor, handle an unexpected digital interruption, correct a minor error created elsewhere in the workflow, or repeatedly switch attention between competing priorities. In the present study, these comparatively small but recurring demands are conceptualized as workplace microstressors. The conceptual emphasis is not on whether a single event is objectively severe but on frequency, recurrence, emotional activation, and the possibility that repeated low-intensity demands collectively consume psychological resources. The broader daily-hassles tradition has long suggested that ordinary recurring stressors deserve consideration alongside major life events, while contemporary occupational research similarly demonstrates that employees' well-being varies meaningfully in response to daily work experiences.

The theoretical importance of workplace microstressors becomes clearer when stress is approached as a temporal process rather than a static state. Employees continuously allocate attention, regulate emotion, manage interpersonal expectations, interpret uncertain information, and respond to performance demands. Each small stressor may require a relatively minor adjustment, but repeated regulation can prevent emotional activation from returning fully toward baseline before another demand occurs. Rigotti, Schilbach, and Kern demonstrated through a within-person daily design that social stressors were associated with daily exhaustion and affect, with social hindrance stressors particularly linked to exhaustion and reduced positive affect. Their study of employees across repeated workdays underscores the value of examining intraindividual fluctuations rather than assuming that a worker possesses one stable level of occupational stress. Technology has added another source of recurrent low-to moderate-intensity demand through communication overload, interruptions, digital permeability, and the extension of work-related activation across temporal boundaries. Recent daily-diary research on technology-driven stress explicitly emphasizes spillover across days and the need to study stress as an evolving process.

Recovery is therefore not merely the absence of work. Sonnentag and Fritz conceptualized psychological detachment as mentally disengaging from work during nonwork time, while their broader recovery framework identified detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control as central experiences through which employees can recuperate. Subsequent meta-analytic evidence has supported positive relationships between employee recovery and well-being and negative relationships between recovery and occupational demands. The distinction is important because an employee may physically leave the workplace while continuing to rehearse an unpleasant conversation, anticipate tomorrow's unfinished tasks, monitor work messages, reconsider a decision, or mentally revisit minor frustrations. Work-related rumination has been associated with poorer daily mood, greater tiredness, nervousness, emotional exhaustion, need for recovery, and sleep impairment. Emotional recovery therefore depends partly on whether the psychological consequences of work cease when formal work ends.



Repeated microstress exposure creates a particularly relevant setting for what Sonnentag described as the recovery paradox. Employees facing greater job stressors have a stronger objective need to recover, yet stress itself may interfere with the very recovery processes required to restore resources. An emotionally difficult workday can stimulate rumination, reduce detachment, promote extended work, disrupt restorative activities, and increase anticipatory concern about the following day. When the same pattern recurs, insufficient recovery may create a carryover effect whereby the employee begins the next work period with lower emotional resources. Contemporary recovery research therefore increasingly considers evenings, breaks, weekends, digital boundaries, and day-to-day spillover rather than treating recovery as an occasional vacation-related phenomenon. Sonnentag, Cheng, and Parker's comprehensive review emphasizes that regular recovery is relevant for employee well-being, motivation, and performance across multiple temporal settings.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine the Cumulative Relationship Between Workplace Microstressors and Emotional Recovery

The first objective is to evaluate the proposition that emotional recovery is influenced not only by the stressors experienced during the current workday but also by stress carried forward from the preceding day. This cumulative perspective is important because repeated microstressors can generate sequential rather than isolated resource demands.

2.2 To Assess Psychological Detachment as a Recovery Resource

The second objective is to examine psychological detachment as a central mechanism through which employees emotionally disengage from workplace demands. The stressor-detachment model proposes that job stressors can make psychological disengagement more difficult and that insufficient detachment contributes to strain.

2.3 To Evaluate Recovery-Supportive Leadership as an Organizational Resource

The third objective is to consider whether employees' recovery should be understood solely as an individual responsibility. Organizational expectations influence whether workers feel permitted to disconnect, stop monitoring communication, protect nonwork time, and postpone nonurgent demands.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Repeated Microstressors, Daily Hassles, and Cumulative Emotional Strain

The theoretical roots of microstressor research can be located partly in the distinction between major life events and recurrent daily hassles. Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, and Lazarus argued that everyday hassles constitute a meaningful mode of stress measurement rather than merely trivial background events. Contemporary occupational research extends this logic by examining within-person fluctuations in daily demands, interpersonal tensions, workload, interruptions, emotional demands, and technology-related pressures. These studies are valuable because retrospective global measures can obscure the temporal sequence through which minor events accumulate and affect well-being.



Rigotti, Schilbach, and Kern provide particularly relevant contemporary evidence. Their study used repeated observations from 99 employees and differentiated social challenge stressors from social hindrance stressors. Social challenge demands were associated with exhaustion as well as positive affect, whereas social hindrance stressors were associated with exhaustion and lower positive affect. The effects also differed according to whether employees worked from home or at organizational premises. Their findings indicate that even stressors arising from ordinary workplace interactions can have immediate affective consequences and that the same broad category of “social stress” should not be regarded as psychologically uniform.

The cumulative perspective is consistent with conservation-of-resources reasoning. Employees possess finite emotional, attentional, cognitive, and energetic resources, and repeated demands require continuing investment. A single minor interruption may consume little capacity, but numerous interruptions combined with interpersonal tension, unresolved tasks, time pressure, and digital extension may create repeated resource loss. Recovery becomes important because it provides a period in which resource expenditure is reduced and restoration becomes possible. When no sufficient recovery window emerges, emotional strain can persist into the following work period.

This interpretation does not imply that every workplace demand is damaging. Challenge–hindrance research has demonstrated that some demanding experiences can coexist with motivation, accomplishment, or positive affect, whereas obstructive or socially threatening demands are more consistently detrimental. Rigotti and colleagues found precisely this distinction in daily social stress. The concept of repeated workplace microstressors should therefore avoid treating all small demands as equivalent. Their cumulative influence depends on appraisal, controllability, social meaning, timing, frequency, and whether they obstruct or advance valued goals.

3.2 Psychological Detachment, Rumination, and Emotional Recovery

Sonnentag and Fritz's recovery framework remains foundational for explaining why some employees successfully restore emotional resources after work while others remain psychologically activated. Their Recovery Experience Questionnaire distinguished psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control as separable recovery experiences. Psychological detachment refers specifically to creating mental distance from work-related activities and thoughts during nonwork time. It is not equivalent to physical absence from the workplace.

The stressor-detachment model later formalized an important bidirectional problem. Job stressors can make detachment more difficult, while poor detachment can strengthen or prolong strain reactions. This model is particularly appropriate for microstressor research because small workplace frustrations often remain cognitively unfinished. An employee may repeatedly revisit why a colleague behaved dismissively, whether an ambiguous message implied criticism, why a task was interrupted, or how an unresolved problem should be handled the next morning. The original stressor may have lasted only several minutes, yet its cognitive afterlife can occupy a much longer period.

Gossmann and colleagues' daily-diary study of psychotherapeutic practitioners provides evidence regarding this after-work cognitive process. They conceptualized work-related rumination as repetitive negative thinking about work during nonwork time and reported associations between daily rumination and poorer mood, greater tiredness, and nervousness. Their review also notes established relationships



between rumination, emotional exhaustion, need for recovery, and sleep impairment. These findings are consistent with the argument that emotional recovery requires more than simply ending a work shift.

3.3 Recovery-Supportive Leadership and Organizational Boundaries

Recovery research historically focused heavily on what employees do during nonwork time, but this emphasis can inadvertently imply that recovery is entirely an individual responsibility. Employees make recovery choices within organizational systems that signal whether disconnection is safe, legitimate, or career-limiting. When supervisors routinely contact employees outside working hours, celebrate constant availability, create avoidable urgency, or model persistent after-hours work, employees may experience formal nonwork time without genuine psychological permission to detach.

Sonnentag and Schiffner demonstrated that leaders' own detachment was related to subordinate detachment and argued that leaders can influence recovery through role modeling, well-being, and whether they create intrusions into employees' nonwork lives. More recent work by Sonnentag, Kark, and Venz developed the multidimensional concept of leader support for recovery, including empathy for recovery, respect for boundaries, and role modeling. Using diary data from 152 employees, they found that respect for boundaries was positively related to psychological detachment at the person level and that detachment was associated with lower exhaustion and higher morning recovery states at person and day levels.

Their findings have particular relevance to microstressors because organizational boundary violations can themselves become repeated minor demands. A single nonurgent evening message may appear inconsequential, but an expectation of perpetual responsiveness can sustain cognitive readiness and prevent the psychological transition from work to recovery. In digitally intensive environments, this boundary problem can be especially pronounced because physical departure no longer guarantees functional separation from work.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Framework

The present manuscript uses a simulation-based longitudinal daily-diary design informed by occupational recovery theory. The simulation was selected because no real employee-level dataset was supplied. This approach allows the proposed research design and statistical procedures to be demonstrated transparently without inventing participants, workplaces, demographic characteristics, organizational locations, or observed outcomes.

The simulated structure consisted of 220 hypothetical employees observed across 10 consecutive workdays, generating 2,200 employee-day observations. The design represents a two-week working diary assuming five workdays per week. Repeated daily observations were chosen because contemporary occupational-stress research has demonstrated the value of within-person designs for identifying day-to-day variation in stressors, exhaustion, affect, detachment, and recovery. Rigotti and colleagues employed repeated daily observations when examining social stressors, while Ingwersen and colleagues used twice-daily measures to study technology-driven stress and next-day processes.

Table 1: Proposed Operationalization of the Study Variables

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Illustrative Measurement	Analytical Function
Workplace Microstressor Load	Frequency and intensity of recurring low- to moderate-level workplace demands that generate emotional or cognitive activation	Daily 1–5 composite covering interruptions, ambiguous requests, interpersonal friction, administrative obstacles, digital intrusions, minor conflicts, and competing priorities	Primary day-level predictor
Prior-Day Microstress	Residual microstressor exposure carried from the immediately preceding workday	Lagged value of daily microstressor score	Temporal spillover predictor
Psychological Detachment	Degree of mental disengagement from work during nonwork time	Daily 1–5 recovery-experience composite	Recovery resource and moderator
Leader Recovery Support	Perceived leader respect for boundaries, empathy for recovery needs, and recovery-supportive role modeling	Person-level 1–5 composite	Organizational resource

Source/Note: The construct architecture draws on the Recovery Experience Questionnaire, the stressor-detachment model, contemporary work-recovery research, leader-support-for-recovery research, and daily studies of occupational stress. The numerical observations in this paper are fully synthetic.

4.2 Synthetic Data Generation and Measurement Logic

Synthetic daily microstressor scores were generated on a bounded five-point scale with both between-person and within-person variation. A temporal dependency was incorporated so that exposure on one workday modestly influenced exposure on the following workday. This structure reflects the conceptual possibility that workplace demands cluster over time rather than resetting independently every morning.

Psychological detachment was modeled as negatively related to microstressor exposure and positively related to recovery-supportive leadership. This design reflects existing theory rather than an estimated population coefficient. Empirical recovery research indicates that greater job demands can interfere with detachment, while supportive leadership and boundary respect can facilitate recovery.

4.3 Statistical Analysis, Reproducibility, and Ethics

Descriptive statistics were first calculated for all principal variables. Standardized regression coefficients were then estimated to allow direct comparison among predictors measured on similar but not identical distributions. Because multiple daily observations belonged to the same hypothetical employee, standard errors were clustered by employee identifier in the illustrative regression.

The primary analytical expectations were that current-day and lagged microstressor exposure would predict lower emotional recovery, psychological detachment would predict higher recovery, leader support would make an additional positive contribution, and the microstress $\times$ detachment interaction would be positive. A positive interaction would indicate that the adverse slope between microstress and emotional recovery becomes less severe when detachment is stronger.

For visualization, employees were classified into three synthetic exposure groups according to their average microstressor load across the ten workdays: lower, moderate, and higher repeated exposure. Mean next-morning emotional recovery was plotted across the simulated diary period. This grouping was used solely for graphical communication and not as a substitute for the continuous regression model.

5. Analysis

5.1 Descriptive Pattern of Daily Stress and Recovery

Across the 2,200 synthetic employee-day observations, mean workplace microstressor exposure was 2.61 on the five-point scale with a standard deviation of 0.99. Mean psychological detachment was 3.38 (SD = 0.76), while perceived leader recovery support averaged 3.33 (SD = 0.69). Next-morning emotional recovery averaged 4.33 (SD = 0.66).

The relatively high mean recovery score reflects the simulation design rather than a claim that real employees generally recover to this degree. More analytically important is the pattern of relationships among variables. Current-day microstress exposure showed the strongest adverse relationship with emotional recovery, while prior-day exposure retained a smaller residual association. Psychological detachment emerged as the strongest positive recovery variable.

Table 2: Simulated Cluster-Robust Regression Predicting Next-Morning Emotional Recovery

Predictor	Standardized β	Direction	P-value	Analytical Interpretation
Current-Day Microstressor Load	-0.418	Negative	< .001	Greater daily exposure predicts substantially poorer next-morning emotional recovery
Prior-Day Microstressor Load	-0.096	Negative	< .001	Previous stress retains a smaller residual association with current recovery
Psychological	0.363	Positive	<	Mental disengagement from

Predictor	Standardized β	Direction	P-value	Analytical Interpretation
Detachment			.001	work is strongly associated with better recovery
Leader Recovery Support	0.046	Positive	.035	Recovery-supportive leadership contributes a small independent benefit
Microstress $\times$ Psychological Detachment	0.185	Positive buffering interaction	< .001	Stronger detachment attenuates the adverse microstress–recovery relationship
Model (R^2)	0.674	—	—	67.4% of simulated variance explained

Note: N = 220 hypothetical employees and 2,200 simulated employee-day observations. Coefficients are standardized. Standard errors were clustered by synthetic employee identifier. These results demonstrate analytical behavior under the simulation assumptions and are not empirical population estimates.

5.2 Cumulative Exposure and the Role of Psychological Detachment

The standardized coefficient of $\beta = -.418$ for current-day microstress indicates that repeated minor demands were the dominant negative predictor within the simulation. The coefficient for prior-day microstress remained negative at $\beta = -.096$, illustrating temporal residue. Even after current demands, detachment, and leader support were taken into account, the model retained a small association between yesterday's stress exposure and today's emotional restoration.

This lagged pattern is consistent with the theoretical proposition that stress does not necessarily disappear at the end of a work period. Recent technology-stress research explicitly argues that emotional and cognitive effects can spill across domains and subsequent days, while recovery scholarship emphasizes the importance of repeated daily restoration. The simulated coefficient should not be treated as verification of this causal mechanism, but it demonstrates how such spillover could be modeled empirically.

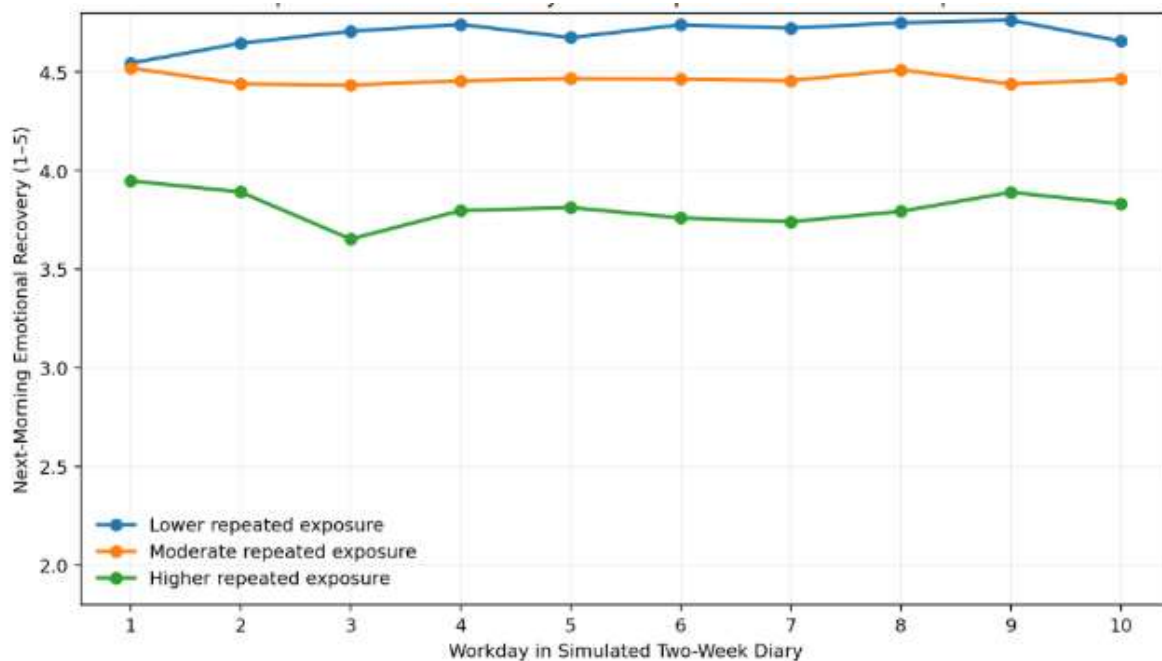
Psychological detachment displayed a substantial positive coefficient of $\beta = .363$. More importantly, the microstress $\times$ detachment interaction was $\beta = .185$, indicating an illustrative buffering pattern. At comparatively low levels of detachment, increases in microstressor exposure were associated with a steeper reduction in next-morning recovery. At stronger detachment levels, the negative slope was less pronounced.

This distinction has theoretical importance. Detachment does not require pretending that difficult work events did not occur. Rather, it involves suspending work-related cognitive and emotional engagement sufficiently for restorative processes to operate. Work-related rumination represents the

opposite pattern, in which occupational demands continue to occupy cognition during nonwork time. Daily-diary research has connected such rumination with poorer daily mood and increased tiredness and nervousness.

5.3 Emotional Recovery Across Repeated Exposure Groups

Graph 1: Emotional Recovery Across Repeated Workplace Microstressor Exposure



Source/Note: Author-generated synthetic daily-diary dataset consisting of 220 hypothetical employees and 2,200 employee-day observations. No real worker data are shown.

The line graph compares average next-morning emotional recovery across ten simulated workdays for employees classified into lower, moderate, and higher repeated-microstress exposure groups. The separation among the trajectories is more informative than minor day-to-day fluctuations. Employees in the lower-exposure group consistently retain the highest emotional-recovery scores, whereas the higher-exposure group shows a persistently lower recovery profile throughout the diary period.

6. Discussion

6.1 Why Small Workplace Stressors Can Produce Disproportionate Cumulative Effects

The principal contribution of the present study is to shift attention from isolated major stressors toward the temporal accumulation of smaller workplace demands. The simulated analysis demonstrates how current-day microstress can exert the strongest immediate association with emotional recovery while prior-day exposure retains a smaller residual relationship. This pattern is consistent with a process perspective in which occupational stress develops through sequences of activation, incomplete disengagement, and subsequent exposure rather than through a single static stress score.

This interpretation does not require assuming that microstressors are intrinsically more harmful than major occupational events. Severe stressors can clearly generate substantial consequences. The distinctive risk of microstressors arises from their frequency, normalization, and invisibility. Employees and managers may not consider repeated interruptions, minor disrespect, constant task switching, ambiguous communication, nonurgent after-hours messages, recurring technological friction, small procedural failures, or repeated changes in priority important enough to address individually. Yet each episode can require attention, emotion regulation, cognitive updating, and behavioral adjustment.

Rigotti, Schilbach, and Kern's findings strengthen this interpretation by demonstrating that day-level social stressors are associated with exhaustion and affect and that hindrance and challenge stressors operate differently. The implication is that organizations should examine the functional meaning of repeated demands rather than simply count them. A demanding interaction that contributes to a meaningful goal may create effort but also accomplishment, whereas recurrent obstruction or relational devaluation is more likely to produce resource loss without compensating gain.

6.2 Psychological Detachment as an Active Recovery Process

The simulated findings position psychological detachment as more than a secondary well-being variable. Its positive coefficient and buffering interaction suggest a twofold role: employees who detach more effectively recover better overall, and stronger detachment reduces the degree to which microstress exposure predicts poorer emotional restoration.

This interpretation aligns closely with the stressor-detachment model. Sonnentag and Fritz argue that detachment involves refraining from work-related thoughts and activities during nonwork periods and that it occupies a central position in the stressor-strain process. Their earlier measurement work also distinguishes detachment from relaxation, mastery, and control, indicating that recovery is multidimensional rather than reducible to leisure time alone.

This distinction has practical importance. An employee can spend an evening physically resting while psychologically remaining at work. Checking messages, mentally rehearsing a conflict, anticipating criticism, solving nonurgent problems, or repeatedly revisiting unfinished tasks prevents complete disengagement. Conversely, effective detachment does not necessarily require passive inactivity. Physical activity, social interaction, hobbies, learning experiences, or personally meaningful activities may facilitate recovery when they shift attention and emotional engagement away from unresolved job demands.

6.3 Organizational Responsibility for Sustainable Emotional Recovery

The positive coefficient for leader recovery support was smaller than the detachment coefficient in the simulation, but its theoretical relevance extends beyond its direct statistical contribution. Leaders influence the environment in which recovery occurs. They determine priorities, model communication norms, authorize urgency, respond to boundary-setting, and signal whether employees are evaluated partly on constant availability.

Sonnentag, Kark, and Venz provide recent evidence that leader recovery support is multidimensional and includes empathy, respect for boundaries, and role modeling. Their diary research found that psychological detachment was associated with lower exhaustion and higher morning recovery



states at both day and person levels. They also showed that recovery support is embedded in relationship quality, meaning that nominal policies may be insufficient when employees do not trust their leaders.

Organizations should therefore approach repeated microstressors through both stressor reduction and recovery protection. Stressor reduction involves identifying avoidable low-value demands: unnecessary meetings, duplicate reporting, contradictory priorities, poorly designed digital notifications, preventable workflow interruptions, unclear accountability, habitual last-minute requests, and minor forms of interpersonal disrespect. Recovery protection involves establishing credible norms around after-hours communication, breaks, task closure, scheduling, workload transition, and the legitimacy of nonwork boundaries.

7. Conclusion

Repeated workplace microstressors represent an important but easily underestimated dimension of occupational well-being. Employees do not experience work exclusively through major crises or severe job demands. Their emotional state is continuously shaped by small interruptions, interpersonal frictions, procedural obstacles, ambiguous expectations, digital intrusions, competing priorities, and other recurring demands that require repeated adaptation. Individually, many of these events appear manageable. Their significance becomes clearer when they recur frequently and are followed by insufficient psychological disengagement.

The simulation developed in this study demonstrates an analytical model through which this cumulative process can be investigated without presenting fictional observations as empirical evidence. Across 2,200 synthetic employee-day records, current-day microstressor exposure emerged as the strongest negative predictor of next-morning emotional recovery, while prior-day exposure retained a smaller negative relationship. Psychological detachment showed a substantial positive association with recovery and moderated the microstress–recovery relationship, illustrating how effective mental disengagement could reduce the consequences of repeated exposure. Recovery-supportive leadership contributed an additional organizational resource.

These patterns are consistent with established occupational recovery research. Psychological detachment has repeatedly been positioned as a central recovery experience, meta-analytic research associates recovery with better well-being, and daily-diary evidence shows that work-related rumination, social stressors, technological demands, and recovery opportunities operate dynamically over time. Recent leadership research further indicates that employees' ability to recover is affected by whether leaders respect boundaries and support psychological disengagement from work.

The broader organizational implication is that emotional recovery should not be considered an employee's private responsibility after working hours. Sustainable recovery begins with work design. Organizations influence the frequency of avoidable microstressors, the clarity of priorities, the predictability of demands, the quality of social interactions, the timing of digital communication, and whether employees feel genuinely permitted to disengage. Effective well-being strategies should therefore combine reduction of unnecessary daily friction with protection of credible recovery periods.



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