

# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Vacay!

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD  
August 20, 2021

# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

*It is that time of year! As this Five on Friday arrives in your inbox, I will be starting vacation. For many of us, myself included, this summer tradition looks very different from years gone by.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*For better or for worse, the pandemic has catapulted us into a new way of working. And this new way of working is spurring new models for vacation as well. Keeping up with the times means that we need to evolve in our thinking and practices – not only for work, but also for vacation. Doing so to preserve some fun is certainly a legitimate rationale, but it's more than that. Doing so... you know what's coming... will also preserve the mental health benefits of vacation!*

**1. Vacation is good for our mental health.** The [mental health benefits of vacation](#) are many, including reducing stress and preventing burnout. A good vacation can increase energy, improve mood, promote creativity and enhance productivity upon return to work. The key is to make vacationing a recurring habit since the mental health [benefits of vacation do not last forever](#). Think of it like sleeping or eating. One night of good sleep will not suffice for the rest of the year. A good meal will not keep you satiated forever. Vacation is the same, it needs to be a practice. Given all the mental health benefits for employees, and thus for their employers, and with technologies available today, it is time to rethink how we take vacation to ensure we reap the mental health rewards.

**2. Unlimited vacation policy?** The “unlimited” vacation policy experiment has failed to promote healthy practices and mental health. Quite the opposite, as [unlimited PTO is associated with employees taking less rather than more time](#). Less vacation pads the company bottom line in the short-run, but in the long-run, it is associated with higher rates of stress and burnout. Such conditions increase employee turnover, which increases costs to companies over time. It was an interesting experiment, but it is a laggard in terms of mental health benefits for both employees and employers.

**3. Required vacation policy?** In 2008, Société Générale discovered that one of their supposed high-performing employees, Jérôme Kerviel, was not forgoing his holidays out of love for his company. Instead, he was vigilant about not taking time off because he was cooking the books and couldn't let a day pass without intervening lest his nefarious activity be discovered. The cost to Société Générale was €5bn (\$7.4bn). In its wake, banking regulation was put in place that requires employees to be out of the office and away from company systems for two consecutive weeks. The idea is that such disruptions will more easily uncover any irregular behavior. Fortunately, most employees are not up to such fraudulent activity, but required vacation

can nonetheless confer benefit by shaping organizational culture and enhancing organizational resilience that is garnered when employees cross-train to cover for each other.

**4. Company-wide closure policy?** Many countries in Europe have policies that protect the “right to disconnect.” These policies mean that employees can disconnect from work during holidays (as well as evenings and weekends). But the right is not an obligation, and many employees report fear that exercising this right will result in diminished respect from the boss and reduced promotion opportunities. Another alternative, common in France, is to have a policy or practice of a company-wide holiday closure. The benefit of this practice is that everyone is in it together, and those on vacation are not missing meetings or slowing down the team. The result is two-fold: reduced stress while on vacation and upon return to work.

**5. Hybrid holidays?** The all-or-nothing framework of work versus vacation largely reflects the reality of the past. For previous generations, when you were at the beach, it was impossible to participate in meetings where the only option to connect with the office was an expensive long-distance call on a hotel landline. Particularly for the knowledge and service sectors today, the rise of remote work may also spawn a new type of holiday. Checking in with the office for a few hours each week while on vacation has the potential to make it more feasible to actually take a break and can reduce the stress of re-entry for many. Where feasible, it may be time to say goodbye to the binary framework of work versus vacation. The challenge will be maintaining boundaries so that the mental health benefits of vacation are not lost.

*I am experimenting with a hybrid practice of vacationing beginning today. Last year, I took two swings at it. I flunked big time and wound up working too much the first round. I was still a newbie, but did better a few months later. In the spirit of practice makes perfect, I hope that I figure out this hybrid option so that I can take a few weeks off and still enjoy the mental health benefits of vacation. I know I will have lots of fun activities and distractions on deck this time around thanks to the upcoming wedding for my oldest son. More on that when I return in September!*