UNPLUGGED

How well do school leaders switch off?

Report 2025

Introduction

This report summarises the results of the first ever global study into how well school leaders switch off.

School leaders bring an undeniable passion to their work. They invest time, energy, and emotion into helping students succeed, supporting staff and creating a positive environment for everyone. This dedication can come at a cost to their own wellbeing, however. The stress of the role can take a significant toll on leaders' mental, physical, and emotional health, and for some can lead to burnout. This is why learning to switch off from work is a necessity.

Studies show psychological detachment to be the central experience of work recovery that allows individuals to reduce the risk of burnout.

Just as your body requires sleep to recover physically, the mind needs periods of detachment to recover from the mental demands of work. When you actively disconnect, you are giving your mind the chance to restore and rejuvenate.

Disconnecting allows your brain to process information, consolidate memories, and reorganise thoughts. This leads to improved performance when you return to work.

Regular detachment from work also reduces the levels of stress hormones in the body, improving the immune system, making it easier to fight off illness and reducing the chances of developing heart disease and a range of other physical and mental health conditions.

There is a tendency among educators to push through to the holidays, but we know from the research that the benefit of a holiday only lasts 2-3 weeks. It is, therefore, crucial that leaders are engaging in psychological detachment regularly and frequently if they are to be fit to serve their school communities.

This study looks at how well school leaders are switching off in schools around the world. Are they able to psychologically detach in the evenings, at weekends and during the holidays? What is preventing them from switching off effectively? What support are they receiving and what strategies do they have to help them to switch off? Are they concerned about their inability to properly detach and the impact this may be having on their health, home life and work? What further support and strategies do they need?

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Summary

The findings from this study highlight significant challenges faced by school leaders in switching off from work and maintaining healthy home-work boundaries. The data suggest that, for many, work-related thoughts and responsibilities extend well beyond the school day and permeate many aspects of their lives.

Most respondents start the day with work-related thoughts and struggle to switch off sufficiently to fall asleep at night. Less than a third say they find it easy to relax when they are not working.

So why is this? Most leaders in the study report working long hours, and also describe their work as emotionally intense. A large majority say they engage in work-related communications outside of school hours and struggle to overcome work related rumination.

Only a quarter of respondents feel they have good home-work boundaries, while only a third say they have effective strategies to help them to switch off outside of work. Most report being unable to look after their own needs without feeling guilty.

The consequences of this inability to disconnect are widely felt. Most respondents worry that it is affecting their health and wellbeing, and most also have concerns about their quality of life. Nearly half worry it is affecting the quality of their work.

Overall, the findings paint a picture of a workforce struggling to disconnect from the demands of their roles. The inability to switch off appears to be deeply ingrained in the working lives of school leaders, with implications not only for their personal health and wellbeing but also for the effectiveness and sustainability of their leadership.

28%
find it easy to relax when they are not working

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Literature

What "switching off" means
Psychological detachment refers to mentally disengaging from work during non-work time — deliberately ceasing work-related thoughts and activities so that recovery can occur. It is the most important of four recognised work recovery experiences, alongside relaxation, mastery, and control (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007).

Detachment enables individuals to replenish depleted mental and emotional resources and is essential for maintaining energy and performance. Subsequent research has shown that detachment is influenced by job demands, including the emotional intensity of work and home-work boundary management. (Sonnentag, 2018).

Why detachment matters
A substantial body of research demonstrates that effective detachment is crucial for sustaining wellbeing and preventing burnout. Meta-analyses indicate a strong negative relationship between psychological detachment and emotional exhaustion (Wendsche and Lohmann-Haislah, 2017).

More recent studies have confirmed that employees who are able to detach report better sleep quality, reduced stress, and higher overall life satisfaction (Baktash, Khan and Malik, 2025; Blake, Smith and Patel, 2025). These findings consistently suggest that detachment is a protective factor, supporting both mental health and professional effectiveness.

Barriers to switching off
Research has identified a number of factors that make psychological detachment difficult to achieve.

Work demands
Extended working hours and fast-paced, emotionally demanding roles are among the strongest predictors of poor detachment and burnout. Studies show that an organisational "overwork climate" is associated with lower psychological detachment and higher emotional exhaustion (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė, Urbanavičiūtė and Skučaitė-Barauskienė, 2023). Similarly, intensified job demands — including time pressure and decision-making complexity — make it harder for employees to mentally disengage from work (Minkkinen, Kinnunen and Feldt, 2021).

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Constant digital accessibility
The expectation to remain available outside of working hours further erodes detachment. Research consistently shows that after-hours email and messaging use interferes with recovery and contributes to fatigue and exhaustion (Tedone, Rees and Briner, 2022; Chen, Li and Park, 2024). Constant connectivity has been shown to negatively impact wellbeing by preventing mental and emotional disengagement from work (Büchler, Terrier and Sommer, 2020).

Poor home–work boundaries
When boundaries between work and home are blurred, switching off becomes particularly challenging. Poor boundary management, particularly around technology use, reduces detachment and disrupts sleep (Barber and Jenkins, 2014). Similarly, poor family boundaries, where work frequently intrudes into personal life, are linked to higher work–home conflict and lower detachment (Žiedelis, Vasiliauskaitė and Liobikienė, 2022).

Work related rumination
Persistent work-related rumination — replaying or anticipating work events — is also a key barrier, keeping individuals cognitively connected to work even during leisure time (Sonnentag, 2018).

Enablers to switching off
Several studies identify practical and organisational enablers that support switching off.

Workday breaks
Recovery experiences within the working day help buffer the effects of job demands. Virtanen et al. (2021) found that meaningful breaks — those involving detachment, relaxation, and reflection — improved mood and wellbeing later in the day and evening. Similarly, Sianoja et al. (2022) showed that employees who took lunchtime walks in natural environments were more likely to engage in recovery-promoting activities during the evening, suggesting that the benefits of daytime breaks extend beyond the workday.

Support
Emotional and organisational support also play an important role in reducing rumination and promoting recovery. Perceived organisational support has been shown to weaken the link between work-related rumination and burnout (Qin, Zhang and Yu, 2025), while work-based social support is associated with lower levels of rumination and greater psychological detachment (Song, Li and Tsai, 2022). Supportive relationships therefore help employees process emotional demands and let go of work concerns more effectively.

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Time away from work

Longer breaks, such as holidays, also promote recovery — but only temporarily. Research indicates that the wellbeing benefits of holidays typically fade within two to three weeks of returning to work (Nawijn, 2010), while the positive effects of weekend breaks often diminish by the middle of the following workweek (Yan, de Bloom and Halpenny, 2023). Sustained recovery, therefore, depends on regular and frequent work recovery experiences rather than occasional time off.

School leaders

Although research on school leaders and psychological detachment is limited, existing studies reveal similar patterns to those found in other professions. Leadership roles are characterised by long hours, high emotional demands, and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life (Kelly, 2017).

School administrators have also been found to experience significant emotional labour and burnout, often linked to the need for constant accessibility by staff, parents, and governing bodies (Coşkun, Yildiz and Aksoy, 2025).

Overall, the literature consistently highlights that psychological detachment is essential for wellbeing and sustainable performance. Yet, it is undermined by long working hours, emotionally intense work, constant digital connectivity, and poor home–work boundaries. Facilitating switching off requires both individual strategies — such as taking restorative breaks and engaging in recovery-focused activities — and organisational actions, including fostering supportive cultures and setting clearer boundaries around availability. These lessons are particularly relevant to school leaders, whose roles involve continuous responsibility and high emotional demand, making psychological detachment both vital and challenging.

11%
take regular breaks during the workday

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Research Methods

A link to an online survey was posted to school leader groups on LinkedIn (5 groups) and Facebook (4 groups) on 21 April 2025, inviting leaders to take part. The survey was also posted on my own feed in LinkedIn, where I have over 20,000 followers. In addition, I reached out to my personal and professional connections, working in a range of school sectors globally, inviting them to participate and asking them to share the survey with colleagues.

Respondents were invited to input their email address at the start of the survey so that the research report could be shared with them. No other personal or demographic information was requested. This was a conscious decision to keep the survey short and quick to complete for busy school leaders.

579 respondents took part in a 25 question survey, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

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Survey Monkey was used to collect data. Quantitative data was analysed using the built-in tools. For qualitative data, a Survey Monkey thematic analysis was combined with a manual analysis to produce the final themes.

More details about the ethics of the study can be obtained on request.

37%
look after their own needs without feeling guilty

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Findings

This section presents the key findings from the research, based on responses from 579 school leaders. The data provide an in-depth picture of how well school leaders are able to switch off from work and the factors that influence their ability to do so.

The findings highlight the extent to which leaders remain mentally and emotionally connected to work outside of working hours, how they use their free time, and the impact that this has on their wellbeing, personal lives, and professional effectiveness. They also explore the conditions that make switching off particularly difficult and the strategies leaders use to create home-work boundaries and overcome rumination.

To provide a clear structure, the findings are presented in five sections.

A. How well do leaders switch off?
Explores the extent to which leaders are able to detach from work-related thoughts and activities during non-work time, including evenings, weekends, and holidays.

B. How do leaders spend their free time?
Looks at how leaders use their leisure time and whether they are able to engage in activities that promote rest, recovery, and wellbeing.

C. The workday and environment
Examines the demands of the working day, including workload, emotional intensity, and opportunities for breaks during work hours.

D. Boundaries and strategies
Considers the boundaries leaders set between work and home, and the strategies they use to switch off and manage the psychological/emotional demands of their roles.

E. Impact of not switching off
Highlights the perceived effects of poor detachment from work on leaders' health, wellbeing, home life, and professional performance.

Together, these sections provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which school leaders are able to switch off, the barriers and enablers that prevent and help them to do so, and the personal and professional consequences that result.

## 26%
have good
home-work boundaries

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How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
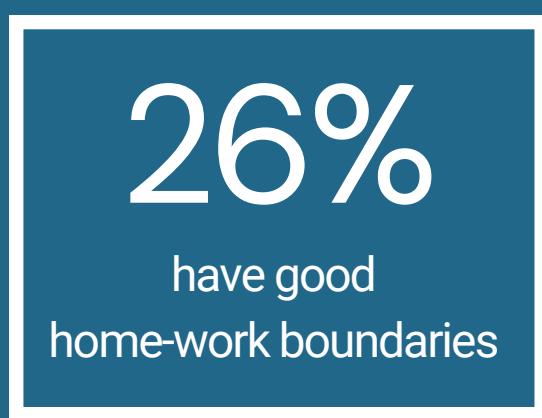
A. How well do leaders switch off?

1.I start the day with non-work thoughts
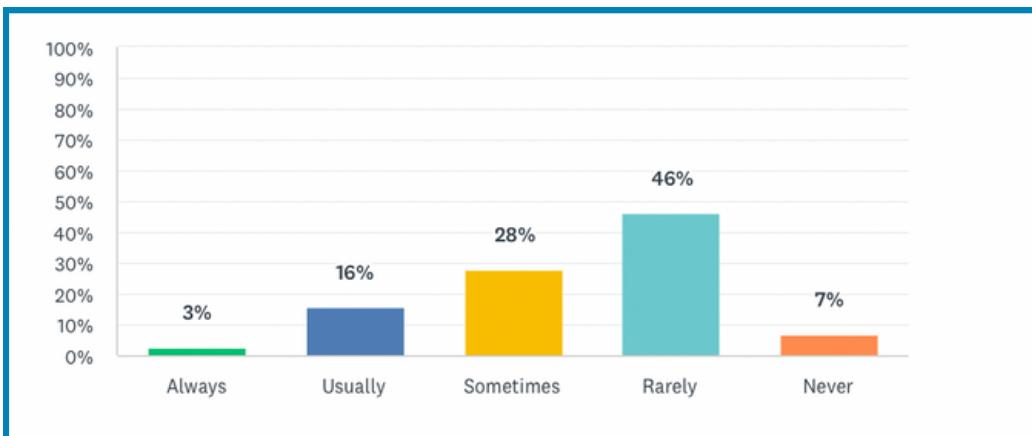
## 2. I switch off work-related thoughts in the evenings
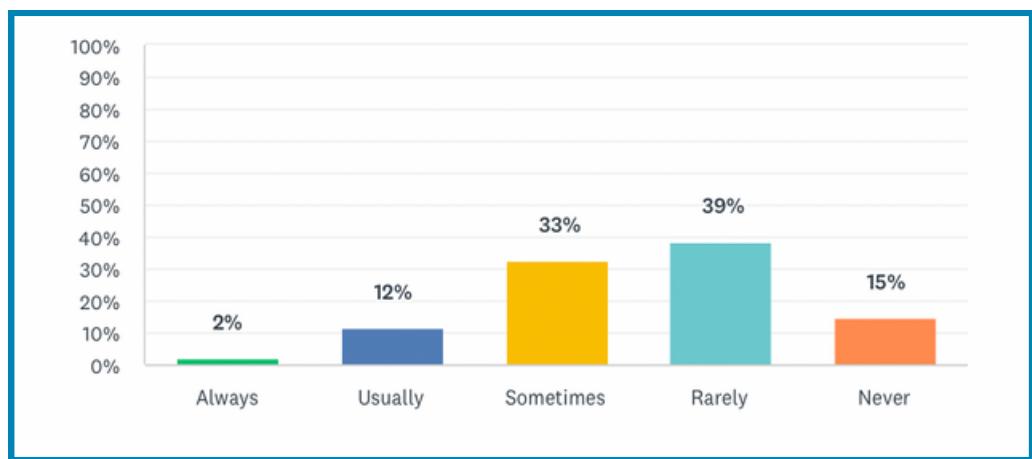
3. I switch off work-related thoughts at weekends

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
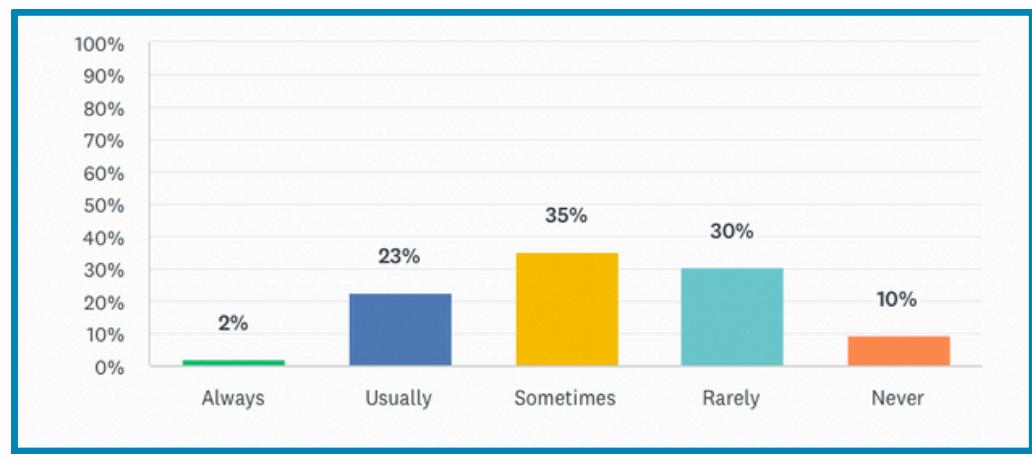
4. I switch off work-related thoughts in the holidays
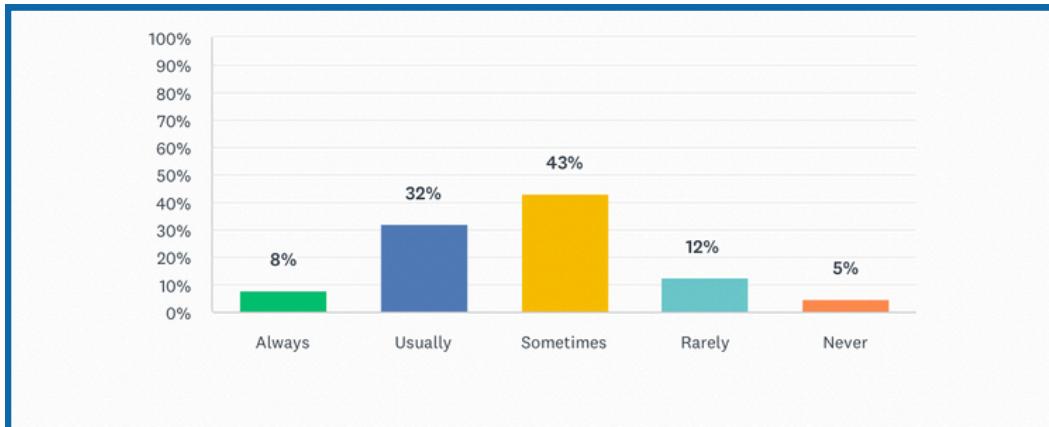
5. I am able to switch off and get a good night's sleep

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
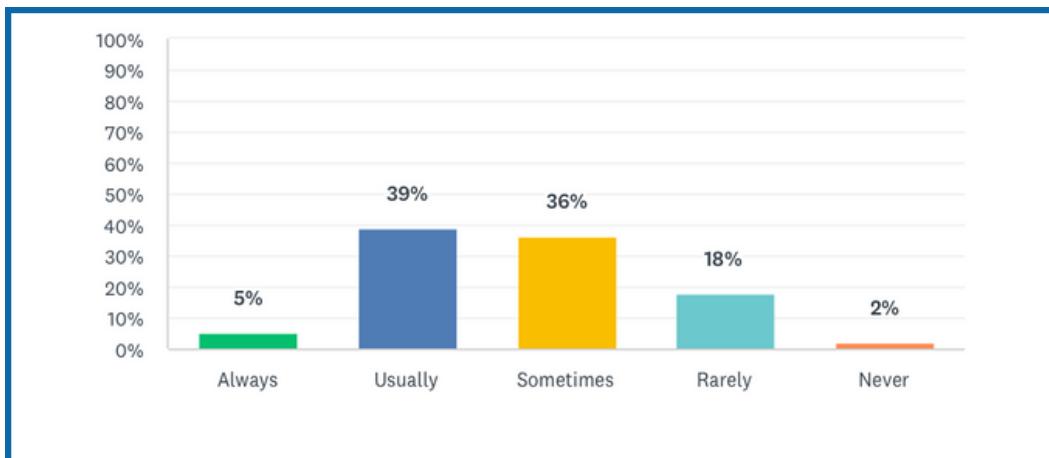
Section A Summary

This section looks at how well respondents switch off in their non-work time. It paints a picture of leaders struggling to switch off work-related thoughts during non-work time, especially at the start of the day, in the evenings and at weekends.

- Over half of respondents rarely or never start the day with non-work thoughts while only a fifth always or usually do.

- Over half of respondents rarely or never switch off in the evenings, while only 14% say they always or usually do.

- Two-fifths of respondents say they rarely or never switch off at weekends, while only a quarter say they always or usually do.

- While 40% always or usually manage to switch off during the holidays, 17% say they rarely or never do.

- 45% of respondents always or usually switch off and get a good nights sleep, while 20% say they rarely or never do.

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# B. How do leaders spend their free time?

6. I avoid work-related calls, messages, and emails outside of school hours
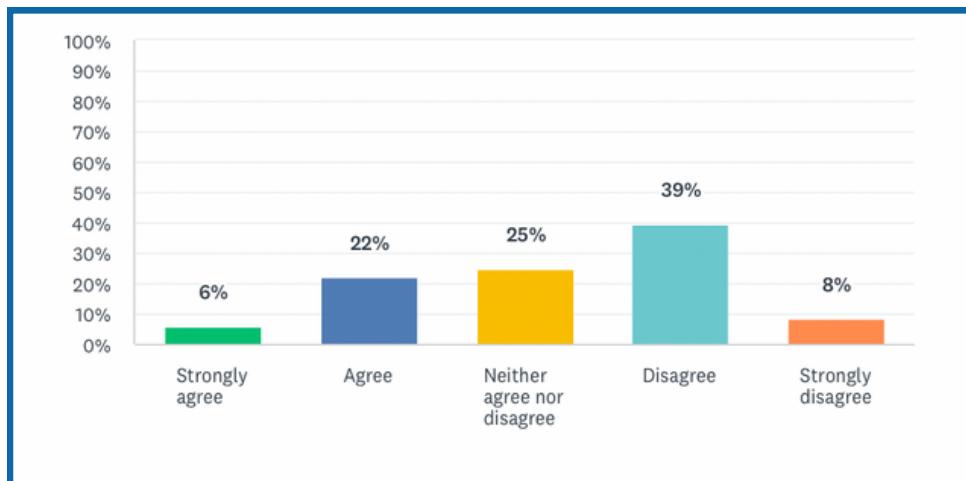
## 7. I enjoy my free time without worrying about work
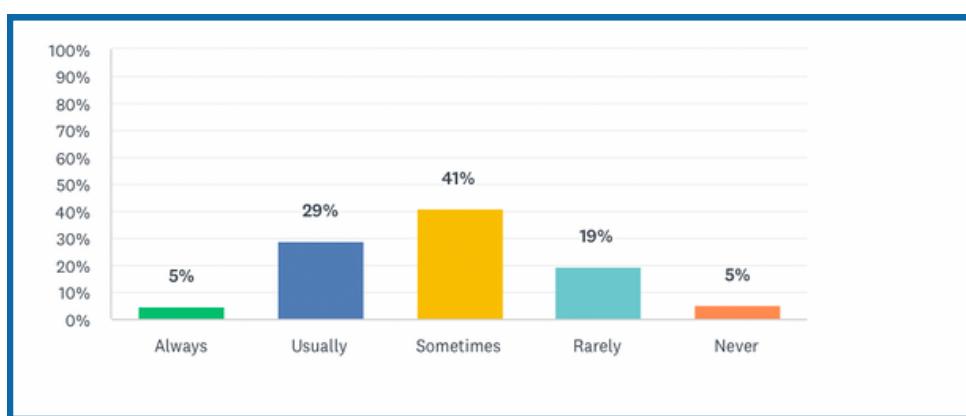
8. I spend my free time doing activities I genuinely enjoy

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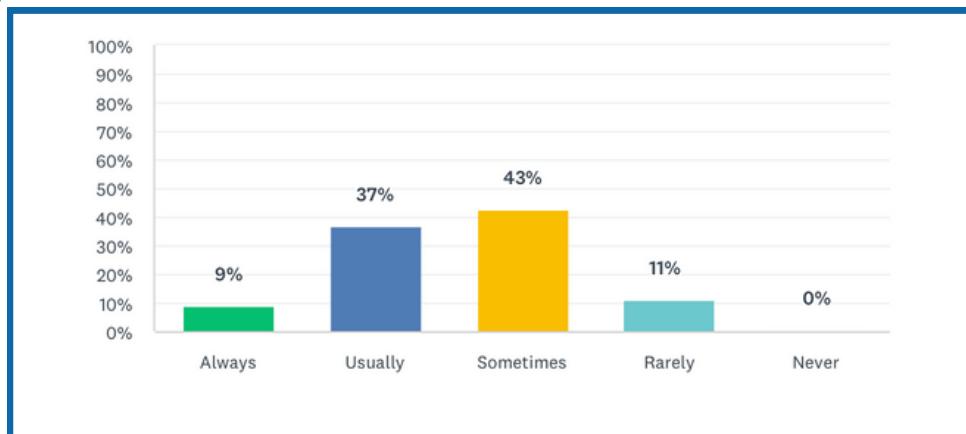
9. I find it easy to relax when I am not working

Strongly agree: 6%
Agree: 22%
Neither agree nor disagree: 25%
Disagree: 39%
Strongly disagree: 8%
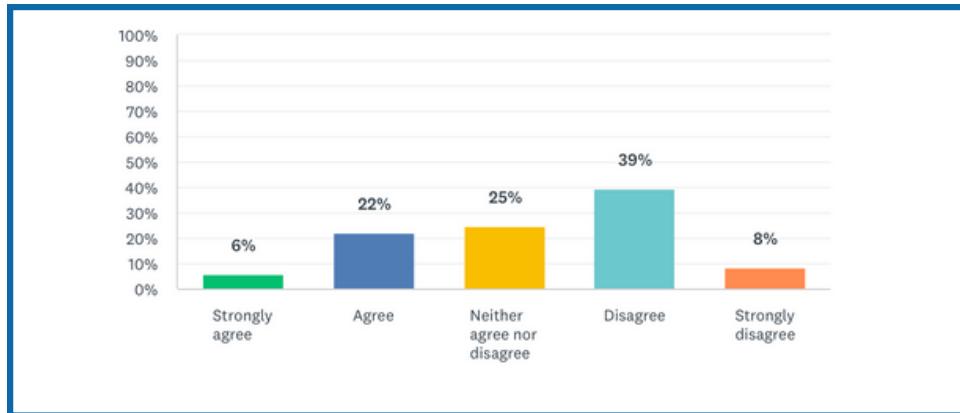
10. I engage in hobbies or non-work activities that give me a sense of purpose or achievement

Always: 9%
Usually: 35%
Sometimes: 34%
Rarely: 20%
Never: 3%
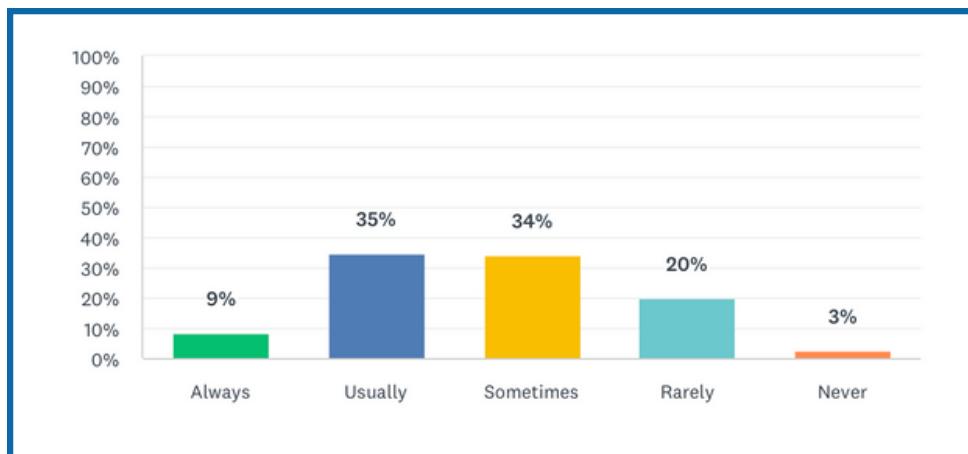
11. I look after my own needs without feeling guilty

Strongly agree: 7%
Agree: 30%
Neither agree nor disagree: 16%
Disagree: 39%
Strongly disagree: 9%

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How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
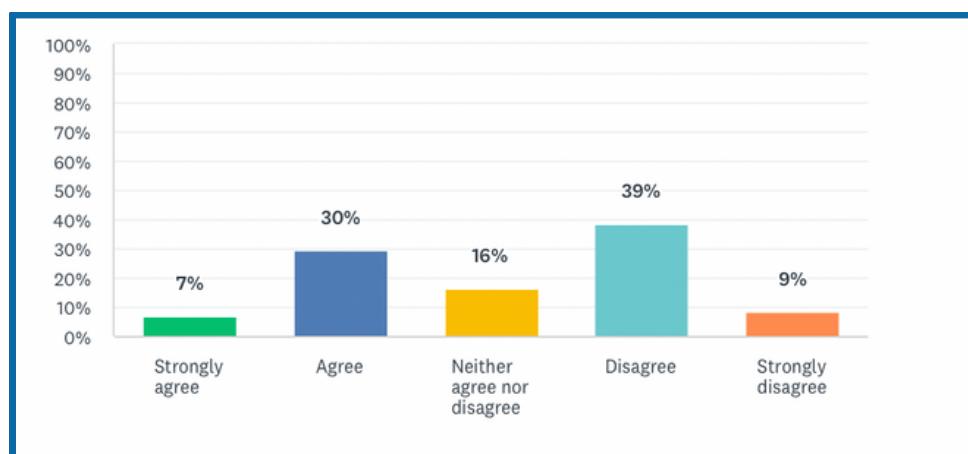
12. In my non-work time I ruminate on things that have happened during the day or things that might happen in the future
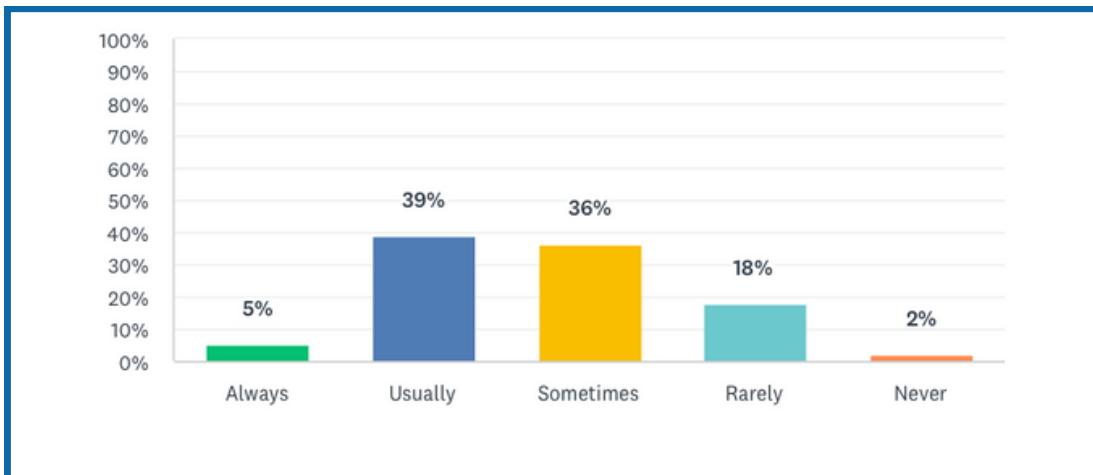
13. I ruminate on the following

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
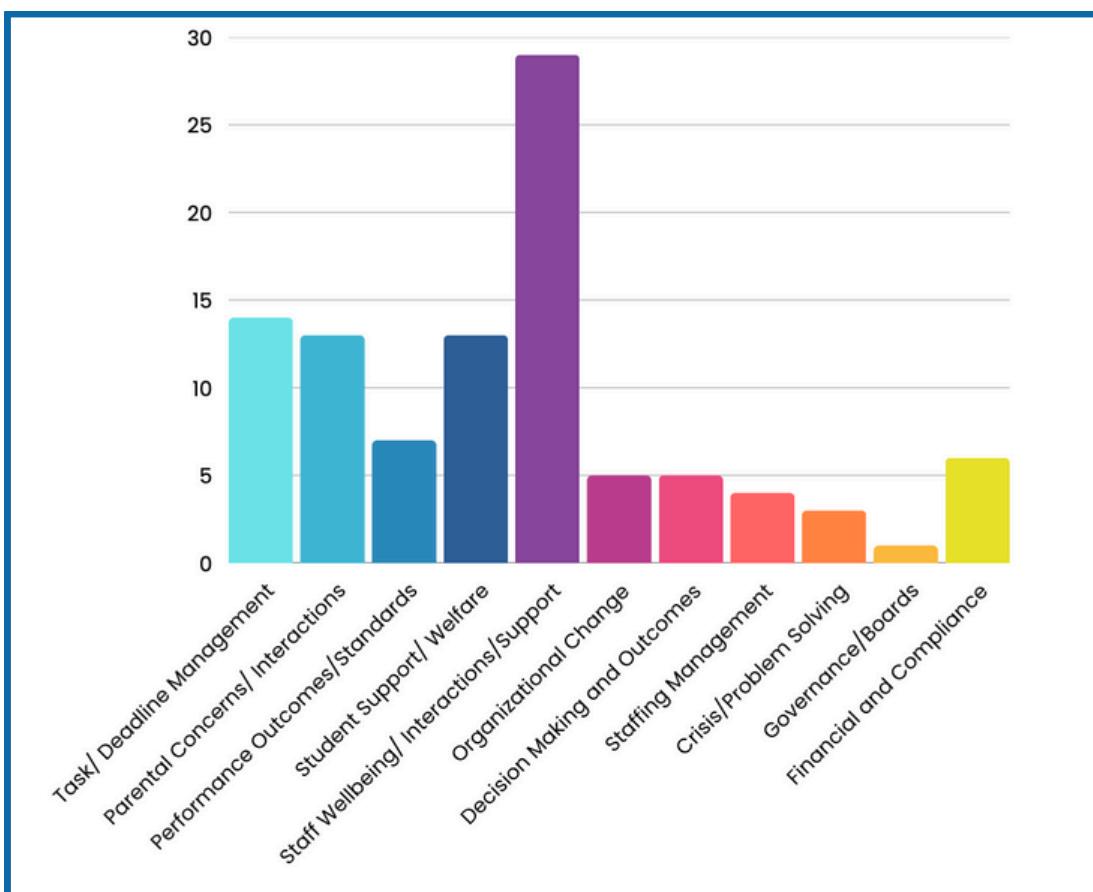
Section B Summary

This section looks at how respondents spend their non-work time. It shows that while many respondents enjoy their free time and engage in activities that they find rewarding, their personal time is marred by work-related communications and worrying about work. This means leaders are unable to properly relax and prioritise their own needs.

- Less than a third of respondents say they avoid work-related communications outside of school hours.

- Only a third always or usually enjoy their free time without worrying about work, while nearly a quarter rarely or never do.

- Only 28% of respondents always or usually find it easy to relax when they are not working, while 47% say they rarely or never do.

- Only 37% say they can look after their own needs without feeling guilty and nearly half say they cannot.

- 44% of respondents say they always or usually ruminate on things that have happened during the day or on things that might happen, while only 20% rarely or never ruminate.

When asked to identify the things that they ruminate on the most, staff-related matters came out on top - including staff interactions, looking after staff wellbeing and providing support for staff. Task and deadline management was the second most ruminated over, followed by student and parent related matters.

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C. The workday and environment

14. I take regular breaks during my workday
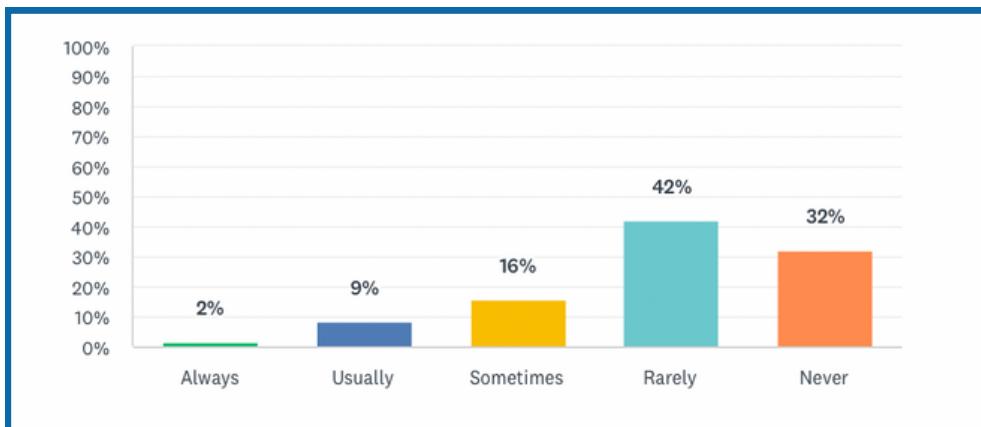
15. I work long hours
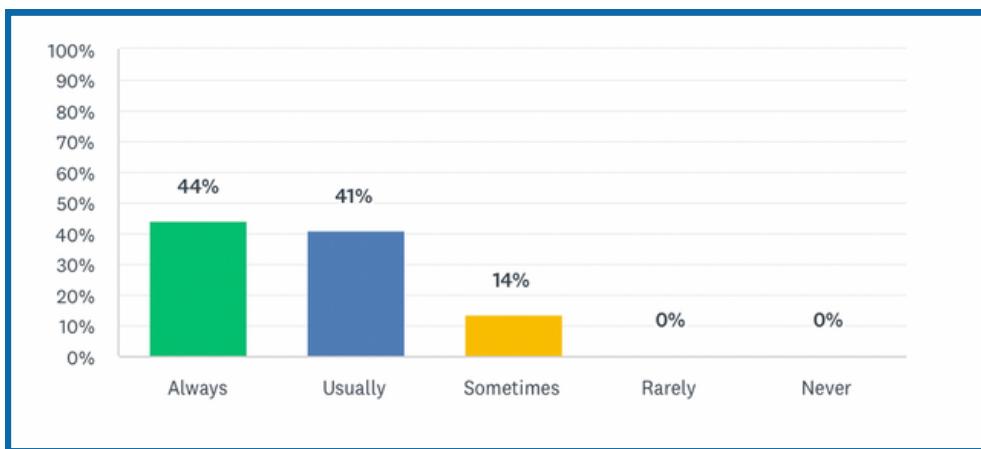
16. My work is emotionally intense

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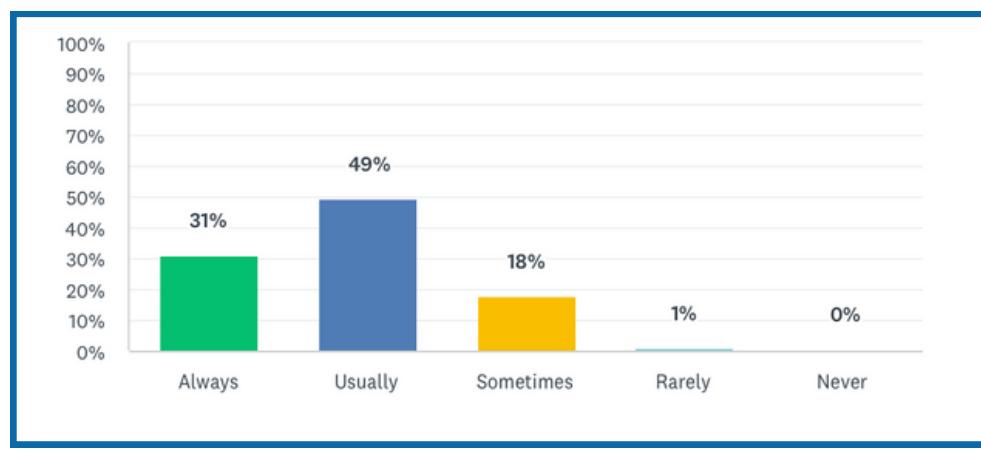
17. I have someone I can get emotional support from when work gets overwhelming

Bar chart:
- Always: 24%
- Usually: 32%
- Sometimes: 26%
- Rarely: 14%
- Never: 4%
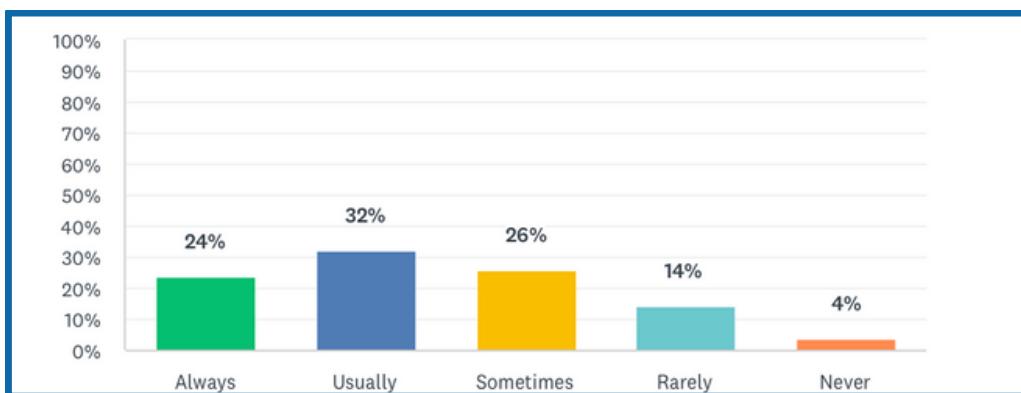
18. I receive emotional support in the form of

Bar chart:
- None of the above: 3%
- Professional coaching: 21%
- Mentoring: 9%
- Formal supervision: 9%
- Peer coaching: 5%
- Networking with othe...: 37%
- Support from colleagues ...: 63%
- Support from friends: 55%
- Support from family: 74%
- Support from former coll...: 42%

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
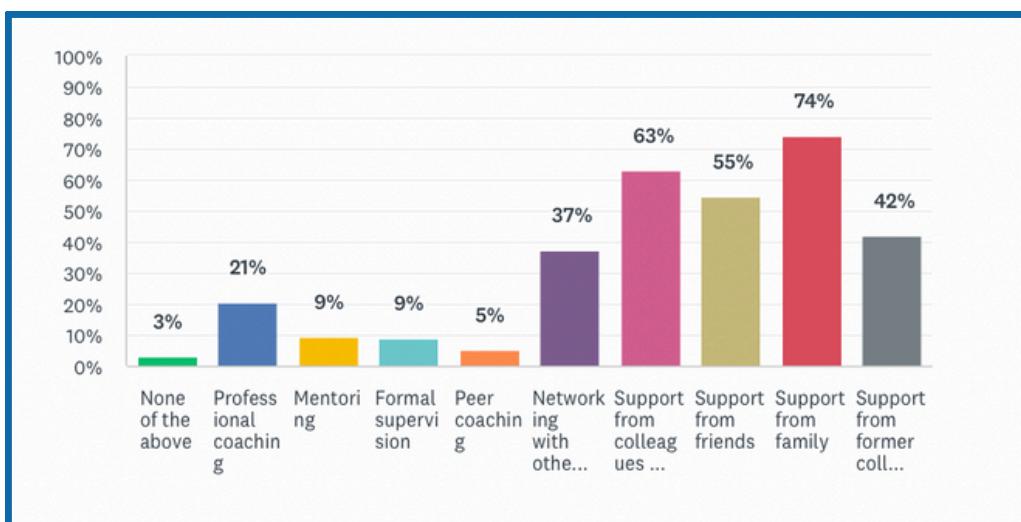
19. What kind of emotional support would you like to have?

Listening/Debriefing 10.5%
Counselling/Therapy 14.3%
Peer Support 9.5%
Coaching 31.4%
Mentoring 11.4%
Supervision 18.1%
Networking 4.8%
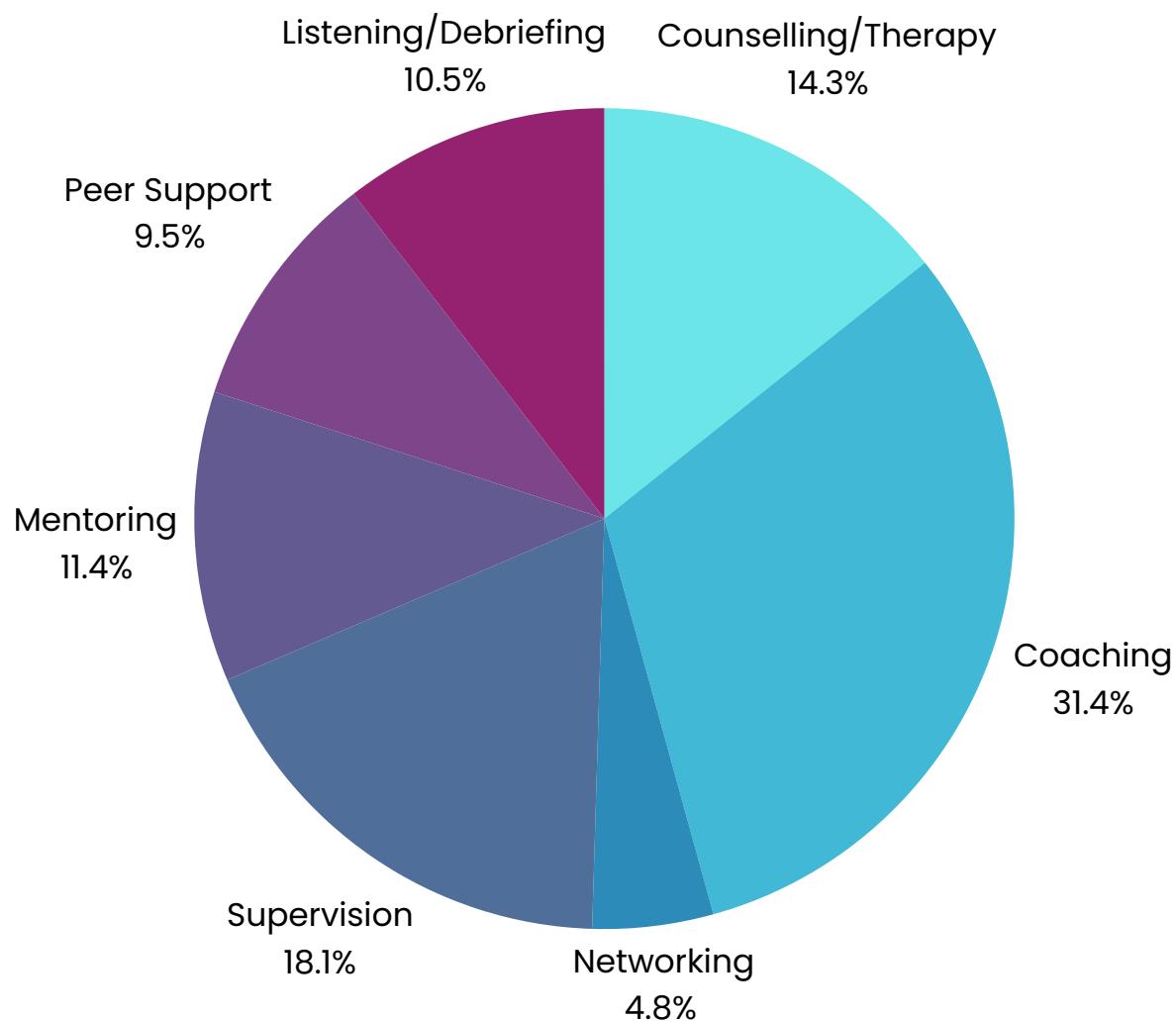
> *"I need more genuine connection with people who are kind, and share common goals."*

> *"It would be helpful to develop more proactive tools of some sort instead of just the reactive support resources I have."*

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"I would like validation of my feelings and ways to feel less guilty saying no."

"! definitely need emotional support. I have no one at work I can turn to and I don't want to bother friends who are in similar positions."

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Section C Summary

This section looks at the nature of the workday and the work environment. It shows how the working conditions of leaders is not conducive to switching off outside of working hours.

- Three quarters of respondents say they rarely or never take regular breaks during the workday. Only 11% always or usually do.

- 82% say they always or usually work long hours.

- 80% say their work is always or usually emotionally intense.

This sections also looks at the kinds of emotional support that leaders receive to help them to cope with the demands of their work and the type of support they would like to receive.

- Over half of respondents always or usually receive emotional support when things get overwhelming, but almost a fifth say they rarely or never receive emotional support.

- Three quarters receive support from family, 55% from friends, 63% from colleagues and 42% from former colleagues. Professional support is much less common with only 21% receiving professional coaching, 9% receiving formal supervision and 9% receiving mentoring.

- Of those respondents who said they would like to receive more emotional support nearly a third would like to receive professional coaching, 18% formal supervision, 14% counselling or therapy and 11% would like to have a mentor.

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D. Boundaries and Strategies

20. I have good work-home boundaries in place
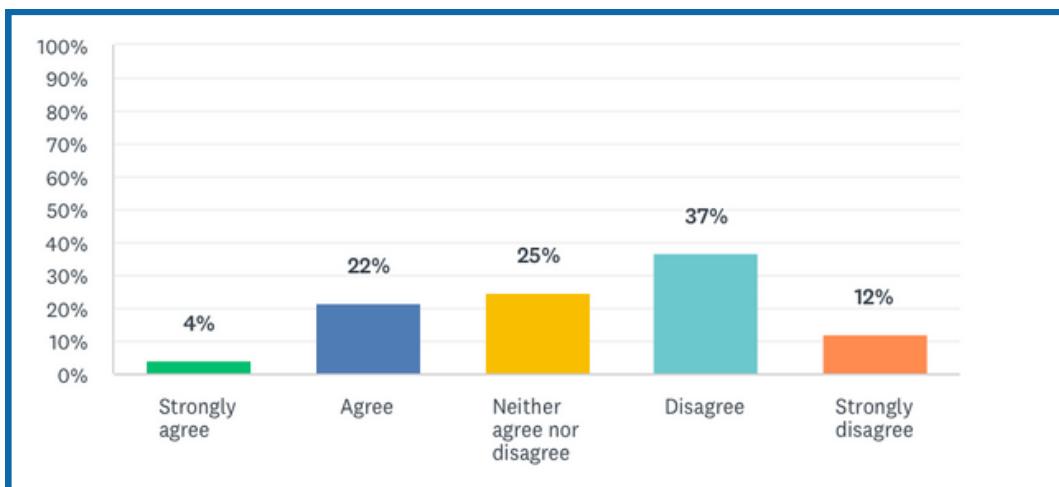
21. I have strategies to help me to switch off that work for me

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
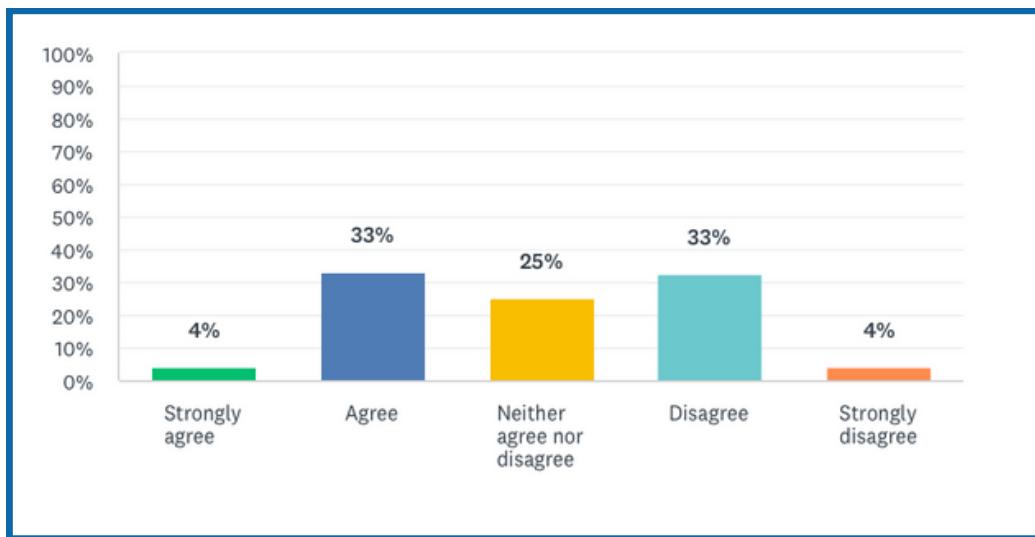
22. The following strategies help me switch off best

- Leisure Entertainment 12%
- Work Management 7.2%
- Relaxation Techniques 4.8%
- Hobbies 19.3%
- Digital Disconnection 12%
- Time with Friends/Family 19.3%
- Physical Exercise 25.3%

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
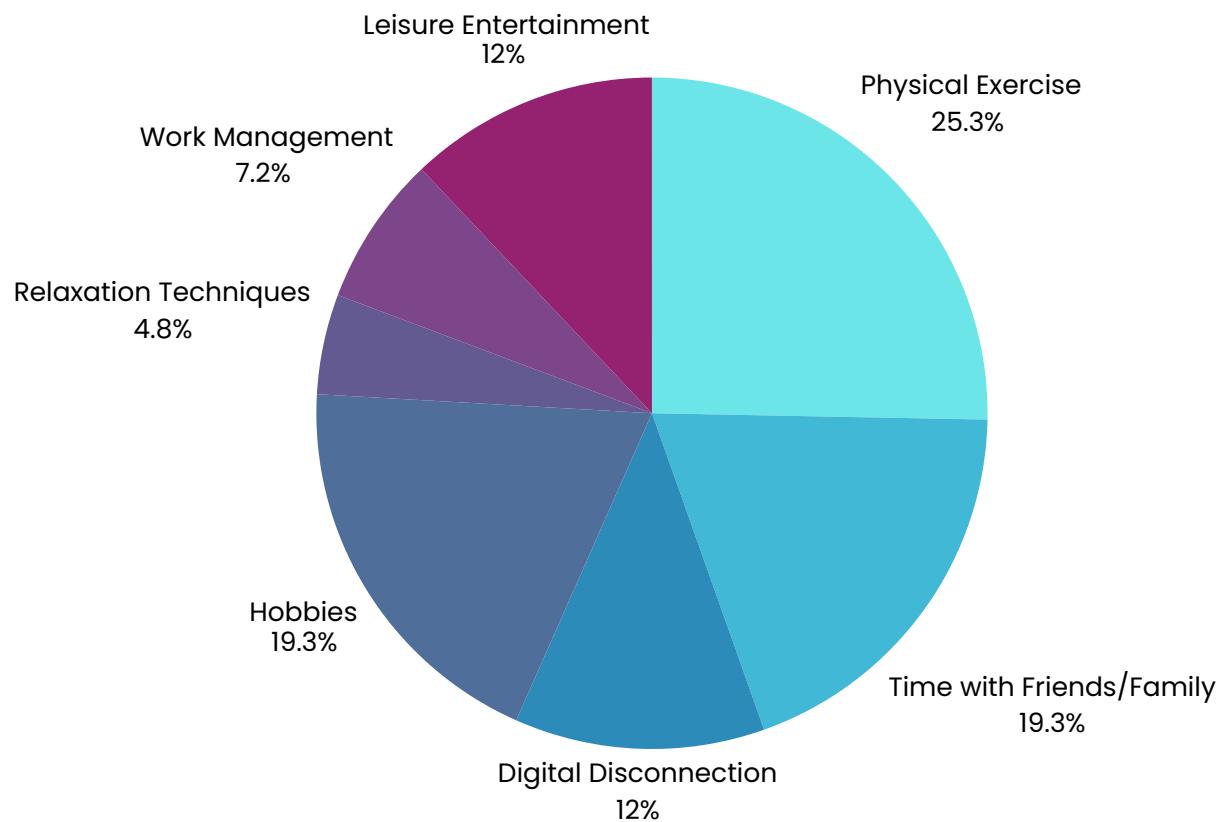
Section D Summary

This section looks at the extent to which leaders have home-work boundaries and strategies that support them in switching off. It highlights how few respondents feel they have good boundaries or strategies in place.

- Just over a quarter of respondents say they have good home-work boundaries, while nearly half say they do not.

- 37% of respondents say they do have strategies to help them to switch off, while the same number say they do not.

Those who have effective strategies were asked to identify them. Strategies broadly fell into seven categories as outlined in question 22 above.

- A quarter of respondents identified physical exercise as an effective strategy.

- A fifth identified spending time with family and friends.

- A fifth identified one or more hobbies and pastimes.

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E. Impact of not switching off

23. I worry that the inability to switch off might be affecting my health and wellbeing

Bar chart:
- Strongly agree: 23%
- Agree: 48%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 17%
- Disagree: 11%
- Strongly disagree: 1%
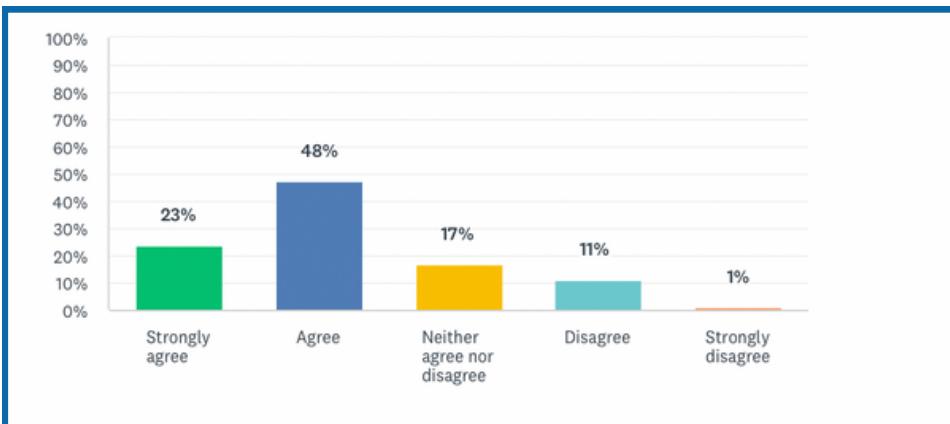
24. I worry that the inability to switch off might be affecting my quality of life

Bar chart:
- Strongly agree: 24%
- Agree: 52%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 12%
- Disagree: 11%
- Strongly disagree: 1%
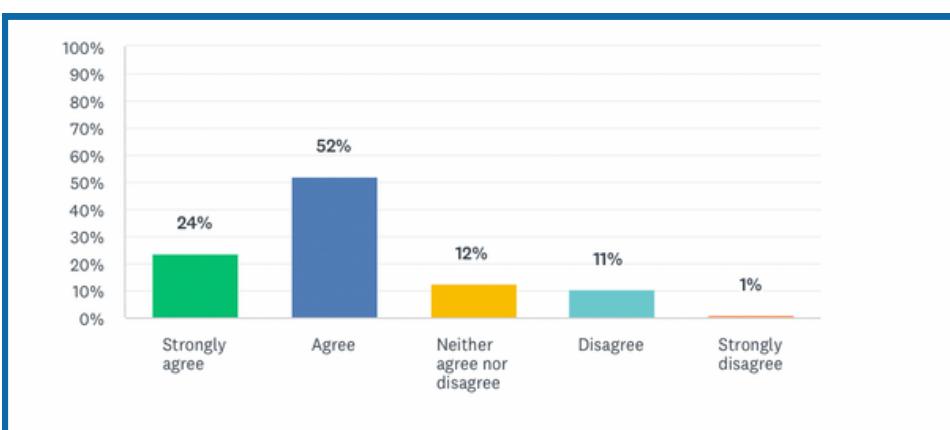
25. I worry that the inability to switch off might be affecting the quality of my work

Bar chart:
- Strongly agree: 8%
- Agree: 35%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 22%
- Disagree: 29%
- Strongly disagree: 6%

How well do school leaders switch off? October 2025
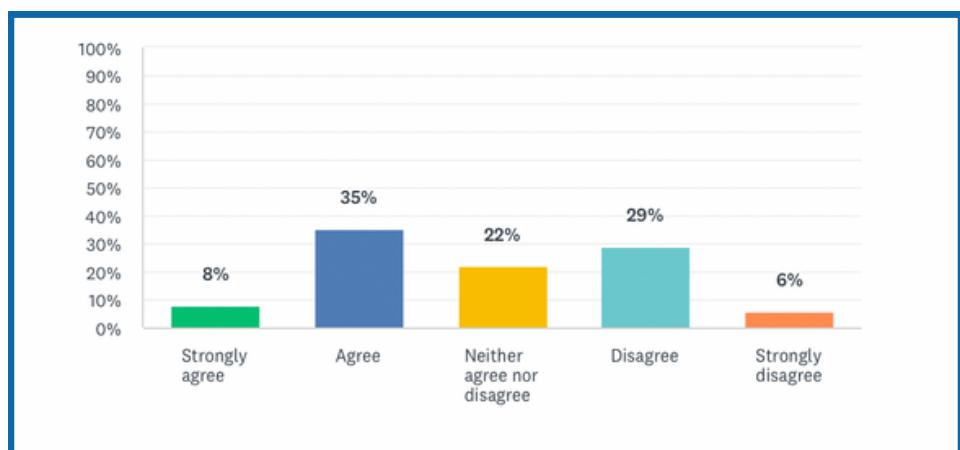
Section E Summary

This section looks at the extent to which leaders are concerned about the impact of not switching off in non-work time. It shows the majority of respondents to be worried about the effect on their health, wellbeing and quality of life, with smaller, but still significant, numbers being worried about the impact on their work.

- 71% of respondents are concerned that an inability to switch off might be affecting their health and wellbeing.

- Three quarters have are concerned it might be affecting their quality of life.

- 43% are concerned is might be affecting the quality of their work.

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25. Additional Comments

"I find that I have to very mindful and intentional in order to switch-off properly. I have to schedule out my week with activities other than work, otherwise I sit on the couch, stare at a screen and ruminate. Having friends that are mostly in education doesn't help as these situations become normalised! We need a circle who work in other fields as well. I think this has been one of the most challenging aspects of moving into leadership."

"Burnout is a really serious thing, and I think it has to be a click in one's life to realise how serious it is, and to make switch."

While I may have strategies to help myself, I don't necessarily do them and frequently spend my evenings mindlessly scrolling or doing little bits of work - though not that effectively."

"Sometimes it is difficult to have a good night because I am so exhausted from the day. I need a better transition between work and home."

"There is a constant push and pull/grappling with prioritising my own wellbeing alongside home, work, aging parents, adult children etc. Throw a bit of menopause in there and it's even more interesting! I often struggle to prioritise myself and don't do things like get to the doctor when I need to."

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"I only learned very recently to switch off as much as possible. But it took me going through a mental health crisis to establish boundaries."

"I had a work burnout a year ago and I worry I'll fall into it again. I'm hoping the knowledge I've gained will help me avoid it. I need strategies. I fear that my new school pressure will not be supportive of a wellbeing focus."

"I know what I need to do then ignore it."

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Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this research paint a concerning picture of the current experience of school leadership. It is clear that most leaders are finding it difficult to switch off from work, both mentally and physically. For many, work-related thoughts begin the moment they wake up and continue late into the evening and across weekends. This inability to mentally detach from work also extends into the night, with many struggling to achieve consistent, restorative sleep.

Large numbers of leaders are unable to avoid work-related communications outside of school hours, and less than half find it easy to relax when they are not working. Many report that they regularly ruminate on events that have happened during the working day or worry about things that may happen in the future. Feelings of guilt are also common when leaders attempt to prioritise their own needs.

The demands of the role itself appear to reinforce these patterns. Most leaders are working long hours, often without taking regular breaks, and many describe their work as emotionally intense. Very few feel they have strong boundaries between home and work, and many feel they do not have effective strategies to help them switch off.

One of the most significant barriers to switching off is the constant accessibility created by digital devices. The expectation — whether explicit or internalised — to be available and responsive at all times means that the working day rarely has a clear end point. Smartphones, email, and messaging platforms allow work to intrude into evenings, weekends and holidays, making it harder for leaders to disconnect and creating a cycle of ongoing cognitive engagement with work. This "always available" culture is deeply ingrained in school leadership and often reinforced by the needs and expectations of staff, parents, and governing bodies.

The implications of this lack of psychological detachment are significant. Many leaders are concerned about the impact it is having on their health and wellbeing, their quality of life, and — for some — the quality of their work.

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While most have access to emotional support from friends, family, or colleagues, few are receiving structured or professional support, such as supervision or coaching, that might help them process the emotional demands of leadership more effectively.

Taken together, the research highlights five key barriers to switching off: long working hours, emotionally demanding work, poor home–work boundaries, persistent rumination, and constant digital accessibility. These factors combine to create a cycle of overwork and overthinking that is difficult to break. This cycle risks harming leaders' wellbeing, their effectiveness, and the sustainability of their roles.

Recommendations

Addressing these challenges requires action at both the individual and organisational levels. Supporting school leaders to switch off is not simply a matter of personal resilience — it is a strategic priority that underpins leadership sustainability, staff retention, student outcomes and the overall effectiveness of the school. The following approaches are recommended.

1. Enhance Professional Support

- Provide structured support such as coaching, formal supervision, and facilitated mentoring or networking opportunities.
- Ensure leaders have safe, confidential spaces to reflect on the emotional demands of their work and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

2. Strengthen Boundaries and Manage Digital Expectations

- Establish clear policies and shared expectations around communication outside of working hours.
- Model healthy behaviours at senior levels and encourage a culture that respects time away from work.
- Support leaders to establish personal and organisational routines that create psychological distance from work.

3. Equip Leaders with Practical Strategies

- Offer training and resources focused on techniques to reduce rumination, improve relaxation, and support mental detachment.
- Provide tools and approaches that help leaders to manage cognitive load and create mental space outside of work.

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4. Improve Working Conditions

- Review workload expectations, staffing models, and operational practices to make shorter working days possible.
- Encourage and enable leaders to take regular breaks during the workday to reduce stress and improve focus.

5. Reframe Self-Care as Leadership Practice

- Challenge the perception that prioritising personal wellbeing is a sign of weakness.
- Position self-care as a core component of effective and sustainable leadership — essential not just for individual leaders, but for the teams, students, and whole school communities.

> *"For more than 2 years now, after a very stressful job, I learned that the most important person in my life is me, since then, I meditate, I practice sport, and gratitude. I observed a huge difference, and I strongly believe that this is the right way. You cannot make anyone happy, unless you are happy."*

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Limitations and Future Research

As with any self-reported research, this study is subject to certain limitations. The most significant is the potential for participant bias. It is possible that many of the 579 respondents who chose to participate were individuals currently finding it difficult to switch off or experiencing high levels of stress. The experiences of the respondents may not, therefore, fully represent those of all school leaders.

A further limitation relates to my own researcher bias. As a practitioner within the field of educator wellbeing, my experiences and perspectives may have influenced the design, interpretation, or emphasis of certain aspects of the research. To minimise this, the survey questions were carefully designed to be neutral in tone and wording. Questions were phrased to focus on behaviours, routines, and experiences, rather than opinions or value judgments, to elicit honest and balanced reflections from participants. The content of the survey and this report were also reviewed by peers prior to distribution to check for neutrality.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the experiences of school leaders and highlight important patterns and issues that warrant further exploration. The consistency and clarity of the data suggest that, while the sample may not represent every school leader's experience, it nevertheless reflects genuine and widespread challenges across the profession.

Future research could build on these findings by examining specific interventions designed to help leaders switch off, or using qualitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of leaders' lived experiences.

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Conclusion

This research highlights a growing and concerning reality within school leadership - many school leaders are finding it difficult to switch off from work in their non-work time. For a large proportion, work-related thoughts and responsibilities extend far beyond the school day, permeating evenings, weekends, holidays. The pressures of long hours, emotional intensity, and constant digital accessibility have created conditions where psychological detachment from work is rare.

The inability to switch off has clear consequences. Leaders recognise the toll it is taking on their health, wellbeing, and quality of life — and many also worry about its impact on the quality and sustainability of their leadership.

Encouragingly, the research also points to areas of strength and possibility. Many leaders value the emotional support they receive from trusted colleagues and personal networks, and there is a growing recognition of the need for professional coaching, supervision, and mentoring as vital supports.

There is also a strong appetite for developing better strategies to relax, set boundaries, and reduce rumination — indicating that leaders want to make positive changes if given the right tools and conditions.

The findings suggest that while individual coping strategies can help, the core issues are systemic and cultural, requiring collective attention from schools, governing bodies, and the wider education community. Creating the conditions for leaders to switch off is not just a matter of personal wellbeing but is also a matter of professional responsibility.

Ultimately, switching off is not an act of disengagement, but of sustainability. It allows leaders to rest, regain perspective, and lead with clarity, compassion, and purpose. Schools that actively support their leaders to disconnect and recover are investing in the long-term stability and success of their entire communities.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the leaders who took part in this study.

Heartfelt thanks to the school leader community for their ongoing support of my work.

Dr Helen Kelly