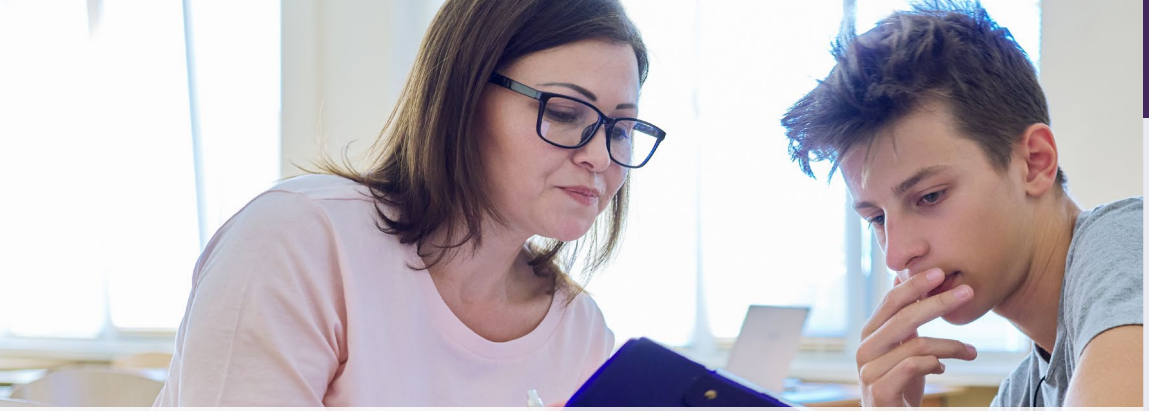

Leaving Work at Work

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
Therapists, case managers, counselors, outreach staff, nonprofit and social service providers.

Description
Human and community services work can stay with us long after the shift ends. Difficult stories, strong emotions, and unfinished problems can follow us home if we don't pause to process them. This short reflection helps signal to your mind that the workday is ending and that it is time to transition out of work mode.

When to Use

- At the end of a shift, especially after a difficult or emotionally heavy day
- When you find yourself still thinking about clients or cases after leaving work
- When you feel irritable, drained, or emotionally "stuck" and can't seem to shift gears
- Before stepping into your home or personal life so you aren't carrying work stress with you
- After responding to a crisis, trauma, or high-intensity situation

WORKPLACE STRESS

Human and community service workers regularly experience:

- Exposure to client trauma, crisis, and complex life circumstances
- Emotional labor and sustained empathy demands
- Unfinished or ongoing client needs
- High caseloads and systemic barriers
- Limited closure at the end of the workday

These conditions can lead to:

- Difficulty "turning off" after work
- Emotional carryover into personal life
- Compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress
- Sleep disruption and chronic stress accumulation

This reflection tool is a brief end-of-day practice designed to support psychological release from work by guiding you through reflection, acknowledging your emotions, and closing your workday.

THE PRACTICE

1. Acknowledge the Day

Write down one thing that challenged you today.

_____

Now write one thing you handled well.

_____

WHY THIS WORKS: Providing human services rarely feels perfect or done. Recognizing effort and small successes helps to create a more balanced view of the day.

2. Identify What You're Carrying

Sometimes emotions linger even after the shift is over. Finish this sentence: *One feeling I'm still holding from today is...*

_____

WHY THIS WORKS: Naming emotions can help reduce their intensity and make them easier to process.

continue on page 2...

THE PRACTICE

3. Decide What Comes Home

Ask yourself: What from today do I want to carry forward?

Examples:

- A lesson learned
- A positive moment
- Appreciation for helping someone
- A reminder of why the work matters

Write it here.

_____

Pause and notice how bringing this to mind feels in your body.

WHY THIS WORKS: Identifying and savoring a moment of gratitude or appreciation in your day helps to reset your nervous system.

4. Close the Workday

Take a slow breath.

Remind yourself: *The workday is finished. I can return to it tomorrow.*

Allow your attention to shift toward the next part of your day.

WHY THIS WORKS: Creating small end-of-day rituals can help reduce stress and make it easier to mentally disconnect from work.

WHY THIS HELPS

This tool creates a brief but intentional pause that signals to your nervous system that it is safe to step out of "caregiver mode." Over time, building this habit helps protect against burnout and compassion fatigue by giving your mind and body a consistent cue that recovery time has begun.

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org
Looking to go deeper? Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community.
Check out the website here for additional details.

Source:
This tool was informed by research on emotional processing, boundary setting, and psychological detachment from work, including studies on occupational recovery and stress management in helping professions (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Figley, 2002).