

THE EXECUTIVE GUIDE TO

Being Present

& Learning to Switch Off

A research-backed workbook for high-functioning leaders who want to stop living in the next meeting, the next quarter, the next crisis — and start being here, now, with the people and moments that matter most.

Neuroscience • Psychological Detachment • Attention Residue • Practical Protocols

Contents

01. A Letter to the Leader Who Can't Switch Off
02. Why It's So Hard: The Neuroscience of the Always-On Brain
03. Attention Residue: The Invisible Tax on Your Presence
04. The Recovery Science: Why Switching Off Is a Performance Strategy
05. The Five Traps That Keep High Performers Stuck
06. The Presence Protocol: Seven Practical Strategies
07. Advanced Exercises for the Executive Mind
08. The Family Presence Playbook
09. Building Your Personal Switching-Off Architecture
10. References & Further Reading
11. Copyright & Disclaimer

01. A Letter to the Leader Who Can't Switch Off

You are not broken. Your brain is doing exactly what you trained it to do.

You built your career on a brain that never stops solving, anticipating, and optimising. That relentless cognitive engine is the reason you are in a leadership position today. But the very quality that makes you exceptional at work is now working against you at home, at the dinner table, during your child's bedtime story, and inside your own rest.

You are physically present but mentally composing tomorrow's board agenda. You hear your partner speaking but your mind is triaging Monday's crisis. Your child is telling you about their day and you are half-listening, half-strategising about a restructure. And somewhere beneath the noise, a quiet voice says: *"I'm missing it. I'm missing my life."*

This booklet is not about productivity hacks or generic mindfulness platitudes. It is a research-backed guide designed specifically for high-functioning leaders who understand that the inability to switch off is not a discipline failure — it is a **neurological pattern** that requires a specific, deliberate counter-strategy.

"The mind that got you here will not be the mind that lets you enjoy what you've built."

How to Use This Booklet

1. Read the science sections first. Understanding *why* switching off is so hard removes self-blame and creates motivation.
2. Choose 2–3 strategies from Section 06. Not all. Start with what resonates.
3. Complete the exercises in Section 07 with genuine effort. These are not theoretical — they are cognitive interventions.
4. Use the Family Presence Playbook (Section 08) to make changes visible to the people who matter most.
5. Build your personal architecture in Section 09. Systems beat willpower.

02. Why It's So Hard: The Neuroscience of the Always-On Brain

Your brain is not malfunctioning — it's operating in the wrong mode

To understand why switching off feels almost impossible, you need to understand three brain networks that govern where your attention goes.

The Three Networks

- 1. The Central Executive Network (CEN)** — This is your task-mode brain. It activates when you are solving problems, making decisions, planning, and executing. For most leaders, this network is overactive. It is the network that built your career, and your brain has spent decades strengthening it.
- 2. The Default Mode Network (DMN)** — This is your brain's "rest" network, but not rest in the sense of doing nothing. The DMN is active during self-reflection, emotional processing, social understanding, daydreaming, and mind wandering. It is the network that allows you to be present with another person, to reflect on meaning, and to connect emotionally. Research published in 2025 describes the DMN as crucial for self-reflection, emotional processing, social interaction, and mental exploration.
- 3. The Salience Network (SN)** — This is the "switchboard" that decides which of the other two networks should be active at any given moment. In healthy functioning, the SN smoothly toggles between CEN and DMN. In chronically stressed, high-performing individuals, the SN becomes biased toward keeping the CEN dominant, because the brain has learned that executive mode equals survival and success.

Sources: DMN Review (2025), MDPI Biology; 20 Years of the DMN, Neuron (2023); Rest to Promote Learning, PMC (2024)

The Leader's Paradox

The more successful you are, the stronger your CEN becomes. But the CEN and DMN are largely **anti-correlated** — when one is active, the other is suppressed. This means that every hour spent in executive problem-solving mode actively weakens your ability to be present, reflective, and emotionally connected. You haven't lost the capacity for presence — you have **under-exercised** the brain network that produces it.

Source: Crittenden, Mitchell & Duncan (2015), eLife; Mindful Leader Review, PMC (2024)

Why Your Brain Resists Switching Off

- a) Hypervigilance reward loop** — Your brain has been rewarded (promotions, revenue, recognition) for staying in threat-scanning, problem-solving mode. Switching off feels like lowering your guard.

- b) Identity fusion** — When your sense of self is deeply entwined with your role as a leader, switching off feels like switching off who you are.
- c) Cortisol habituation** — Chronic stress normalises elevated cortisol. Your baseline "calm" is actually someone else's "stressed." True relaxation now feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable.
- d) Absence of transition rituals** — There is no commute any more, no physical boundary. Your office is your kitchen table, your phone is your office, and your bedroom is your boardroom.

03. Attention Residue: The Invisible Tax on Your Presence

Why you can't "just be here" even when you want to

In 2009, researcher Sophie Leroy introduced the concept of **attention residue** — the phenomenon where thoughts from a previous task linger in your mind, affecting your ability to fully concentrate on the current activity. For leaders, attention residue is the invisible thief of presence.

Key Research Finding

Research by the American Psychological Association indicates that the effects of attention residue can last anywhere from **15 to 23 minutes** after switching tasks. Neuroscientific studies link this to the functioning of the prefrontal cortex. For leaders switching between high-stakes decisions all day, attention residue accumulates — by the time you sit down for dinner, you are carrying the residue of dozens of unresolved cognitive threads.

Source: Leroy (2009); APA research on task-switching; Neurolaunch (2024)

What This Looks Like at Home

1. Your child is telling you about school and you realise you haven't heard a single word.
2. Your partner asks a question and you respond with irritation — not at them, but at the interruption to the mental thread you were following.
3. You are at a family dinner but mentally rehearsing an investor call.
4. You "relax" by scrolling LinkedIn or checking Slack — activities that feel like rest but keep the CEN fully engaged.
5. You feel guilty about not being present, which creates additional cognitive load, making presence even harder.

The Compound Effect

Attention residue doesn't just affect one moment — it compounds. Each unfinished cognitive thread occupies working memory space, reducing the total bandwidth available for the present moment. By evening, your working memory is like a browser with 47 tabs open. No wonder you can't load the page your family is trying to show you.

Self-Assessment: Your Attention Residue Load

Rate each statement (1 = Rarely, 5 = Almost Always):

- I think about work problems during family time: ____
- I check my phone within 10 minutes of getting home: ____
- I mentally rehearse tomorrow's meetings during dinner: ____
- I feel unable to focus on a book, film, or conversation at home: ____
- I feel guilty about being distracted but can't seem to stop: ____
- I respond to personal conversations with work-mode brevity: ____

Score: 6–12 = Mild residue. 13–22 = Moderate. 23–30 = Severe — your presence is significantly impaired.

04. The Recovery Science

Why switching off is not laziness — it's a performance strategy

This section exists because many leaders carry a deep, often unconscious belief: "If I switch off, I'll fall behind." The research says the opposite. Switching off is how you stay ahead.

Sonnentag's Four Recovery Experiences

Professor Sabine Sonnentag's landmark research (University of Mannheim) identified four recovery experiences that are essential for wellbeing and sustained performance. Her Recovery Experience Questionnaire, validated across thousands of participants, remains the gold standard in occupational health psychology.

Recovery Experience	What It Means	Leader Example
1. Psychological Detachment	Mentally disengaging from work-related thoughts entirely.	Not checking email after 7pm. Truly "off."
2. Relaxation	Low-activation experiences that require little effort.	Listening to music, a bath, gentle stretching.
3. Mastery	Challenging non-work activities that provide achievement.	Learning guitar, cooking a complex meal, chess.
4. Control	Freedom to choose how you spend your time.	Deciding your own evening schedule, saying no.

Source: Sonnentag & Fritz (2007), *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, N=930

What the Evidence Shows

A 2025 study in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* using representative longitudinal data confirmed that psychological detachment from work is positively associated with happiness, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction, while reducing sadness, worry, and anger. Research consistently shows detachment is the single most powerful recovery experience, with the strongest associations with reduced burnout and improved mental health.

A 2025 study in *Behavioral Sciences* confirmed all four recovery experiences partially mediate the relationship between work-family conflict and wellbeing, with relaxation emerging as the strongest predictor.

Sources: *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2025); *Rest to Resist, PMC* (2025); Sonnentag (2024), *JOOP*

The Business Case for Switching Off

- **Gallup (2024):** 25% of leaders experience burnout often or always. Nearly two-thirds experience it at least sometimes.
- **Dow Chemical study:** Mindfulness training showed potential savings of up to \$22,000 per employee through reduced burnout and increased productivity.
- **Meta-analysis of 111 RCTs (2024):** Mindfulness interventions produce meaningful improvements in attention, executive function, and working memory — the exact capacities leaders need most.

Sources: Gallup State of the Global Workplace (2024); Workplace Peace Institute (2026); Administrative Sciences (2024)

05. The Five Traps That Keep High Performers Stuck

Patterns you won't find in generic self-help books

These traps are specific to high-functioning, leadership-level individuals. They are not character flaws — they are adaptive strategies that have become maladaptive.

Trap 1: The Indispensability Illusion

The belief that everything will fall apart if you stop monitoring. This is reinforced every time you catch a problem early or prevent a disaster. Your brain logs the save but not the hundreds of times things were fine without your intervention. The result: you check your phone at 11pm "just to be safe" because your brain genuinely believes safety requires your constant vigilance.

Trap 2: Productive Guilt

The deep discomfort of doing nothing when you "could" be doing something useful. For many leaders, rest triggers guilt, and guilt triggers the urge to be productive. Evenings become a covert work session disguised as "just catching up on emails." The nervous system never resets because it never gets permission to.

Trap 3: The Stimulation Addiction

After years of high-stakes, fast-paced decision-making, ordinary life feels understimulating. Your child's story about school cannot compete with the dopamine hit of closing a deal. This is not selfishness — it is a neurological tolerance built through years of high-stimulation work. Your brain's reward threshold has been recalibrated.

Trap 4: Identity Enmeshment

When "who I am" becomes indistinguishable from "what I do," switching off work feels like switching off yourself. Leaders who have sacrificed hobbies, friendships, and personal interests to build their career often discover that without the role, they don't know what's left. Presence requires a self to be present as — and many leaders have outsourced their identity entirely to their title.

Trap 5: The Deferred Life Plan

"When this project ends, I'll be more present." "When I hit this target, I'll slow down." "When I retire, I'll make up for lost time." The goalposts always move. The deferred life plan is the most dangerous trap because it feels rational and temporary. It is neither.

Which Traps Are You In?

Read each trap again slowly. Circle or write down the ones that felt uncomfortably accurate:

For each trap, write one specific behaviour it produces in your daily life:

06. The Presence Protocol

Seven strategies that go beyond "take a deep breath"

These strategies are designed for people who have already tried the basics and need something more targeted, more nuanced, and more compatible with a leadership lifestyle.

Strategy 1: The Cognitive Closing Ceremony

Attention residue persists because cognitive threads remain "open" in working memory. The closing ceremony is a deliberate 10-minute protocol performed at the end of your workday that **closes** those threads, signalling to your brain that they have been handled.

- 1. Brain dump** (3 mins) — Write every unfinished task, lingering worry, and tomorrow-concern on paper. Get it all out of your head and onto a physical list.
- 2. Next action assignment** (3 mins) — For each item, write the single next physical action (not "sort out project" but "email Sarah about timeline by 9am"). This tells your brain: *"It has a plan. You can let it go."*
- 3. Transition statement** (1 min) — Say aloud or write: "Work is closed. I am choosing to be [dad/mum/partner/myself] now." This explicit declaration creates a cognitive boundary.
- 4. Physical transition** (3 mins) — Change clothes, wash your hands, walk around the block, or do 20 push-ups. A physical action anchors the mental shift in the body.

Strategy 2: The "Third Space" Method

Coined by Dr Adam Fraser, the Third Space is the transition between one role and the next. Most leaders go directly from work-mode to family-mode with no transition, carrying all the residue. The Third Space is a deliberate buffer — even 5 minutes — where you consciously reflect on what just happened, rest and reset, and then set an intention for who you want to be in the next space.

- a) Reflect** — "What happened today? What went well? What's weighing on me?"
- b) Rest** — Take 3–5 slow breaths. Let the nervous system downshift.
- c) Reset** — "Who do I want to be when I walk through this door? What quality do I want to bring?"

Strategy 3: Strategic Phone Architecture

Your phone is the single biggest presence-destroyer. But simply "putting it away" doesn't work because the pull is neurological, not just habitual. Instead, redesign the architecture:

- 1. Create a "Home" screen profile** that removes email, Slack, and LinkedIn. Switch to it at 6pm.
- 2. Use physical distance** — phone charges in a room you are not in during family time.

3. **Set a "VIP only" contact filter** — so genuine emergencies reach you but routine notifications do not.
4. **Replace the reflex** — when your hand reaches for your phone, place it on your child's shoulder, your partner's hand, or your own chest instead. Redirect the neural pathway.

Strategy 4: The Presence Anchor

Choose one recurring family activity as your "presence anchor" — a non-negotiable daily ritual where you are fully engaged. Not the whole evening. Just one anchor. This could be: the first 15 minutes after you get home (no phone, full eye contact), dinner (no screens at the table), bedtime story (you read it, not delegate it), or a nightly walk with your partner. The power is in the ritual, not the duration. Fifteen fully present minutes are worth more than three hours of divided attention.

Strategy 5: Sensory Re-Entry

When you notice your mind drifting to work during personal time, use sensory re-entry to return to the present. This is not generic mindfulness — it is a targeted micro-intervention:

- a) Notice the texture of what you are touching right now (your child's hair, the dinner plate, the sofa fabric).
- b) Make deliberate eye contact with whoever is speaking. Notice the colour of their eyes.
- c) Name one thing you can smell. This activates the olfactory system, which has direct connections to the emotional brain, pulling you out of executive mode.

Strategy 6: The "Mastery Hobby" Investment

Sonnentag's research identifies **mastery experiences** as a key recovery mechanism — activities that are challenging, absorbing, and provide a sense of competence in a non-work domain. For leaders, this means investing in something that *demands* your full attention because it is difficult and new: learning an instrument, rock climbing, painting, a new language, woodworking, chess. The activity must be absorbing enough to crowd out work thoughts, and different enough from your work to activate different neural pathways.

Strategy 7: The Sunday Sovereignty Rule

Designate one day per week (Sunday or equivalent) as fully sovereign — meaning no work, no email, no Slack, no "quick check." This is not about productivity. It is about rebuilding the neural pathway for non-work identity. Sonnentag's research on **control** as a recovery experience shows that autonomy over leisure time is a significant predictor of wellbeing. The sovereignty rule gives you back what leadership took: the freedom to simply be.

07. Advanced Exercises for the Executive Mind

Cognitive interventions designed for high performers

Exercise 1: The Funeral Thought Experiment

This exercise is uncomfortable by design. It uses mortality salience — a well-documented psychological phenomenon — to cut through the noise and reconnect you with what actually matters.

- 1. Close your eyes. Imagine your own memorial service, 40 years from now.
- 2. Three people speak: your life partner, your child (now grown), and your closest friend.
- 3. What would each of them say if you continue on your current trajectory?
- 4. Now — what would you *want* each of them to say?

What your child would say on your current path:

What you want your child to say instead:

The gap between those two answers is where your work begins.

Exercise 2: The Arrival Inventory

Each evening for one week, answer this question within 30 minutes of arriving home (or finishing work, if you work from home):

Day	What was the last work thought I had?	Am I still carrying it? (Y/N)	What am I missing right now by carrying it?
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			

Fri

Capture what you noticed while completing the exercises above.

Exercise 3: The Presence Time Audit

For one week, track the total minutes you are genuinely, fully present with your family each day — not in the room, but *present*: phone down, eye contact, engaged, listening. Most leaders who do this exercise for the first time are shocked. The number is often under 20 minutes per day.

Day	Total Hours With Family	Fully Present Minutes	Presence Ratio	What Stole My Attention?
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Exercise 4: The "What Are They Thinking?" Empathy Bridge

This exercise deliberately activates your DMN (the brain network for social cognition and empathy) while you are with your family.

1. During a conversation with your partner or child, pause internally and ask: *"What are they feeling right now? What do they need from me in this moment?"*
2. Do not answer out loud. Simply hold the question in your mind.
3. Notice what happens to your attention. It shifts from internal (work rumination) to external (the other person). This is the CEN-to-DMN switch happening in real time.
4. Practice this 3 times per day for 2 weeks. You are literally training your brain to reactivate the network it has been suppressing.

Exercise 5: The Reverse Performance Review

You receive performance reviews at work. This exercise creates one for your presence at home. Ask your partner (or your children, if age-appropriate) to rate you anonymously:

- "When we're together, how often do you feel you have my full attention?" (1–10)
- "What do I do that makes you feel I'm not present?"
- "What would it look like if I were fully here?"
- "What do you miss about spending time with me?"

Notes & reflections

08. The Family Presence Playbook

Making presence visible to the people who matter most

Changing internally is essential, but your family needs to see the change. This section provides concrete actions that make your shift toward presence tangible.

The Re-Arrival Ritual

When you walk through the door (or close the laptop), perform a deliberate "re-arrival." Make eye contact with each family member. Touch them — a hand on the shoulder, a hug, ruffling hair. Say their name. Ask one genuine question and listen to the full answer before speaking. This ritual takes 60 seconds and communicates more than an hour of distracted proximity.

The "CEO of Evening" Role Reversal

Choose two evenings per week where your partner is completely "off duty" and you are the sole responsible adult for children, dinner, bedtime, and household decisions. You bring the same competence, focus, and accountability you bring to the boardroom. This does three things simultaneously: it gives your partner genuine rest, it forces you into deep engagement with domestic life, and it rebuilds the non-work identity that has atrophied.

The Weekly One-on-One

You schedule one-on-ones with your direct reports. Schedule one with each family member. A 30-minute weekly slot where you give that person undivided attention, doing whatever they choose. Your child picks the activity. Your partner picks the topic. Your only job is to be completely there.

The "Boring" Challenge

High-performing brains resist ordinary moments because they feel understimulating. This challenge retrains your reward system. Choose one "boring" family activity per week and commit to experiencing it fully without escaping into your phone or mental work loops. Examples: watching your child's entire practice (not just the last 5 minutes), folding laundry together while talking, walking the dog slowly with no podcast. The discomfort you feel is your brain recalibrating. Lean into it.

A Note on Repair

If years of distraction have already created distance in your relationships, presence alone may not be enough. You may also need to explicitly acknowledge what happened: *"I know I haven't been fully here. That wasn't fair to you. I'm working on it, and I want you to tell me when you notice me drifting."* This kind of repair — naming the problem, taking ownership, inviting accountability — is what turns a private intention into a shared project.

09. Building Your Personal Switching-Off Architecture

Systems beat willpower — design your environment for presence

Step 1: Define Your Non-Negotiable Presence Anchors

What are the 2–3 daily moments where you commit to being fully present?

Step 2: Design Your Cognitive Closing Ceremony

What will your end-of-day ritual look like? Where, when, how long?

Step 3: Redesign Your Phone Architecture

What apps will you remove from your Home screen? Where will your phone charge at night?

Step 4: Choose Your Mastery Hobby

What absorbing, non-work activity will you commit to learning?

Step 5: Set Your Sovereignty Day

Which day is fully work-free? What boundaries need to be in place to protect it?

Step 6: Brief Your Family

What will you say to your partner/family about the changes you are making? When will you say it?

Step 7: Set a 30-Day Review

On ___/___/2026, I will re-read this section and honestly assess my progress.

The Final Reframe

You have spent your career building something extraordinary. But the people sitting across from you at dinner — they are not waiting for you to build something. They are waiting for you to **be there**. That is the only thing they cannot get from anyone else. Your board can replace a CEO. Your children cannot replace their parent's presence. The most important meeting of your day is the one that has no agenda.

10. References & Further Reading

The research behind this booklet

1. Arnold, M., Casper, A. & Sonnentag, S. (2023). Daily trajectories of evening recovery experiences and their role for next-day mood. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
2. Bartoli, E. et al. (2024). Default mode network electrophysiological dynamics and causal role in creative thinking. *Brain*, 147(10), 3409–3425.
3. Crittenden, B. M., Mitchell, D. J. & Duncan, J. (2015). Recruitment of the DMN during a demanding act of executive control. *eLife*, 4, e06481.
4. DMN Review. (2025). The Journey of the Default Mode Network: Development, Function, and Impact. *Biology*, 14(4), 395.
5. Fritz, C. & Sonnentag, S. (2010). The weekend matters: Relationships between stress recovery and affective experiences. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(8).
6. Gallup. (2024). *State of the Global Workplace Report*.
7. Journal of Happiness Studies. (2025). Detach to Thrive: Psychological Detachment from Work and Employee Well-Being.
8. Leroy, S. (2009). Why is it so hard to do my work? Attention residue when switching between work tasks. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109(2).
9. Lippincott, M. (2018). Mindfulness practice and leadership performance. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 70(3), 212–225.
10. Meta-analysis of 111 RCTs. (2024). Mindfulness interventions and cognitive outcomes. *Administrative Sciences*.
11. PMC Mindful Leader Review. (2024). The mindful leader: leadership qualities derived from mindfulness. *PMC*.
12. Rest to Promote Learning: A Brain Default Mode Network Perspective. (2024). *PMC*.
13. Rest to Resist: How Recovery Shields Well-Being from Work-Family Strain. (2025). *Behavioral Sciences, PMC*.
14. Sonnentag, S. & Fritz, C. (2007). The Recovery Experience Questionnaire. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 204–221.
15. Sonnentag, S. (2024). Leader support for recovery: A multi-level approach. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*.
16. Stanford DMN Review. Menon, V. (2023). 20 years of the default mode network. *Neuron*, 111(16), 2469–2487.

Recommended Reading

- **Books:** *The Third Space* by Adam Fraser; *Deep Work* by Cal Newport; *Four Thousand Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman
- **For your team:** Encourage your direct reports to detach. Research shows a leader's own detachment signals permission for employees to do the same.

11. Copyright & Disclaimer

Important legal and usage information

© 2026 mySafeTherapy. All Rights Reserved.

This booklet and all of its contents, including but not limited to text, exercises, reflections, research summaries, graphics, layout, and design, are the exclusive intellectual property of **mySafeTherapy**. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published, or broadcast in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of mySafeTherapy, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this booklet is for educational and coaching purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. mySafeTherapy does not assume any liability for actions taken based on the content of this booklet. The research citations included are for educational reference and do not imply endorsement by the cited authors or institutions.

Confidentiality

This booklet is provided as a confidential resource for individual clients of mySafeTherapy. It is not intended for public distribution, resale, or sharing beyond the individual for whom it was provided.

Permissions & Licensing

For permission requests, corporate licensing, team distribution, or use in coaching or therapeutic settings, please contact mySafeTherapy through the official website or email.

mySafeTherapy — Executive Wellbeing Series