

Best Thing Today Maria Törnroos and Maija Taka on Recovery

Jingle [00:00:00]: Aalto University podcast.

Maria [00:00:11]: Welcome to The Best Thing Today, a podcast series by the psychologists at Aalto University learning services. The voice you are listening to belongs to me, Maria Törnroos, and with me, I have as always Maija Taka.

Jingle [00:00:27]: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists.

Maria [00:00:33]: So, today, we're going to talk about recovery in academia and give you advice on how to recover both during the year, and also now, during your upcoming summer holiday. And if you feel that you're too busy to recover, this episode is especially for you.

Maija [00:00:53]: Well said. And a disclaimer, this episode will not focus on recovery during the pandemic, but on recovery in general.

Maria [00:01:03]: So, this is a very interesting topic because it's so relevant to everyone, especially, I think, in academia. But everyone seems to have problems with it. So, what is so special about recovery in academia? And what challenges recovery? Why do academics have a hard time recovering?

Maija [00:01:27]: I assume that the problem is very complex. Academics are passionate about their work, and we usually don't count our hours. We don't leave work when we leave work or when we close a laptop. So, work is easily in our minds throughout the day, you can imagine. At least I find it difficult to avoid thinking about work, unless I have something completely else I need to fully concentrate on. So, think about research work. You do field work, lab work, writing, networking, presentations, funding applications, supervision, et cetera. So, there are many layers of work, and you need to work on them at the same time. We're evaluated mainly through the journal papers, but in reality, one paper easily requires at least one year work. Add to the publish or perish culture you've been talking about, 24/7 availability, financial realities, tenure track realities, and so on.

Maria [00:02:31]: So, it's a lot in the culture, in the environment and also, in the individual, that challenges recovery in academia.

Maija [00:02:39]: Well said.

Maria [00:02:40]: But on the other hand, there are a lot of aspects of the academic setting that help with recovery, or should help, I think. One such thing is academic freedom to decide when and where you do your job. And this is also called autonomy. And there was a recent study which concluded that autonomy to decide on when you work or when you're available, whether it's during the so-called normal working hours or whether it's during the evening and the weekend, this actually protects you from burnout. But this is important, so listen carefully, this does not mean that long work hours are fine. No, it means that when you have the possibility to choose, it has a positive effect on your wellbeing, but long work hours are still harmful.

Maija [00:03:37]: So, chopping up the day and making sure you recover during the day makes it okay to work even during evening.

Maria [00:03:45]: Yes, exactly. So, research shows that for expert work and for creative work, less is more. I often get the question from doctoral students, "How much should I work? Is, you know, eight hours enough, is six hours enough?" But actually, less is more. The more hours you work, the less you actually get done, or it takes longer to do simple tasks if you're fatigued. Because the brain simply can't handle long working hours in this kind of creative expert work that academics do. So, think, for example, if you're answering an email in the morning when you have energy after a good night's sleep, versus answering the same email in the afternoon after eight hours of work. So, in which case do you think it takes longer to formulate an answer?

Maija [00:04:42]: For me, this gives hope, but however, I know what I should be doing, versus me changing my ways of working, are two separate things.

Jingle [00:04:57]: The Best Thing Today.

Maria [00:05:03]: So, if we now move on to what recovery actually entails and how we should be recovering in order to be healthy and productive. Maija, do you know what the DRAMMA model is?

Maija [00:05:15]: No, but please tell me.

Maria [00:05:17]: So, the DRAMMA model is developed by Newman, Tay and Diener in 2014. And according to this model, recovery is most effective when it consists of six elements. This doesn't mean that all six have to be present in all recovery-related activities, but it would be good to have something from each category. And what are the categories, you ask. The word DRAMMA is actually an acronym containing the six elements of good recovery, which are Detachment, Relaxation, Autonomy, Mastery, Meaning and Affiliation. And the first element, which is Detachment, has been really put to the test during Corona. So, in this model, Detachment means cognitively switching off from work or from the stressful situation. But when we work at home, in order for us to be able to cognitively switch off, we also need to physically switch off, which has been very difficult.

Maija [00:06:22]: I totally agree. Like by putting away the laptop or the books out of sight - out of mind way of working, or by going for a walk after the workday, actually leaving the work. Like we talk about in our episode about remote work, this has been a true challenge during this year. And to confess, I can't call myself a DRAMMA queen just yet.

Maria [00:06:50]: Good one. Okay, the next element of good recovery is Relaxation. And this means essentially doing nothing. And some people get, you know, worried when I say, "do nothing". Doing nothing doesn't necessarily mean just sitting on the couch staring at the wall. It can also mean other things. It can mean different things to different people.

Maija [00:07:17]: Like walking in the nature might be relaxing for some, practicing mindfulness, playing an instrument or something else.

Maria [00:07:26]: For me, doing nothing means watching Netflix, and essentially that's, you know, you are doing something, your brain is actively watching the series, but it feels relaxing to me.

Maija [00:07:40]: And you shouldn't feel bad about it.

Maria [00:07:42]: And according to research, especially academic work requires creativity and ideas. And this happens during the rest. So, when your brain is doing nothing. So, it is very important in academic work to also give the brain a chance to do nothing.

Maija [00:08:02]: And I like your point because creativity is often forgotten when you're in too much pressure in research work. But what was the A in the DRAMMA model?

Maria [00:08:13]: So, the third element is Autonomy. And as I said in the beginning, this is important for our wellbeing at work, but also important for recovery. And autonomy in recovery is about being able to choose what you do to recover.

Maija [00:08:31]: So, tasks like your spouse gives you or things you have to do, like vacuuming might help in part with recovery, but are not things you would have chosen yourself. I balance research work with concrete hands-on work, like baking or picking berries or making puzzle.

Maria [00:08:51]: Exactly. Because sometimes you procrastinate doing work by cleaning the apartment, for example. But God forbid, if it's something that you have to do, then it doesn't feel as, you know, nice or relaxing to do. And then you postpone doing that.

Maija [00:09:06]: I know.

Maria [00:09:08]: And the fourth and fifth elements, the Ms in the model are Mastery and Meaning. So, doing something that challenges you, like playing chess or training for a marathon, and doing something that adds meaning and purpose to your life, like volunteering, for example.

Maija [00:09:26]: So, finding something that you enjoy and where you can see your development in. I can give an example. A year ago, I challenged myself and I started training long-distance running, which I've always hated. But I created a routine of going running, running with friends, so seeing other people while running, and seeing the leaps of development, that's so rewarding after all. So, it also includes the autonomy, so I can go running whenever, wherever.

Jingle [00:09:59]: The Best Thing Today.

Maija [00:10:02]: What's the last but not pleased letter in DRAMMA?

Maria [00:10:05]: It's the A, and it stands for Affiliation. And this has also been put to the test during the pandemic. And the affiliation in recovery is about a sense of belongingness and a sort of social support network that you get, for example, if you have a running group that you train for the marathon with, or if you are studying a language at some, you know, [?? 00:10:33] and you have a group that you study with. So, doing something together, feeling that connection to a group. And because of Corona, we haven't actually been able to do that much in groups during this year.

Maija [00:10:49]: I feel that all the episodes discuss belongingness sooner or later, but you cannot overemphasize its importance.

Maria [00:10:56]: Yeah, we keep coming back to these certain key aspects, a workload or belongingness and also time management, which we're going to talk about in a later episode. But as I said before, it's not about filling your free time with activities, and it's not about all your activities containing these six elements. It's about finding something from each element that you can incorporate into your own life, into your own free time or your breaks. And when you think about it, it's not that hard.

Maija [00:11:31]: A lot of tips on recovery are actually also time management tips. So, it's about organizing your day, so that it supports your recovery. Like turning on emails only for a certain window of the day, minimizing interruptions, taking regular breaks, both micro and macro, and finally, remembering yourself throughout the day.

Maria [00:11:54]: It's completely true that good time management also supports your recovery, and breaks have been a very big issue during remote work. It's much easier to take breaks when you are at campus than when you're at home. And for me, it's been really, really hard. And I've only noticed how bad I've been taking breaks, my physical symptoms in my neck started, then I noticed that, okay, I need to take more breaks, but then I had workshops where I scheduled long breaks, and then I realized, okay, I need to schedule these long breaks also in my non-workshop work.

Maija [00:12:32]: It's not easy to manage yourself.

Maria [00:12:34]: No.

Maija [00:12:36]: But it's not always in the hands of the individuals either. So, the culture plays a part in here. Like, is it okay to send an email on Friday evening or more importantly, is it okay not to answer it until Monday morning and how to make sure that you don't reply immediately? And what kind of working conditions are your culture fostering, and do they support your wellbeing?

Maria [00:13:03]: Yeah, like always, and in many aspects that we've talked about previously on workload and supervision and remote work, it's important to recognize the role of the individual versus the role of the organization and what can you control and what can you influence as an individual. And that is also one way to help recovery. So, think about what you can influence or control and what you cannot.

Maija [00:13:31]: I really liked that point. Like, what is the smallest possible thing you could do to increase your own recovery?

Maria [00:13:38]: And focus on that. And then if there are things that you cannot control, then you perhaps need to find ways to tolerate them or let them go.

Jingle [00:13:51]: The Best Thing Today, podcast by Aalto University psychologists. Today, Maria Törnroos and her special guest Maija Taka.

Maria [00:14:06]: Okay. And now, we come to the part in our podcast where we give advice that we ask from an Aalto expert. And this time we approached Professor Olli-Pekka Kauppila to ask his tips on recovery.

Maija [00:14:21]: Yes. Olli-Pekka is an associate professor on organization and management in the school of business. How does academic work environment challenge his recovery?

Maria [00:14:33]: Well, he wrote to us and said that a key challenge for him is that the work feels like it's never done. So, you may finish writing something or teaching a course, but the long processes can keep haunting you for years. And it's very difficult to let go of something that's not ready. And this, I also remember from my academic career, because I'm very impatient. So, these long processes like were really hard for me. He also wrote that he feels like he's always working, but also feels that he never works.

Maija [00:15:15]: Oh.

Maria [00:15:17]: So, quite the paradox. And the more he feels like he never works, the better for recovery. So, the more he feels like the work he does, you know, feels good, and not as a burden or a, you know, hard workload, the better for recovery, because it's doing things that are fun. And then, it doesn't require that much recovery time. And for him, the pandemic hasn't changed things in a dramatic way, but one thing that he lifted up, that I think is something that we all share, is that we haven't been able to see the friends and colleagues at work. And this has impacted his recovery somewhat, because spending time with people and talking about random things helped to deal with work-related phenomena. And I think many people agree with this. And the other thing he also lifts up as something that has challenged recovery during the pandemic is that he hasn't been able to go to the gym, which is also an important part of his recovery.

Jingle [00:16:23]: The Best Thing Today.

Maria [00:16:26]: So, how does Olli-Pekka recover during the year?

Maija [00:16:29]: He had nice diversity of different activities that all combined to his recovery. So, he has a family to spend time with, do activities, he has just finished building their own house and working on the garden. And he also mentioned the gym and physical work, which is a great way to recover from the academic work, sitting in front of the laptop. So, a lot of exercise, skiing, walking, running, hiking, the gym.

Maria [00:16:59]: Wow. That's a lot.

Maija [00:17:01]: That's a lot. Good to have the diversity. And he feels that even doing some so-called normal things can help in clearing the mind after heavy workdays.

Maria [00:17:12]: And then, he actually added that, if he would like something more, it would be more quiet time. So, just being lazy and doing nothing, but it's quite difficult in this kind of publish or perish culture to say that I'm now doing nothing and being creative, because it probably is frowned upon. And during the summer, his recovery plans are not doing anything wild, because he has three children and the youngest is one year old, and

they will go to the summer place, chop some wood and swim and do fun summer activities. And that sounds really nice.

Maija [00:17:56]: Yes, really good.

Maria [00:17:58]: And probably a good way to get detached from work.

Maija [00:18:04]: As far as you can go.

Maria [00:18:11]: So, to recap, what are the most important take home messages from this episode?

Maija [00:18:17]: Like remembering yourself, improving your ways to manage your work, have some DRAMMA in your life. What else?

Maria [00:18:27]: Probably that recovery should happen throughout the day, the week and the month, that it's not only something that you should think about during the weekend or the vacation, because if all the vacation and all the weekends always go to full recovery, then that is not enough for your body and your brain. So, think about recovery during the day also.

Maija [00:18:52]: And make sure that the heavy and intense weeks are followed by easier ones to balance. Take a couple of days off after intense field work or a manuscript submission, you might even have like a submission hangover.

Maria [00:19:06]: That's true. That's a very good advice. And also, remembering that recovery is individual, and everyone should try to find a way that works the best for them. So, for some, mindfulness might do the trick, while others need to go hiking in order to completely get detached, and whatever floats your boat. And the final tip before you head for summer vacation is to try to prioritize and finish what you can, because undone work burdens your brain.

Maija [00:19:40]: Yes.

Maria [00:19:41]: And if you can't finish everything, you should write things that you can't finish down on a piece of paper or on your computer, and also make a plan of attack on how you will go back to this after you've returned from your vacation, so that you give yourself permission to go on vacation.

Maija [00:20:02]: The world is not going to be completed by summer holidays. I also encourage you to see the daily progress you make, because you're doing great work.

Maria [00:20:15]: That's nice. We hope that you have a really relaxing summer and come back in the fall fully recovered. And in the next episode, we are going to talk about time management. As always, it was a pleasure to talk with you, Maija. What are you going to do during this summer?

Maija [00:20:40]: After this episode, my plan is to fully detach my mind from work. My goal is that I can't remember my password and my fingers are blue from picking blueberries when I get back. So, I'd say I've had a good holiday if I meet those. How about your summer and holiday plans?

Maria [00:21:02]: Well, I'm going to be probably out in the archipelago with my kids, but then I'm going to be writing my book, my upcoming book there.

Maija [00:21:10]: And making sure that you recover.

Maria [00:21:12]: Yes. Yes. The book writing is mastery and meaning and detachment and all that. Bye.

Maija [00:21:19]: Bye. Such a DRAMMA queen.

Jingle [00:21:22]: Aalto University podcast.

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