

Email incivility has a ripple effect on households

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The negative repercussions of email incivility extend beyond the workplace, and can even negatively affect a domestic partner's attitude toward their own work, says a new paper from YoungAh Park, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

It turns out that a rude email's reach extends further than the recipients

in the message's "To" field.

As [email](#) communication becomes increasingly ubiquitous in all aspects of work life, email incivility – rude messages, non-urgent messages marked "High priority" and time-sensitive messages sent with inadequate notice – has a ripple effect that crosses work boundaries and ends up affecting employees and their domestic partners.

According to a new paper from a University of Illinois expert who studies [work stress](#) and recovery, the negative effects of email incivility extend beyond the recipient's work and family domains and can even play a role in their partners' withdrawal from their own work, said YoungAh Park, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois.

"What I found in my previous study is that email incivility—this general rudeness over email, whether it's the tone, content or timing of a message—really stresses people out on a daily basis," she said. "People who receive a greater number of negative, rude or just uncivil emails tend to report more strain at the end of their workday, which can manifest itself in all sorts of ways, from physical symptom such as headaches to feeling negative emotions.

"In this new paper, I found that email incivility has more persistent effects. It's not merely a blip on your workday radar and then you forget about it. It has a cumulative negative effect for both workers and their families."

Park and co-author Verena C. Haun of Johannes Gutenberg University collected survey data from 167 dual-earner couples at multiple points in time during a typical work week: before leaving work for the weekend, the following Monday morning and at the end of the next new week. Results show that when employees experience more frequent incivility via work email during the week, they tend to withdraw from work the

following week.

"This is a typical stress reaction: When you are under great stress, you tend to avoid your work as a means of conserving your energy and resources and staying away from stressors. It's self-preservation," Park said.

The researchers also found that when employees receive more uncivil emails during the work week, on the weekend, "they 'transmit' their stress to their domestic partner and, as a result, the partner also withdraws from their work the following week," Park said.

"What's really stressful about email incivility is that, unlike face-to-face interactions, emails don't have any social cues like tone of voice or body gestures that help recipients understand the context accurately," she said. "Nuance is lost in email—it could be blunt, it could merely be banal, it could be neutral. You just don't know, and because of the ambiguity of the sender's intentions, the recipients may ruminate more about it because they don't know how to respond to it. That's why it's so distressing."

When workers ruminate about negative work incidents over the weekend, "they are more likely to take their stress out on family members, including their spouse, because the rumination replays the stressors and renews their effects," Park said.

"So this workplace stress crosses over work-life threshold more easily to the spouse on the weekend," she said. "Interestingly, when the spouses also negatively reflect on their own work over the weekend, they become more affected by the stress transmission. It's like a double whammy."

To combat the [stress](#) effects of email incivility, employees need managers who recognize the effects of poor email etiquette, Park said.

"This is one of the emerging workplace stressors that needs attention from top to bottom of an organization," Park said. "Email is so ingrained in our work life now that it would be impossible to completely do away with it. So we can't remove the stressor, but we should find a way to reduce it."

For employees, it helps to be able to completely disconnect from work when they're not at work.

"We know that email is very time efficient, but sometimes behavior that email encourages can make it unhealthy," she said. "If email is your major method of communication, then there ought to at least be an email code of conduct for employees. There has to be a shared set of norms to follow."

People tend to outsource all of their [work](#) communication to email because it's easy, but old fashioned in-person, face-to-face communication is better "when you're communicating negative feedback," Park said.

"Managers really need to think about how they want to set up the communications expectations for email among their employees so they can reduce this stressor," she said.

The paper was published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

More information: YoungAh Park et al. The long arm of email incivility: Transmitted stress to the partner and partner work withdrawal, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2289](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2289)

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