

## **Letting go of work:**

Research findings regarding  
psychological detachment  
during non-work time

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## Outline

- The concept of psychological detachment:
  - Definition and measurement
  - Theoretical framework
- The stressor-detachment model:
  - Conceptual model
  - Empirical evidence
- Recent research findings
- Discussion:
  - Theoretical implications
  - Extension of the stressor-detachment model
  - Practical implications

## The concept of psychological detachment

- Work in modern organizations is often demanding:
  - Up to 40% of US employees describe their work as “very or extremely” stressful (NIOSH report)
  - Many don’t use all their vacation days
- Demands require the use psychological resources
- Mentally letting go of work during non-work time:
  - Replenishes psychological resources
  - Decreases strain
  - Increases well-being and performance capacity at work

## Psychological detachment: Definition

- “An individual’s sense of being away from the work situation” (Etzion et al., 1998)
- To psychologically disengage from work during non-work time (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005)
- “Absence” (Sonnentag & Fritz, in press):
  - Not being involved in work-related tasks
  - Not thinking about job-related issues
- “Presence” (Sonnentag & Fritz, in press):
  - Engagement in hobbies
  - Interactions with others
  - Mental disengagement (sleep, meditation, etc.)

# Psychological Detachment: Measurement

- Items such as: During nonwork time....
  - I forget about work.
  - I don't think about work at all.
  - I distance myself from work.
  - I get a break from the demands of work.

(Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007)

## **Theoretical framework: Conservation of Resources Theory (COR, Hobfoll, 1989, 2002)**

- Goal: gain and protect personal resources
- Stress/strain as a result of threat of or actual resource loss
- Experience of work stressors as resource loss, leading to lower well-being and higher strain
- Coping with or ruminating about work stressors results in lower levels of detachment

## **Theoretical framework: Work-Home Resources Model** (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012)

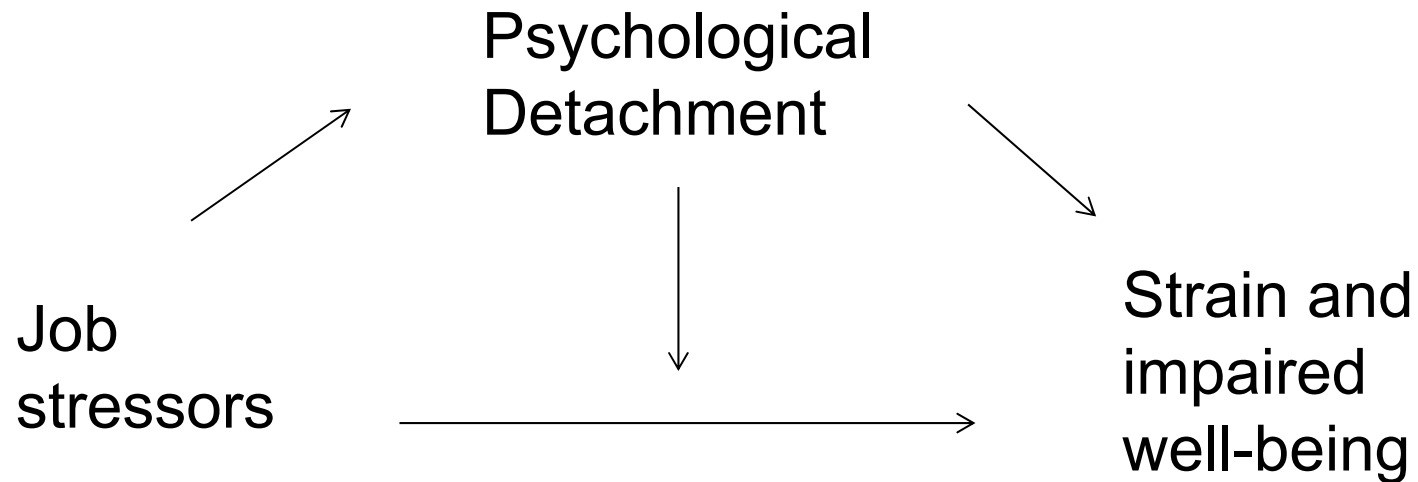
- Personal resources (e.g., time, energy, emotions) link demands and resources of one life domain to outcomes in the other domain
- Contextual work demands deplete personal resources and impair accomplishments in the home domain
- Experience of work demands/stressors draws on resources in the home domain through lack of psychological detachment

## The stressor-detachment model (Sonnentag & Fritz, in press)

- Describes the relationship between work stressors, psychological detachment, and employee strain
- **Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress** (Meurs & Perrewe, 2011, Ursin & Erikson, 2010): Activation resulting from the experience of stressors is linked to a lack of detachment and increased strain
- **Allostatic Load Model** (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; McEwen, 1998): Sustained demands over time (with a lack of opportunity to detach and recover) are associated with impairments in individual well-being



# The stressor-detachment model: Conceptual model



## Job stressors and detachment

- Work stressors may impact detachment from work through
  - negative activation/affect
  - increase in stress hormones
  - worry/rumination
  - engagement in work-related activities at home

## **Job stressors and detachment: Empirical evidence**

- NEGATIVE associations with work stressors:
  - Workload
  - Cognitive demands
  - Situational constraints
  - Emotional demands
  - Role ambiguity and role conflict
  - Conflicts with customers and coworkers
  - Work-related technology use at home

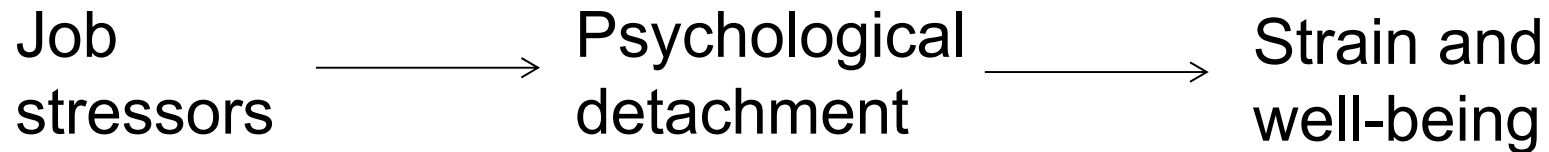
## Detachment and strain: Empirical evidence

- NEGATIVE associations with strain:
  - Emotional exhaustion
  - Need for recovery
  - Health complaints
  - Negative mood and fatigue at bedtime  
(short-term, within-person)

## Detachment and well-being: Empirical evidence

- POSITIVE associations with well-being:
  - Work engagement
  - Life satisfaction
  - Positive affective states  
(findings less consistent)
- Benefits accumulate:
  - Detachment during evening hours is associated with positive affect at the end of the work week

## Detachment as a mediator: Empirical evidence

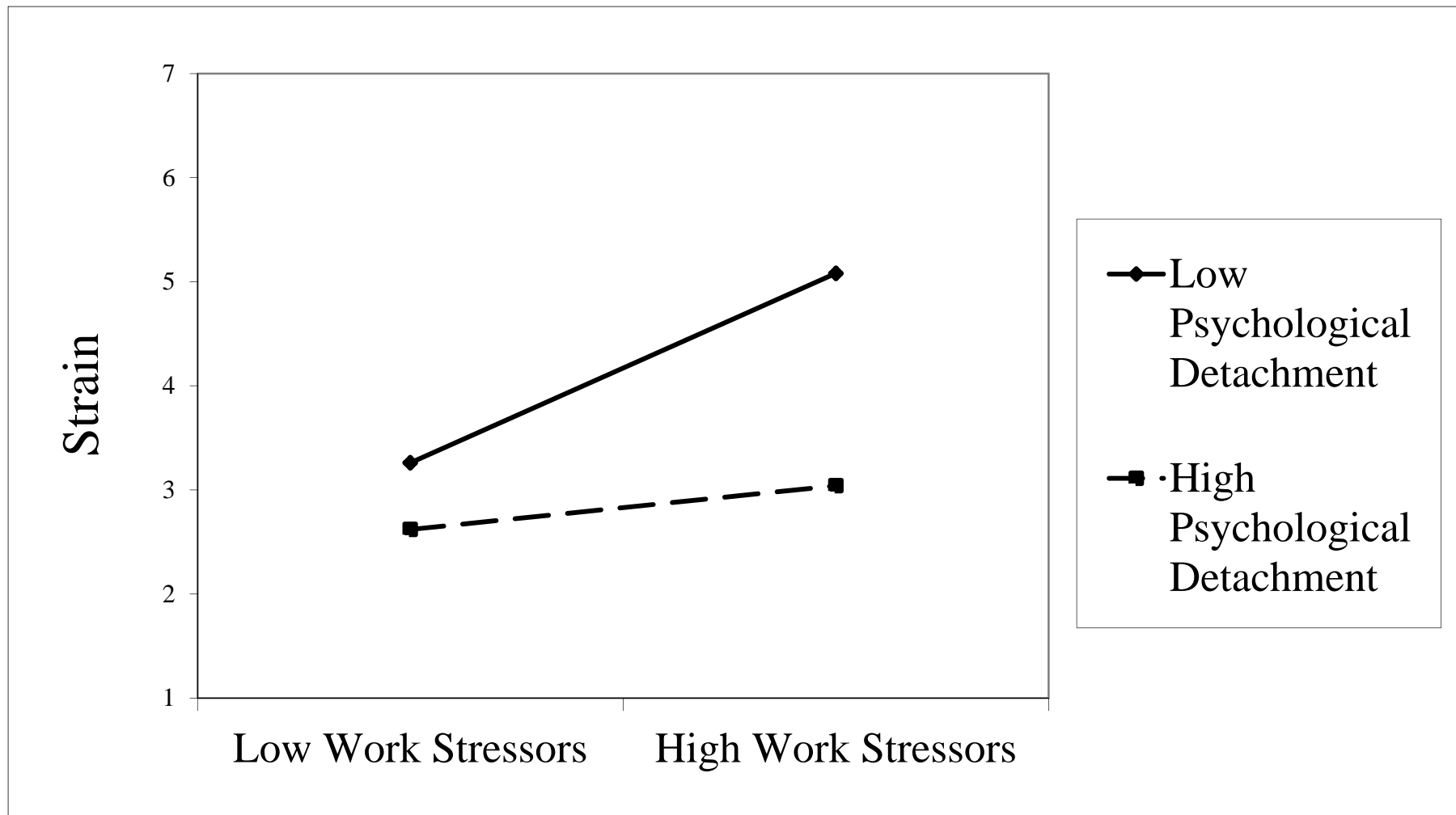


- So far, limited empirical evidence due to
  - a) small number of studies
  - b) limitations in research designs
- However, already existing research supports the idea of detachment as a (partial) mediator

## Detachment as a moderator

- Detachment allows replenishment of psychological resources translating into lower strain and higher well-being.
- When employees are able to detach, everyday work demands have a weaker effect on experienced strain, compared to when employees are not able to detach.

## Detachment as a moderator





## **Detachment as a moderator: Empirical evidence**

- Moderating effect for:
  - Social stressors
  - Role conflict
  - Work-related smartphone use
- Detachment moderates relationship between immediate strain at work and strain later at home
- Research still limited. However, so far indicates that detachment has potential to buffer effects of job stressors on strain and poor well-being

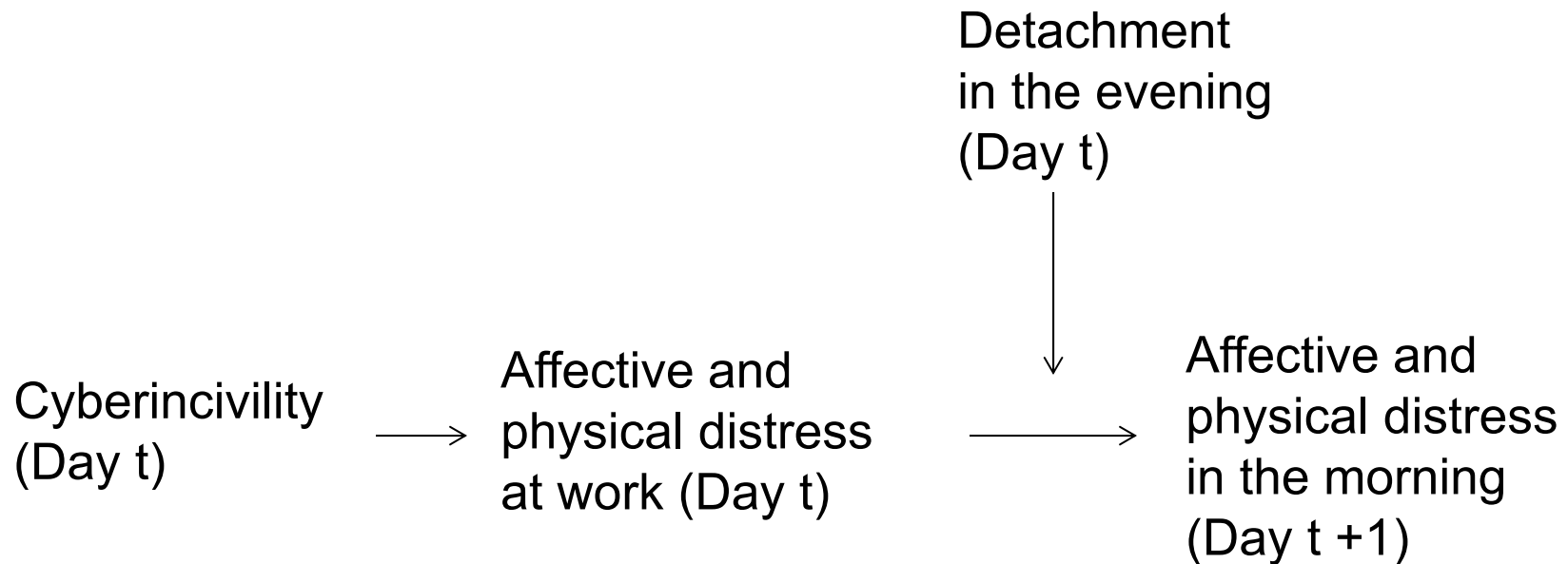
## Recent research findings

- **Additional predictors of detachment:**
  - Cyberincivility: Park, Fritz, & Jex (under review)
  - Becoming a supervisor: Debus & Fritz (in preparation)
  - Hypervigilance: Fritz, Hammer, Guros, Shepherd, & Maier (in preparation)
  - Spousal support for recovery: Park & Fritz (under review)
- **Additional outcomes of detachment:**
  - Work-family conflict: Demsky, Ellis, & Fritz (2014)

## **Cyberincivility: Park, Fritz, & Jex (under review)**

- Incivility: low-intensity aggressive acts with ambiguous intent
- Cyberincivility: uncivil behavior through email
- Cyberincivility as a stressor associated with employee strain
- Can detachment from work alleviate the negative effects of cyberincivility?

# Cyberincivility: Conceptual model



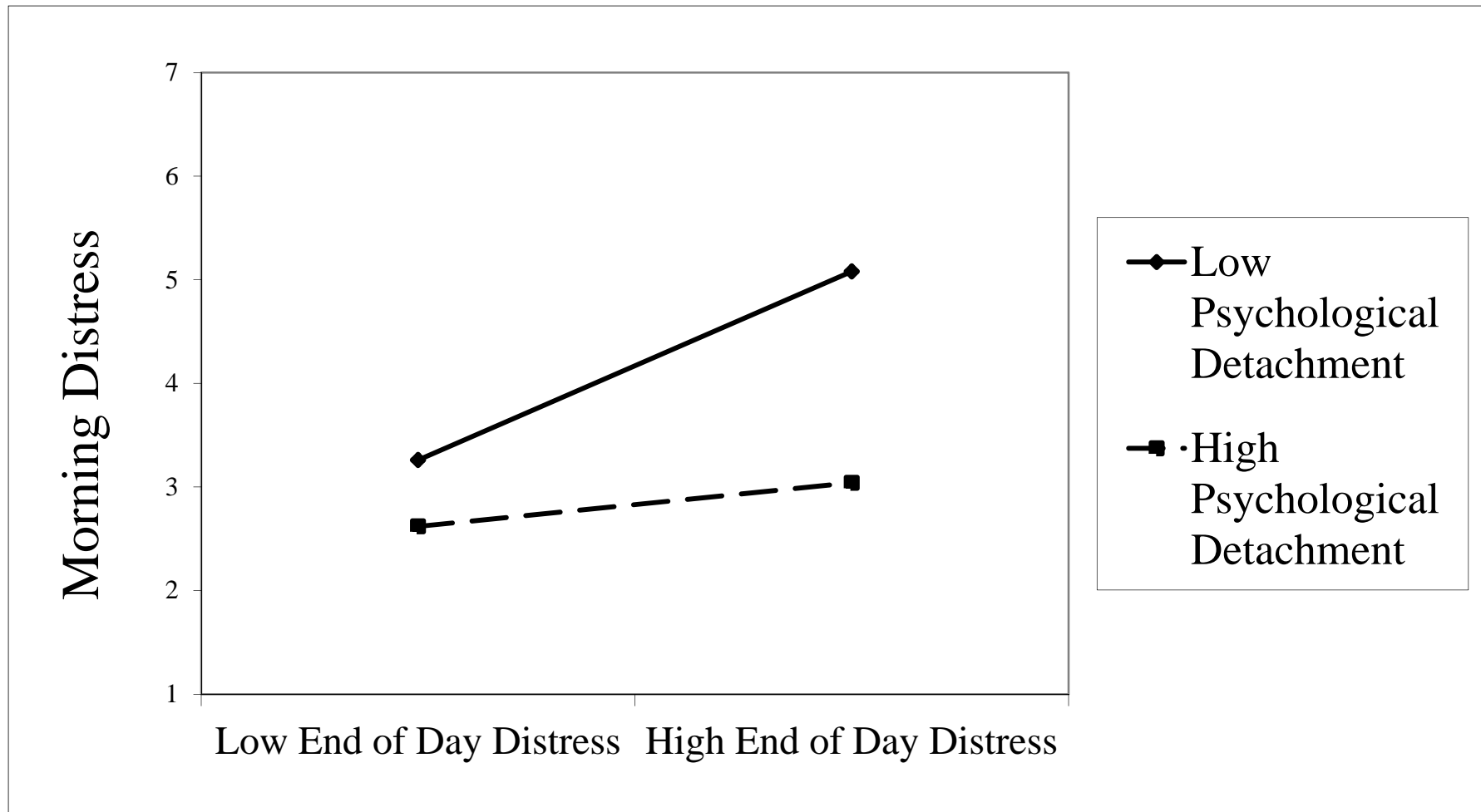
## Cyberincivility: Study design

- **Sample:** 143 full-time employees who used email as one of their primary modes of work-related communication
- **Measurements:**
  - Day-level study over five consecutive workdays
  - Measurements of cyberincivility, affective, and physical distress at the end of the workday
  - Measurements of distress and detachment (the previous night) the following morning

## Cyberincivility: Results

- Multilevel analyses examining within-person relationships
- Cyberincivility linked to increased distress at the end of the workday
- Distress at the end of the workday linked to higher distress the following morning
- Psychological detachment moderated the relationship between distress at the end of the workday and distress the following morning. The relationship was weaker when employees were able to detach during the evening

# Cyberincivility: Results



## **Becoming a supervisor: Debus & Fritz (in preparation)**

- Transitioning to a supervisor role increases resources (e.g. autonomy) as well as demands (e.g., time pressure)
- How does taking on a supervisory role change employee job satisfaction, exhaustion, and work-family conflict?
- Can detachment from work moderate these relationships?



## Becoming a supervisor: Study design

- **Sample:** 2613 employees from the Swiss Household Panel that were transitioning to a supervisory position between 2002 and 2012
- **Measurements:**
  - Measures of job satisfaction, exhaustion, work-family conflict, and detachment once per year between 2002 and 2012
  - Comparison of “pre-supervisor” to “supervisor phase”
  - Detachment examined as moderator during “supervisor phase”

## Becoming a supervisor: Results

- Analysis via discontinuous change models
- Exhaustion and work-family conflict were higher in years in which employees held a supervisory position; Job satisfaction did not change
- Detachment moderated the change in outcomes over time:
  - Increase in exhaustion and work-family conflict was smaller under high levels of detachment
  - Job satisfaction increased under high levels of detachment (but not under low levels of detachment)

## **Hypervigilance: Fritz, Hammer, Guros, Shepherd, & Maier (in preparation)**

- Hypervigilance: A state of activation associated with constant screening the environment for potential danger
- Especially common in occupations with high potential for danger, such as corrections
- Hypervigilance may be linked to a lack of detachment through:
  - Physical and emotional activation
  - Rumination
  - Increased perceptions of danger

## Hypervigilance: Study design

- **Sample:** 1,331 corrections officers in Oregon, 14 correctional facilities
- **Measurements:**
  - Self-reports of hypervigilance and detachment
  - Hypervigilance (9 items):
    - I always kept an eye out for potential danger.
    - If I relaxed, I may have made myself more vulnerable to dangerous situations.
    - Being aware of my environment was an important part of staying safe.

## Hypervigilance: Results

- Hierarchical regression analysis predicting detachment
- Control variables: PTSD-like symptoms, veteran status, physical confrontation with an inmate
- Hypervigilance is linked to lower levels of detachment from work during non-work time

## **Spousal recovery support : Park & Fritz (under review)**

- Role of spouse in employee psychological detachment (and recovery from work in general)?
- Spousal recovery support:
  - Provide time for leisure activities
  - Facilitate/initiate specific activities that enhance psychological detachment
  - Create norms around work-family boundaries

## Spousal recovery support: Study design

- **Sample:** 318 matched married Korean dual-earner couples
- **Measurements:**
  - Spouses reported their recovery support for the other spouse
  - Each spouse reported their own level of detachment
  - Spousal recovery support (4 items): I provide support or assistance for my spouse...
    - to forget about work

## Spousal recovery support: Results

- Spousal recovery support was associated with higher levels of employee detachment
- No gender effects



## **Work-family conflict: Demsky, Ellis, & Fritz (2014)**

- Little is known about the relationship between detachment from work and perceptions of work-family conflict.
- Psychological detachment may be a mechanism through which job stressors (such as workplace aggression) may be associated with work-family conflict

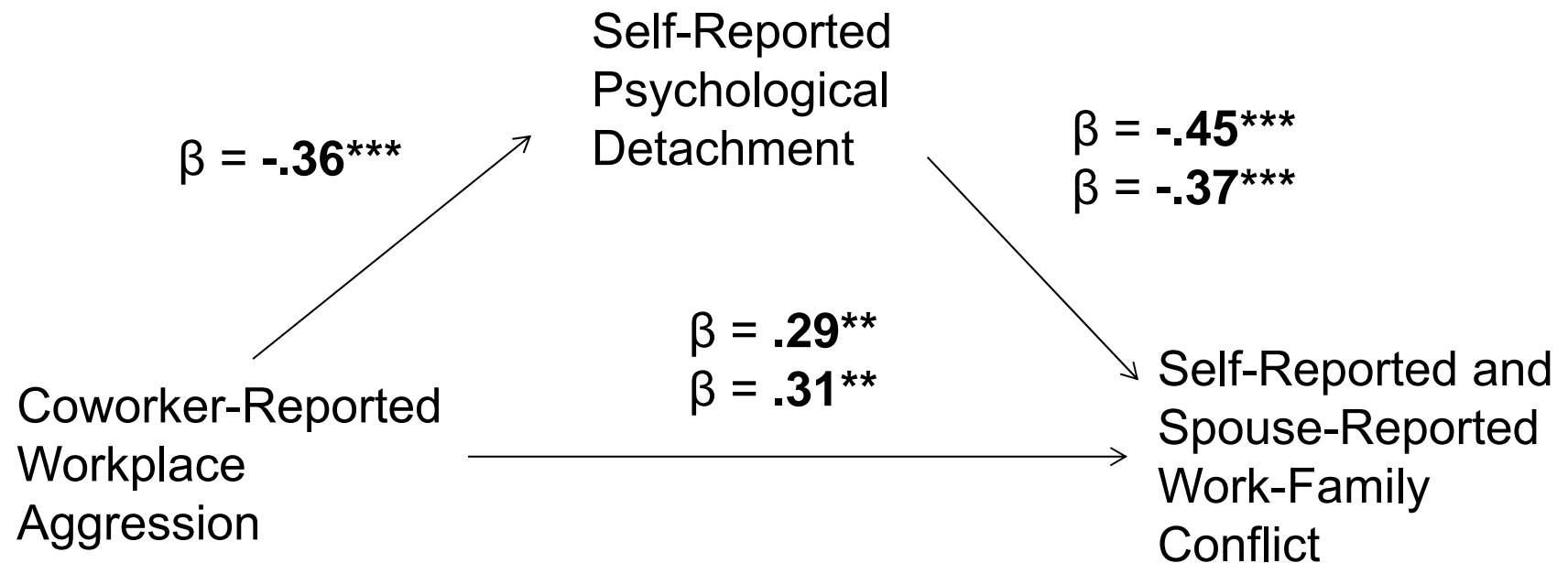


- Detachment as a mediator?

## Work-family conflict: Study design

- **Sample:** 107 US college and university employees (non-academic); plus spouse and one coworker
- **Measurements:**
  - Cross-sectional, multisource survey
    - Self-reported detachment and work-to-family conflict
    - Coworker-reported aggression
    - Spouse-reported work-family conflict

## Work-family conflict: Results



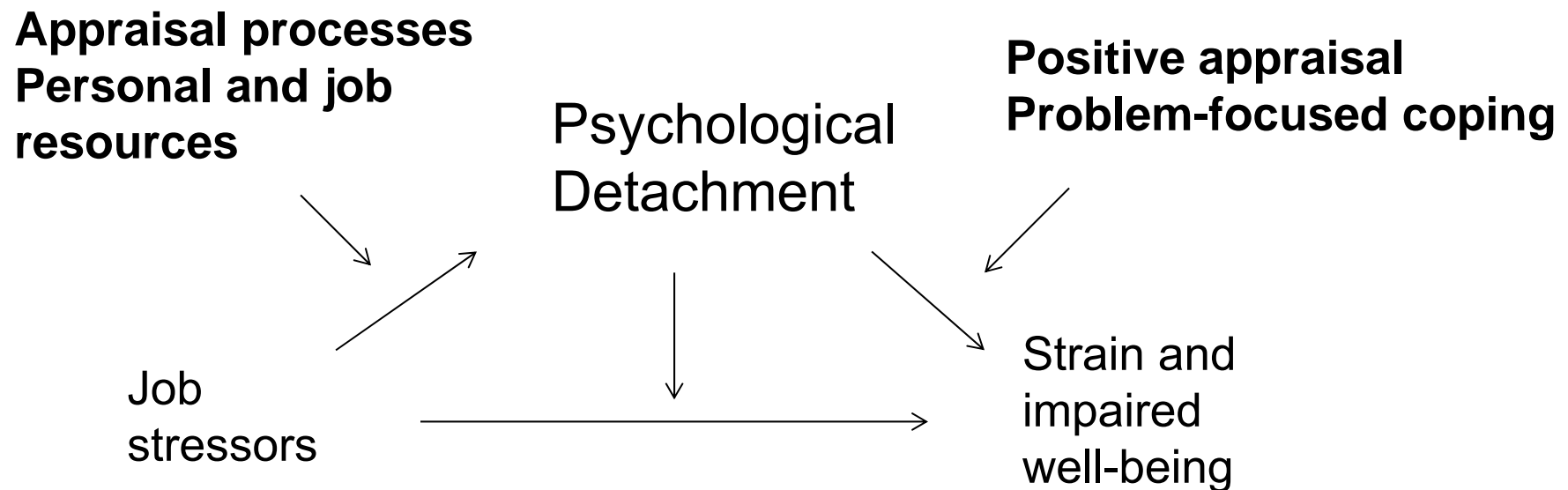
## Discussion: Summary

- Lack of detachment as a result of work stressors:
  - Working after-hours
  - Rumination, emotional activation
  - Problem-solving
- Strain and decreased well-being as a result of low detachment
- Detachment as a moderator: Can alleviate relationships between stressors and strain

## Discussion: Theoretical implications

- Lack of detachment:
  - Hinders resource replenishment
  - Associated with additional resource loss translating into strain
  - Sustained activation due to rumination or problem-solving
- Detachment as a moderator:
  - Helps replenish resources
  - Helps break loss cycles

# The expanded stressor-detachment model



## Discussion: Future research

- Role of job-related and personal resources?
- Moderators in the stressor-detachment and the detachment-strain relationship?
- Detachment from positive vs. negative work events (i.e. conflict vs. enrichment)?
- Crossover processes:
  - family members?
  - Coworkers?
- Performance-related outcomes?

## Discussion: Practical implications

- Reduce job stressors:
  - Rethink distribution of workload over time and across people
  - Reduce conflict
- Create group or organizational norms around detachment
- Under high levels of stressors provide more opportunities for detachment



## Discussion: Practical implications

- Increase supervisory support
- Increase workplace flexibility
- Help employees develop individual strategies for detachment

**Thank you!**

**Please contact me with questions:  
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