

Time Out: Taking Time Off Mindfully

Do you know which country reside the most productive workers in the world? According to one study, it's Australia. Not the answer many of us would expect, huh? I mean, can you imagine those partying, beer-drinking, happy-go-lucky people from down under being the most productive? So how is it that they were named the most productive workers in the world?

Productivity on the Job Correlated with Taking Regular Breaks

Is this research finding validating that old "work hard, play hard" adage? Do people who play harder work harder? Perhaps, but more apt may be that taking breaks is the most effective strategy for increasing productivity on the job, a recent finding by industrial/organizational psychologists.

Consider this: Australians get 4 weeks of paid time off each year, and during those 4 weeks they get paid overtime, and if that isn't enough to make you want to move there, they also get 2 additional weeks of sick days or days to care for others. So Australians get 6 weeks of paid time off. That's 1½ months per year! Compare that to the standard 3 weeks that Americans get—2 weeks of vacation and 1 week of sick days. We only get half the vacation time that Australians get, and that's pretty scary considering that our workdays and workweeks are increasing each year. It's becoming more and more common for people to work crazy hours, and therefore have less time for breaks.

Take Breaks Even if They Aren't Offered or Encouraged

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to incite a revolution, though I wouldn't be disappointed or surprised if this e-mail resulted in one. I do, however, encourage you to think about how you supply yourself with adequate breaks in your life, regardless of how much vacation time you get. While most employers don't necessarily encourage their workers to take breaks, they do want you to be productive. This means it's really up to you to take breaks regularly. The average person can focus intently on work for a span of 50 minutes before needing a break of 10 minutes. And make sure you use your vacation time every year, and if that time isn't enough for you, take unpaid vacation time if you need to. Your health and sanity is worth more than any job!

Make the Most of Your Time Off

Get what you need from your breaks and vacation time. Pay attention to your thoughts, emotions, body, soul, and spirit as you go about your minutes, hours, days, weeks, and months. What you really need from a break or vacation may change depending on the time of day, month, or year. Identifying which cognitive or physical skills or abilities, emotions, energies, or bodily sensations we are using or experiencing over the course of our workdays offers us insight into how best to plan our time off so that we bring ourselves, lives, and relationships back to balance and wholeness. Such ancient holistic health systems as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine offer us nutritional, physical, and mental advice for rebalancing ourselves, but if we are really paying attention to ourselves, we can give ourselves what we need every day from our time off.

Mindfully Planning Breaks & Vacations

Let's again review what it means to be mindful: Mindfulness is waking up to who we really are, to seeing ourselves just as we are, and using what we know about who we really are to guide us, to make informed decisions, and to live more fully in each moment.

Mindful planning of breaks and vacations means knowing what we really need from our breaks and vacations and planning them accordingly. And sometimes what we really need is not what we really want. For example, if we have low energy, we might want caffeine to boost our energy, but if we've already had enough caffeine such that we will not experience withdrawal symptoms while at work, then getting our bodies in motion or doing a brief restorative meditation would be healthier ways of boosting our energy, despite our craving for caffeine. Try to see beyond your own cravings and habits and assess for yourself what you really need for increased productivity, health, sanity, wholeness, and balance.

Questions for Self-Exploration

The following questions serve as a guideline for waking up to who you are on the job. As you go through this list, think about the kinds of mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational skills or abilities you engage or don't engage throughout your workdays.

- What mental processes do you generally use?
Strategic vs. historical thinking? Right brain (creative, emotional) vs. left brain (analytical, logical, language) functioning? Intuition vs. senses? Thinking vs. feeling? Receiving information or expressing information?
- What behaviors do you exhibit?
Does your job allow you to move your body or do you remain seated for long periods of time? Do you sit in one position or move in one way most of the time, or is there variation? Do you find yourself talking too much or not enough on the job? Do you get enough or too much social interaction? On the phone vs. e-mail vs. person-to-person contact? To what extent do you get to be creative or express yourself?
- Which sensory organs do I favor?
Do I mostly use visual, auditory, taste, smell, or touch and when do I use which? How easy or difficult is it for me to shift my attention to those senses I don't favor?
- What is my energy level like throughout the day?
How does your energy level shift depending on who is around you during the workday? Are there certain people or activities at work that result in negative or depressed energy? Are there certain people or activities that overstimulate you such that it's difficult to refocus on work?
- Are you a thinker, feeler, or somatic type?
If you think, think, think all day long, how connected are you to your emotions and body? If you're a feeler, how connected are you to your thoughts and body? If you're a somatic type, then how connected are you to your thoughts and emotions?
- How does spirit float in and out of your day?
Do you have moments of utter clarity, perfection, or flow during the day? What facilitates these moments? How attached are you to experiencing these moments, or how much of your attention is placed on having them, and how necessary are they to your productivity on the job? How disconnected from vs. connected to spirit are you most of the time?

Way of Being on the Job vs. Off

You might find that your answers to the above questions come easily or are obvious, but maybe you never thought about using the information to consciously plan breaks and vacations for yourself. Notice if there is any new discovery you make in answering these questions or in just thinking freely about your time off, and use this new information to your benefit. How might your answers be if you were to answer them given the following instructions: 1) Answer the questions the first time as they relate to your work/job, and then 2) Answer them again as they relate to your life outside of work. How similar or different are your answers?

Personality and Job

For those of us who are happy with our career choices, we are probably aware of how our job taps into or depends on certain skills, abilities, or traits that come easily. There is often a natural fit between who we are and what we do for work. This means we may have to work even harder ultimately to rebalance because what we really need to rebalance is likely not sought or achieved because there is little motivation for such activities. In other words, if we don't have to use certain internal resources for work, and it's not our natural way to use such resources in life, then we will likely not use these resources, favoring other resources habitually. Rebalancing may mean developing other parts of ourselves that have been dormant or rarely accessed.

What You Really Need To Rebalance

Now that you are aware of how you function most of the time, you are much better able to make decisions about what you need to rejuvenate yourself during your time off. Use the following questions as a guide:

What does your mind really need for rebalancing?

What does your body need for rebalancing?

What does your heart need for rebalancing?

What does your spirit need for rebalancing?

What do your relationships need for rebalancing?

What do your senses (touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight) need for rebalancing?

Overall, what kind of experience will truly rejuvenate you?

Now plan your break or vacation!

Ideas for Mindful Planning of Breaks

Maybe in the mornings you have more energy and could use greater focus, so take a break, close your eyes if you can or focus your eyes on one spot in your workspace for a minute or two while you focus on just your breathing, allowing everything else to come in and out of your awareness. Maybe you are focused enough and need to move your body or stretch every so often because you tend to feel tension as you go about your day. If you are working indoors all day, go for a walk on your lunch break, and if you are out and about all day, rushing from one place to the next, make sure you schedule some time in the middle of your day for quieting, centering, and calming your system. A yoga class or t'ai chi might be a good way to spend your lunch break.

Ideas for Mindful Planning of Vacations

If you always take camping trips, perhaps pamper yourself this time. If you usually pamper yourself, rough it this time. If you have difficulty being alone on your vacations, go somewhere alone and challenge yourself for the sake of personal growth, or just devote some time to spend with yourself on a group trip. If you generally plan your itinerary leaving little unstructured time, plan less and see how having more unstructured time feels, or vice versa. If you always go to the same destination or hotel or restaurants, change it up. Whatever your habitual vacation looks like, tweak it so you get an experience that you don't usually get. In other words, take a vacation from your usual vacation!

Time is a limited resource, so take time off work and daily routine with mindfulness! Structure your breaks and vacations so that you **create the rebalance you really need**.