

CAN RELAXATION SAVE YOUR LIFE?

Americans are widely recognized as hard workers, but lots of us aren't quite up to snuff when it comes to relaxation. In fact, the term "leisure sickness," which describes a flulike syndrome that workaholics get from taking time off from the job, is in the running for dictionary publisher Webster's "Word of the Year" for 2010! But far more typical is the vague but persistent sense of guilt that many people experience when relaxing -- as if anything that feels this good can't possibly be a good use of time. Well, you *can* and *should* relax about that. In fact, there is a great deal of research demonstrating that regular relaxation -- the kind where you really chill out and do nothing -- is as important to your health as eating right and exercising.

Many people assume that effective relaxation requires two weeks at the beach, but that's not at all the case. Research has shown that even little bits can produce bountiful health benefits that we usually associate with visits to the gym and languorous vacations... and in fact, to attain the maximum benefits of relaxation, you need to build *some* relaxation activity into every single day. To help you find what works for you, here are research-supported relaxation suggestions that deliver actual health benefits in just minutes...

- **Grab some midday ZZZs.** A study at Harvard that investigated the napping habits of more than 20,000 adults discovered that people who took brief naps (under a half hour) two or three times a week reduced risk for coronary disease by 12%. Upping the nap ante, the folks who napped three or more times a week, reduced risk by an astonishing 37%.
- **Just quietly chill out.** Yet another study, at New York University, established that "wakeful resting" (otherwise known as just sitting there) promotes memory and cognition function. The study asked students to observe images and then take a short rest while remaining awake. During this nonactivity, they were hooked up to functional MRI brain scans, which revealed that their brains at rest were busily absorbing and consolidating the new information just gained.
- **Get a massage.** Many studies have shown that even a brief hands-on session from a pro can elevate the feel-good brain hormones *dopamine* and *serotonin*, which are known to slow the heart rate, reduce blood pressure and cortisol levels and contribute to deeper sleep at night. This deep sleep, in turn, enables the body to heal in a myriad of subtle but important ways -- for instance, by facilitating the ongoing repair and regeneration of tissue.

MORE POWERFUL IDEAS FROM A RELAXATION EXPERT

For even more healthful everyday relaxation techniques, I called psychiatrist James S. Gordon, MD, psychiatrist and founder and director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, DC, and author of *Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression*. Dr. Gordon says the way to a saner, healthier and happier life is to practice relaxation at least several times a day. *Here are some of his effective techniques...*

- ① • **Close your eyes and breathe deeply into the belly.** Sit quietly for a few minutes, eyes closed, belly relaxed, and breathe deeply, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. If you can do this twice a day, you'll find that you can look at the world differently, he says. "We are constantly in high gear -- just taking a few minutes like this gives you fresh perspective and actually changes your psychology and physiology."
- ② • **Go outdoors.** Use nature as a no-cost, convenient, personal spa. Numerous studies show that going outside where there are trees and plants relieves stress and sharpens cognition.

At least 15 min/day sunshine

It's literally healing -- a study of patients recovering from surgery found that those with windows facing trees healed faster and took fewer pain medications than patients without a view.

- **Even brief spurts of movement help.** It would take pages to list all the proven health benefits associated with regular exercise -- just one of which is that it boosts brain neurotransmitters that help ease anxiety. Research has shown that simply taking a brief walk (indoors or out) can improve your mood... leading Dr. Gordon to advise grabbing *any* chance you can to move around, for example, periodically getting up from your desk to take stretch breaks, walking up steps instead of taking an escalator, taking a walk after dinner.
- **Build actual activity into your schedule.** If you want to maximize your relaxation prescription, you need to engage in regular, extended periods of exercise. You've tried but failed before? The key to commitment is finding exercise that you enjoy. As Dr. Gordon observes, "jogging is great for health -- but if you hate to jog, it's not great for *you*." You don't have to be "serious" and "focused" to get the benefits, he adds -- consider dancing each morning to your favorite CDs... immersing yourself into the deeply serene environment of a swimming pool for a few laps several times a week ... biking around the neighborhood... sampling different classes to try Pilates, yoga, karate or the zippy Zumba dance technique -- the list of possibilities is endless.

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HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?

Dr. Gordon suggests looking to your life for signals that you're relaxing well and sufficiently -- or that you need a bit more. Signs that you need to increase your "relaxation prescription" include a tendency to be irritated and impatient... difficulty focusing clearly... insensitivity to the needs of others... digestive upset... insomnia... and feeling anxious or depressed. If that sounds like a typical day or week in your life, it's time to sit down, breathe deeply and contemplate which of the many relaxation activities sound good to you right now -- and then do them.

Source(s):

James S. Gordon, MD, psychiatrist and founder and director of The Center for Mind-Body Medicine, and clinical professor, departments of psychiatry and family medicine, Georgetown University, both in Washington, DC. He is author of *Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression* (Penguin), which contains these and many other techniques for relaxation. www.cmbm.org.

- ④ laughter - good, deep belly laugh :)
- ⑤ smile

Also
* hum
* whistle

"Bless" for good health!

Breathing
laughter
Exercise
sunshine
smile

All free