



The Value of a

VACATION

Even in a recession, a vacation is well worth the investment, says Jennifer Johnson.

I know what you may be thinking: she's out of her mind for writing an article that encourages readers to take a vacation during an economic crisis! It may seem like there's no way you can afford your annual vacation this year. But, I invite you to consider that you cannot afford to not go. Symptoms of stress—irritability, moodiness, depression, anxious thoughts, decreased concentration, feelings of being overwhelmed, sleep disturbances, eating more or less than usual, or using alcohol or drugs to relax—typically increase for many people surrounding stressful circumstances, such as a recession. This is all the more reason to keep your vacation plans intact this year.

The origins of the word "vacation" go back to Latin to the root *vacare*, which means "to be empty." A true vacation involves emptying ourselves, freeing ourselves from the details of our daily grinds. It requires leaving behind the ties that bind us to our work and other responsibilities—fax machines, laptops, cell phones—and entering into the realm of relaxation and joy. If we truly empty ourselves from our daily routines, a vacation holds the potential to help us deeply experience joy and then incorporate more of that joy into our lives when we return home.

Studies show that there are psychological and health benefits of regular vacations. Research by Mina Westman, Ph.D., of Tel Aviv University demonstrates that vacations result in decreased work absenteeism, job stress and burnout. Dov Eden, Ph.D., also of Tel Aviv University, stated in an article in *Medical News Today* that employees who take a complete break from work benefit the most from a vacation and are less likely to experience burnout. But we must truly empty ourselves, as Dr. Eden also indicates that those who are unable to take a complete break from work while away on vacation are *not* likely to recover from the negative effects of chronic job stress, which can bring on chronic disease.

To accomplish this freedom, focus on what brings you joy when planning your vacation. People who are introverted may prefer a week at a quiet beach or a yoga retreat, while extroverts may prefer a more active vacation such as sightseeing in a large city. If you're traveling with others, be certain to consider everyone's needs and preferences in the planning process,

and create a balance of stimulating and relaxing activities. The keys to a beneficial vacation are to create a change of venue from your everyday routine and to spend time engaging in activities that bring you relaxation and enjoyment. If the trip to your destination is too stressful or the activities that you plan are stressful, this negates the positive benefits you could receive from your vacation. Similarly, if your vacation stretches your budget to the degree that it causes you to feel stress while you're away, this will likely negate the vacation's potential positive effects, too. So, plan realistically and either set aside money for your vacation throughout the year or plan something that won't be too much of a financial burden.

During your vacation, explore things that you've wanted to do but have not permitted yourself. Let go of feelings of guilt or feelings that you don't deserve a vacation, and refuse to let those feelings stop you. Use your time away to explore new ways of being or new activities. If you're typically an early riser, allow yourself to sleep in. If you typically sleep in, awake to take in a beautiful sunrise. Shake things up a little, and get yourself out of any ruts that you may have worked yourself into.

As you return from vacation, evaluate what worked well to help you relax and enjoy yourself while you were away and try to incorporate some of those activities or habits into your routine. For example, if you visited the beach and discovered that watching the shorebirds helped you feel at peace, put up bird feeders in your backyard when you return home. If your creative spirit felt renewed by visits to an art museum or gallery, schedule an hour every few weeks to visit your local museum or gallery, or sign up for a photography or painting course.

In addition to incorporating new activities, also try incorporating some of your vacation habits into your daily routine. Did you sleep more, meditate daily, eat more healthily, take daily walks, or engage in creative activities such as journaling about your experiences? Think about how you can make room for these healthy and relaxing vacation habits in your regular schedule. For example, try getting up 10 minutes early to do daily journaling, meditate or to pack a healthy lunch. Or, go to bed 30 minutes earlier every night. If you felt recharged by renewing your sense of adventure while you were away, then make a plan to include small adventures into your

Quick Tips

for getting the most from your vacation

Consider your primary needs regarding your vacation—adventure, solitude, family time, peace, convening with nature, laughter or spiritual renewal—and gear your trip toward meeting those needs. Also, consider your travel needs. Do you prefer to travel by plane or car? Is travel stressful for you? If so, plan a trip that's closer to home.

Do something new (or long forgotten) at least once on your vacation—ride a bike, draw, try new types of foods, go for a walk, or initiate conversation with someone whom you don't know.

Try to incorporate some of the things you enjoyed on your vacation into your daily routine at home—go to bed earlier, get up earlier, take regular walks or engage in creative activities.

life, such as outdoor physical activities, saying yes to things to which you typically say no, or trying something new at least once a week.

While you're away having fun, be sure to take some photographs of the happiest memories from your trip and gather mementos of your happiest times to bring back. Research by Julia K. Boehm and Sonya Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., psychologists who have extensively researched happiness, indicates that replaying or reliving happy events results in increased feelings of life satisfaction. So upon your return from vacation, as you make room in your day for some newly discovered activities that bring you joy, be sure to also schedule in some moments to daydream about your last vacation and to start imagining your next one! ■

Sources: "The Promise of Sustainable Happiness" by Julia K. Boehm and Sonya Lyubomirsky in *The Handbook of Positive Psychology*; "Work, Stress, and Health" by George Hunka in *Medical News Today*, www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/89906.php; "The Impact of Vacation and Job Stress on Burnout and Absenteeism" by Mina Westman and Dalia Etzion in *Psychology & Health*, www.faculty.ucr.edu/~sonja/index.html

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