

The Usual Suspects

Relaxation 101

An Introductory Course

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Relaxation 101 *An Introductory Course*

Vacation, What Vacation?

Vacationing means many different things to many different people. For some, it means the whirlwind tour of every single museum, monastery, cathedral, or fortress in a foreign country. For others, it means participating in every possible physical activity within a 24-hour period, including tennis, golf, windsurfing, SCUBA diving, horseback riding, and jet-skiing. While these activities have some therapeutic value for curing the stressed mind, they often leave the vacationer exhausted as a result, requiring a “vacation from the vacation” upon returning home.

Some forms of stress in today’s world results from falling victim to an overwhelming number of external demands that we cannot control. Work, family, finances, recreational activities, congested urban living, all make significant demands on us that we feel run our lives. We are on the receiving end of what I refer to as a nonstop stream of “noise.”

In order to continue to function, we need a break from it, or risk ending up in a straightjacket. Tours or sports vacations are somewhat helpful in that they eliminate some forms of “noise”, but they often substitute one form for another. Either way, it’s still “noise”, and you’re still stressed out. Which leads you to ask, vacation, what vacation?

Basket Cases

Stressed-out vacationers are everywhere. You’ve seen them in hotel lobbies, at the airport, in restaurants. They’re rushing to catch the bus, hurrying to make that tee-off time, quaffing down their fast-food, pushing their way through queues. Listen to them for five minutes, and you’d think you were in the worst place on earth. There’s always something wrong, whether it’s the food, the service, mode of transportation, or the number of cable TV channels in the hotel. Nothing is ever good enough. They return from their week of “relaxation” more stressed out than before.

There is Hope

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not against the tour or sports vacation, and it is not my intent to be critical of them. They can be quite stimulating and fun. However, for those looking to really get away from it all and engage in a little vacation for the mind, they are counter-productive.

Through numerous trips to warm tropical climates, I have discovered a simple method of curing stress that works real well, and I’m not talking about the Rummer, although it has medicinal qualities that are well documented. A vacation that is deliberately planned to have NO AGENDA is the single most-effective cure for everyday stress I can find. That’s right, you intend from the start to DO NOTHING, and lots of it. My experience with this strategy has enabled me to return from vacation time and time again, totally rested, invigorated, and looking forward to tackling new challenges.

Turn off the “Noise”

This simply means that you plan from the start to eliminate all forms of “noise” in advance. While that sounds elementary on the surface, the majority of vacationers simply haven’t the foggiest idea how to do it.

First, you need enough time. A minimum of 10 days or more, preferably 2 weeks, should be the least amount of time you should ever consider. Do not even bother with the one-week vacation, because you will spend 2 of the days in transit, and the 5 remaining days are nowhere close to the minimum required to relieve stress. I have found that it takes at least 7 or 8 consecutive days of doing nothing to get to the stage where you forget all about your stressful life back home and begin to relax.

Second, it is absolutely necessary to completely and totally disassociate yourself from your existence back home. This is critical. It means that you forget about your home, job, friends, responsibilities. Avoid CNN. Do not call in for messages or check your e-mail. Don't check in at the office to see how things are going! The secret here is that you must have 7 or 8 *consecutive* days where you totally disassociate yourself from your life. Fall off the wagon, and you're back to the beginning.

Only then will you reach a whole new level of relaxation that you never knew existed. You will begin to think on your own again. Things will make sense. You will begin to see how ridiculous things like e-mail, television, cell phones are, and how they add to your stresses by controlling you and your life.

Plan "B"

This is one of the single most valuable tools for eliminating vacation-induced stresses, that is, things that happen to you while you're away. People always have a pre-conceived plan or idea how that "perfect vacation" will be. Expectations include on-time departures, first-class airline seating, gourmet meals, personal limousine transportation, five-star accommodations, and somebody waiting on YOU hand and foot – all for \$299!

The fact is, it's never been accomplished by anybody – we're batting zero as a civilization here folks, so why do we continue to think that we're going to be the one to break the streak. Forget about the plan and go with the flow – look for a "Plan B."

The secret: when something does not go as planned, do not panic. This takes discipline and practice. Remain calm and ask what alternatives are available – then LISTEN CLOSE. The alternative suggestion will often be better than the original plan. You will most likely be treated to a splendid new adventure if you simply go along with it.

I cannot count the number of times "Plan B" has worked out better for me. I have met many interesting people, sampled great local cuisine, been treated to an experience not generally available to visitors – all because I listened with an open mind and went with the flow. Better still, I have stories to tell of these great adventures!

Mantras

This is always fun. During every vacation, someone comes up with some new expression that defines the moment. It can be used over and over again to remind us of that moment, and is quite effective at recreating it. I have collected a number of them, "mantras" I call them, because they seem to have special powers when used. Try them and you will see what I mean.

- "I'm not that important back home" – This is a good basic mantra for those having difficulty dissociating themselves from home and office. It one might be a bit tough to swallow for those who have dedicated their lives to climbing the corporate ladder. You

will find it quite effective in the early phases of “letting go.” Use it often during this phase.

- ❑ “Too much is just enough” – Vacations should be times in your life where you eliminate the normal bounds of conduct and pull out all the stops. You sometimes need to remind yourself of this when you are trying to decide if you want to order the lobster or the rock crab – have both! A corollary to this basic concept is the expression “Because I can.”
- ❑ “More fun than we deserve” – This one comes into play early in the vacation cycle when you think you’re relaxed, and are definitely having fun. It adds to the delirium of the moment.
- ❑ “We’re here and they’re not” – This is my favorite. Try saying it amongst your travel companions while relaxing under a palm tree on the beach with your favorite beverage in hand. You will then fully understand its power. “They” of course, are your unfortunate friends left behind in sub-zero temperatures under a three-foot blanket of wet snow. No need to elaborate on who “we” are.
- ❑ “No problem, mon” – Everybody knows this one, but in order for it to work, YOU have to believe in it. That’s right, no problem means just that, no problem. Get used to it.
- ❑ “Less is more. Nothing is best” – This one is great for those who are really well on the road to a relaxing vacation. Repeat it while you are reclining under a coconut tree with a Rummer in your hand. It reminds those around you that you have been successful so far, in your quest to eliminate all forms of stress-related sources from your existence, and intend to take it to the next level.
- ❑ “If I were any more relaxed, I’d be dead” – When you find yourself muttering this one, it is proof that you have reached the maximum level of relaxation.
- ❑ “The less I know, the better” – A good one for those who want to flaunt the fact that they have successfully reached the maximum level of mental relaxation.
- ❑ “Dumb and Dumber” – This one takes the mental “relaxation zone” to a whole new level. On the surface, it doesn’t make any sense, but try saying it amongst a group of people who are in the “zone” – you’ll see what I mean.
- ❑ “Groundhog Day” – Taken from the movie where Bill Murray wakes up every morning to re-live the same day over and over. Once you have been in the “relaxation zone” for several days, they will appear to repeat themselves. This is good because you are really well on your way to being cured.

Props

Props are necessary to enhance the experience. You must have some form of trivial mental stimulation.

- ❑ The Rummer – I should not need to elaborate on the value of this basic prop. So vital is it to the success of your vacation that you should never be without. An adequate supply of limes is also critical.

- ❑ The “Traveler” – A traveler is a fresh beverage that you bring with you wherever you go - don’t leave the boat without it. You should always be aware of the location of the next beverage refueling stop and plan accordingly. You never want your bevy to run out. This one is very popular with Canadians, who come from a country where it is a criminal offense to carry open liquor from the refrigerator to the living room. In the Caribbean, there are no such laws, and the ability to carry one with you down the street provides an exhilarating feeling of freedom.
- ❑ The Sarong – This is not something that is worn frequently, if at all, back home. It’s too cold there, and I don’t think it would qualify under the “Casual Friday” rule. It adds considerably to the Caribbean ambiance. Ladies always look great in a sarong. Guys like ladies who look great in a Sarong. Be sure to add this item to the travel budget, and hit the shops early in the trip.
- ❑ A Perfect “10” – Ladies on a Caribbean vacation simply cannot resist the rare opportunity to look like Bo Derek. Hair braids look great with a tan. Be sure to keep them for a few days after returning home, just to rub it in.
- ❑ Shoeless Joe – If your feet are reasonably tough, you can actually go the whole trip without wearing shoes. There are real bonus points to be scored with your business colleagues back home when you announce that you did not wear shoes the entire time.

Non-Props

Make sure you leave these behind:

- ❑ Cell phones, pagers, computers – If you’re planning to “work” while you’re on vacation, don’t bother coming. Each time you think about your stressful existence back home, you are resetting the relaxation clock back to zero, meaning that you will never reach a truly restful state.

Don’t call in for your messages or dial in for your e-mail. They can really wait until you get back. Trust me, you’re not that important, and the world will actually function for a few days without you.

- ❑ Jewelry and other expensive items – You are on vacation, so take a holiday from trying to impress other people. They don’t care. You will spend the entire time worrying to death about being robbed.
- ❑ Hair dryers, cosmetics, 27 changes of clothes – Again, you’re on holidays and it’s hot out, so you don’t really need to lug all this stuff around with you. A dress code in the Caribbean means that you have to be dressed, no more.
- ❑ Watches – Take your watch off for the entire holiday and see what happens. A watch is unnecessary because you can do what you want, WHEN you want, not when the watch tells you. Besides, there are only three time periods in the Caribbean – morning, afternoon, and night. You don’t need a watch to identify them.

Turning Points

From my experience, the road to total mental relaxation follows a familiar path:

1. **Anticipation** – Prior to departure, there is a period of anticipation where you keep reminding yourself how great it's going to be to get away from it all. This is said in the heat of battle, as you struggle to stay afloat of the daily stresses, compounded by the stresses of trying to leave.
2. **Enlightenment** – During the first few days of vacation, you undergo a period of total enlightenment, where you are no longer bothered by the stresses of daily life back home, but are not really relaxed yet. You think you are relaxed, but have yet to reach the advanced state.
3. **“Decompression”** – After about 7 or 8 days, and it really takes this long, you will undergo a phenomenon that is truly remarkable. You will reach a turning point in your vacation where you will just “let go.” I refer to it as “decompression”. You will know you've hit this point when all of the sudden, you will want to do absolutely nothing, or less. Symptoms include incoherent sentences that you never complete, repetition of several of the Mantras listed above, and general disregard for orderly life. This is the critical point in your recovery from stress.
4. **Total Cure** – After a few days of total indulgence of the “decompressed” state, you will reach a point where you need mental stimulation again. You will think about your life back home, your job, and you will possibly even miss it. This is the final indication that you have been “cured”, and you're ready to return. This is what you've come down here for. This was your mission.

Mental Floss

This is really what it's all about – providing every opportunity for you to air out the mind. It only occurs once you have reached the “decompressed” state, and is not always easy to achieve. Many are uncomfortable with the idea of doing nothing on vacation, scheduling endless streams of activities that postpone this vital phase.

Real mental relaxation comes from turning off all the “noise”. You can control this by *planning* a lot of quiet “think time” in advance. Plan an afternoon lounging around on the deck of the boat, listening to your favorite tunes, a Rummer in hand, watching the world go by. Pull up a cooler to a secluded beach and lounge the day away sitting under the shade of a coconut tree. Take three hours to have breakfast. Sit out on the boat at night and look at the stars.

With the “noise” turned off, it is amazing how quickly you begin to “work things out” in your mind. Things that were troubling you will come into focus, and you will be able to really begin to deal with them. It will also become quite clear after a few days of this, just how consumed you are with trivialities in your day-to-day existence. This really becomes evident after you have had a chance to think with all the “noise” turned off. The experience reminds me a lot about a scene in the movie *City Slickers* where Curly (the cowboy played by Jack Palance) turns to Billy Crystal and says, “You people worry about a lot of SHIT.” How true.

Later in the film, Curly shares his idea of **the meaning of life** with Crystal when he says that you have to look for “that one thing” (of course, it's the one thing that's important to you). There is no question that several days of “think time” will help put you in touch with “that one thing.” Great therapy for the weary mind.

Pay it *Forward*

Once you've been enlightened and cured of mental stress, you will have to re-integrate with society again when you return home. It will not be possible to go to work shoeless, dressed in a sarong, with a Rummer in your hand, and Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" playing in the background. It will be a tough adjustment.

For a few days, you will be totally dysfunctional. You will reflect back on the great time you had as you try to get your head around the task at hand. Eventually you will return to normal.

It is my experience that people return right back to their old stressed-out selves within a few days. You can tell because the usual Mantras no longer work on them. You call them up and recite the "more fun than we deserve" mantra, and they bite your head off. "Why are you bothering me?" they ask.

It is my recommendation that, on returning back, you incorporate one or more things learned on vacation into your everyday life. Take two hours for lunch. Throw out your cell phone. Wear your "parrot shirt" to work on Casual Friday. Play a Jimmy Buffett CD while stuck in traffic. Don't allow yourself to return to the old level of stress. Take it easy, enjoy your regular life more, and focus on what's important. Do not allow yourself to be caught up again in the trivialities of everyday life, especially now that you know better. Pay it *forward*

Try saying "No problem, mon", the next time something doesn't go right. It works.