

**All this
relaxing
is stressing
me out**



YOU WOULDN'T THINK YOU NEED A LESSON IN CHILLING OUT,
BUT IT TURNS OUT LOTS OF US ARE PRETTY BAD AT IT.
TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY BY UPGRADING YOUR DOWNTIME.

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YOU KNOW THAT twirl-in-a-meadow feeling you're supposed to have after R & R? For me, it's more of a bathe-with-a-toaster feeling. When long weekends, special occasions, or vacations would roll around on my calendar, my first thought was always the same: I can't wait for my time off...to be over.

Not that I didn't want to kick back, but the go-to moves that were supposed to be relaxing—things like vegging out, grabbing drinks with friends, and skipping town—left me feeling edgy and unfulfilled. I'd head back to work more exhausted and confused than ever. I was doing all the right things to decompress, so why the eff wasn't it working?

I thought this made me kind of a weirdo, but apparently, I've got company. More than 40 percent of adults say they don't do enough or aren't sure they're doing enough to manage their stress, according to the

Stress in America Survey released last year by the American Psychological Association (APA). So why is de-stressing such a puzzle? For starters, making the most of your downtime isn't one-size-fits-all. Just because certain activities are the restorative norm (think: bubble bath and a glass of wine) doesn't mean they'll work for you, says Emma Seppälä, PhD, author of *The Happiness Track*. What makes an activity restorative isn't necessarily the activity itself but whether or not it fits your personality. If what you're doing to relax is against your nature (say, going to a silent retreat when you're super chatty), the body's relaxation response—decreased heart rate, slowed breathing, low-


ered blood pressure, and reduced muscle tension—won't, well, respond.

What's more, relaxing isn't about doing nothing at all or trying to ditch stress entirely. While you don't want a flood of stress hormones like cortisol, a little bit is important for a variety of bodily functions, including circadian rhythms, says Shawn M. Talbott, PhD, author of *The Secret of Vigor*. Cortisol is also associated with feelings of excitement—important for powering through challenges. Ideally, you'll choose activities that keep your stress hormones in a healthy excited-and-energetic range and don't cross over to the dark side of anxious and irritable, a sign that your bod is on cortisol overload.

The problem is that we tend to forge ahead with the relaxation classics. If

you have an adventurous streak, cuddling with your Kindle isn't going to refuel you. If activism nurtures your soul, being waited on during a lavish resort vacay may leave you feeling icky. "Forced relaxation can actually lead to more tension because you feel guilty that you're not doing it right," says Talbott. Instead of counteracting your fight-or-flight response, you send it into overdrive. This can lead to short-term annoyances, like brain fog, anxiety, and sluggishness, and eventually more serious health problems, including burnout, diabetes, and heart disease.

Worse, women's stereotypical me-time is rife with unhealthy habits. Men get




the message that they should spend downtime being physical—hitting the gym, playing ball, or going for a run—which short-circuits the stress response quickly. Women, on the other hand, tend to cope with stress using unhealthy and sedentary behaviors, like binge-watching TV and surfing the web, as the 2015 APA survey confirms. Even vegging out can leave you a stress mess, because although it distracts you on the surface, women often ruminate about nerve-racking experiences long after they're over, Talbott says.

We also buy into the notion that food is therapy. The APA survey found that more than 40 percent of women reported eating too much or eating unhealthy foods because of stress in the past month, compared to only 24 percent of men. Enter weight gain, high blood pressure, and depression. On the other hand, says Talbott, when you actually relax right and are able to lower your stress levels, your metabolism functions properly (sayonara, belly fat), your brain stays sharp (hello, eloquent answer to your boss), and your skin looks fabulous (how *you* doin'?).

HOW TO GET IN THE FLOW

Adding another activity to your already packed-to-do list in order to chill out seems counterintuitive. But if you fully engage in something that you have a legitimate interest in, your body will go on autopilot.



Called being in "flow" by psychologists, this intense focus coincides with a cocktail of hormones and chemicals that blend to calm your nervous system and slow your breathing, according to researchers at Duke University, making it possible for an otherwise Zen-challenged woman to recharge.

The more committed and proactive you are going into an activity, the more refreshing the experience will be, Talbott says. Schedule at least one hour a day to recharge (not counting your seven to eight hours of beauty sleep), and value that time as much as you do date night. "Restorative activities aren't luxuries but necessities," says clinical psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo, PhD, author of *Better Than Perfect*. They are as important for your health as diet and exercise are and shouldn't be treated as something to squeeze in when you can.

Experiment with different kinds of activities—high-octane, slo-mo, totally paused, even those that are typically considered chores—and pay attention to

how you feel before, during, and after, the experts say. Are you excited for that spa day or pottery class or dreading it? Afterward, do you feel relaxed, centered, and energized or tired, bored, and uninspired? Welli, a wellness app that doubles as a crash course on finding your flow (welliapp.com), suggests evaluating



WHILE MY FRIENDS FELT REFRESHED AFTER HIGH-OCTANE CONCERTS, TRIPS, AND PARTIES, I THRIVED ON LOW-KEY SOLO ACTIVITIES, LIKE READING, CLEANING, AND BROWSING VINTAGE SHOPS AND ART GALLERIES.



your workday breaks, according to researchers at Baylor University. Hiatuses don't even have to consist of nonwork activities to be restorative; perhaps going for a cup of coffee just makes you worry about all the calls you might be missing. People who do what they want to do or like to do with their time—including work-related tasks like catching up on e-mails or organizing notes—feel an increase in job satisfaction and a decrease in emotional exhaustion, the study authors found.

Once you've picked out your activities, fully commit. If your phone rings mid-meditation, return the call later. If you're digging into a box of Crayola 24 and your adult coloring book, don't check Instagram. When multiple things are competing for your attention, it can make you feel more pressed for time than you truly are, amplifying your anxiety, according to a 2015 study in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. "In the long run, you'll end up feeling worse because you're not fully committing to working, resting, or playing," says Christy Lambert, a life coach in Richland, Washington.

"Another thing to remember is that when we do something all the time, its positive effects can start to diminish," says Lambert. To ensure your fave restorative activities stay restorative, it's important to add elements of novelty to keep things

fresh. Instead of just streaming the same old rom-com, turn it into a mini-event. Choose a classic flick you've never seen but always wanted to, prepare a fancy popcorn recipe, or invite a neighbor over (better yet, do all three).

For me, it took falling asleep in the middle of a Stone Temple Pilots concert to finally admit what I'd always known: that while my friends felt refreshed after high-octane experiences, like concerts, trips, and parties, I thrived on low-key solo activities, like reading, cleaning, and staycationing—browsing vintage shops and art galleries in a new neighborhood.

Your definition of relaxation should be as unique as your Starbucks order and as sacred as #TGIT—because when it's time to punch out, your first thought should always be the same: I can't wait for my time off...to start. ■



RELAX BETTER!

How you unwind has a lot to do with who you are. Find your bliss here.

The Creative

You're always dreaming up your next project, so unwinding can be tough. Pick activities that are both stimulating and mindful. **Try** starting a blog, viewing an art-house film, or indulging in an adult coloring book.

The Socialite

You're at your best in a crowd getting swept up in the moment. **Try** calling a faraway friend, joining a fitness class or sports league, or organizing a clothing swap with coworkers.

The Adventuress

Since you get bored easily, über-stimulating activities that test your limits are tops. **Try** training for a 5K, cooking a new type of cuisine, or traveling to a new destination (sans itinerary).

The Girl Boss

Look for activities that are mindful with a hint of accomplishment. **Try** redecorating one corner of your pad, watching top TED Talks, or attempting an intricate updo.

The Soloist

Not into the whole people thing? Block out uninterrupted chunks of quiet time. **Try** taking an online coding class, getting crafty with a DIY project, or walking dogs for a local shelter.

your experiences on measures like "I felt the activity had just the right amount of challenge" and "I didn't notice time passing." Over time, tracking trends will help you nail down which activities are most likely to engage you...and which you should steer clear of.

The same "it's personal" strategy can be applied to

