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CAN 20 MINUTES A DAY CHANGE YOUR LIFE?

Don't worry: this is not another article exhorting you to get a minimum amount of daily physical exercise. Yes, 20 minutes a day of that is good, too. But what if you discovered that less than a sitcom's worth of time devoted to being entirely inactive could also make you stronger and healthier?

The inactivity that provides health benefits isn't sitting on the couch, watching sitcoms, of course. But recent research has demonstrated an amazing array of positive effects from putting down the remote—and the computer mouse, iPod and cellphone—and engaging in one of several forms of quiet time for your brain. Meditation, relaxation, visualization or even good old-fashioned prayer—all of these practices kick brain chemistry into a different gear. The net effect? It's like hitting a powerful "refresh" button, improving job performance as well as quality of life.

Our modern surroundings provide so much sensory stimulation, and so little quiet time. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, in part because our "input" circuits get overloaded. Yes, it's amazing to have 1000

songs available at the flick of a scroll wheel, or 100 channels at the click of a remote—and to be able to communicate instantly with a customer in South Burlington or Siberia. But the brain doesn't get any down time from the flood of information.

Today, most jobs require our brains to be fully engaged. It's a daily, ongoing struggle to filter and prioritize all the demands of incoming and outgoing communication. With constantly ringing phones, whirring faxes and the "You've got mail!" guy nagging us from inside the computer, we have

to take active steps to seek meditative refuge.

The outward shape of the "time-out" option you practice matters less than the inner state it conjures. It's important to choose something that fits in well with your lifestyle and belief system. Equally important is setting aside the time every day, even if it means turning off the phones, closing your office door and hanging a "Do Not Disturb" or "Gone

Fishin'" sign on the knob. Studies have shown that the increased productivity of employees who do some form of meditation or relaxation more than compensates for the time they take during the workday to do it.

Twenty minutes to better health—now there's a mantra we can all get behind.

Compare the zoom and swirl of a modern office to the agrarian work environment of the nineteenth century. A farmer worked tremendously hard, and the risks were high: crop failure could mean starvation for his family. Yet much of his back-breaking labor was accompanied only by the rustle of wind or the rhythmic strike of his tools on the soil. The mind could settle into a reflective groove while the body toiled.



CHECKLIST: THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

“Just relax!” Ironically, this sometimes becomes an expression of exasperation, uttered in frustration when rising tensions begin to boil over.

Biochemically, relaxing is often easier said than done, especially when the body is undergoing the physical manifestations of stress: increased heart rate and blood pressure, along with elevated levels of cortisol and adrenaline in the bloodstream. These biological preparations for fight or flight evolved to help ancient man outwit and outlast primitive dangers: an unexpected woolly mammoth at the cave door, for example. Modern day stress survivors are more likely to face sticky situations like overscheduled days at the office, jammed e-mail inboxes and conflicting demands between work and family life. The unexpected appearance of an extinct mega-mammal would actually provide some welcomed comic relief.

In the 1970's, Dr. Herbert Benson pioneered the use of a technique called relaxation response to combat the physiological effects of stress. From the ancient principles of meditation, the Harvard physician distilled a simple strategy to calm and clear the mind, prescribing 20 minutes of daily practice. In the decades since, Benson and other researchers in the field of mind-body medicine have demonstrated that regularly practicing the relaxation response provides a stunning array of health benefits, for medical conditions ranging from hypertension to chronic pain.

The technique itself is easy to learn. Here are the basic steps:

1) Pick a word, short phrase or sound to repeat.

RESOURCES

>>Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response*. [New York: Harper, 2000.] Updated, expanded version of the Harvard doctor's classic book—his pioneering work on treating physical disease by managing stress.

>>en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meditation. Excellent overview of meditation history, forms and health benefits, with links to scientific studies and practical sites.

>>www.mbmi.org/basics/mstress_RAW.asp. Simple list of basic stretches to do at your desk to relieve muscle tension, along with a short description of the progressive muscle relaxation technique.

MEDITATION: THE MIND MATTERS

The origins of meditation date back thousands of years, to the ancient religions of Asia. But meditation does not have to be part of a religious belief system or spiritual practice to have tremendous healing powers.

And modern science is now proving how powerful meditation can be. New imaging technology shows that regular meditative practice may actually rewire the brain's internal circuitry. It promotes better communication between the amygdala, which is responsible for triggering the body's reflexive “fight-or-flight” chemistry, and the pre-frontal cortex, where decision-making powers can override the more primitive response. Someone who routinely meditates may experience a different physical reaction when confronted with a stressful situation. Over time, that person's body is much less likely to suffer the longterm damage that chronic stress causes. Regular meditation may even strengthen the immune system.

Many approaches to meditation have evolved over the millenia. They all have key elements in common: quieting the active mind into a passive state and calming the body by concentrating on slow, steady breathing. One specific technique is called visualization: picturing yourself in a peaceful place. By imagining the sights, sounds and physical sensations of a secluded beach, for example, you allow other cares and troubles to melt away.

Another strategy is called progressive muscle relaxation. It helps clear the mind by purging tension from the body. Each session begins by tensing, then relaxing, muscles from the feet to the scalp. With guided imagery, a recorded voice helps create a calm mental environment by leading you through steps such as breathing, muscle relaxation and imagining serene surroundings. But some people find the sound of someone else's voice distracting, not soothing.

The goal is to find what works for you. And to practice whatever practice you find most relaxing.

2) Sit in a quiet place, in a comfortable position and close your eyes.

3) Scan your body for muscle tension, starting from your feet, and relax your muscles from toe to head.

4) Breathe slowly, but naturally, and repeat your word silently to yourself as you exhale.

5) Assume a passive attitude. If outside thoughts creep in, just return your focus to repeating the word.

6) After 10-20 minutes, give yourself a minute or two of transition time

back to the “real world” before opening your eyes or standing.

7) Practice one or two times a day.

Many resources are available to help you get started. The key to the relaxation response is regular practice. Once your mind and body become accustomed to shifting into the relaxation response-induced state, it is possible do “mini-relaxations” throughout the day: conjure moments of calm whenever you have a spare minute or whenever the need arises. Then you'll never have to fear the arrival of stress at your door, no matter how hairy (or woolly!) the situation gets.



TWENTY MINUTES TO BETTER HEALTH

- Investing 20 minutes daily to refresh your mental and spiritual energy pays clear dividends: improving stamina, focus and overall physical health.
- There are many effective forms of down time for your brain; what matters most is establishing a regular habit of practice in a quiet environment.
- Meditation and the relaxation response are simple, proven strategies for hitting the brain's refresh button.



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