

CLAIMING THE EMPTY SPACES

The Importance of Idle Time in a Fast-Forward World

You're just about to leave for a dentist appointment, when you receive a phone call saying the dentist has been called out on emergency and will have to reschedule your appointment.

Congratulations! You are the winner of one unexpected free hour!

What will you do with your winnings?

Answer your email? Return to the project you were working on before you had to leave? Return phone calls? Run errands?

Ever consider doing *nothing*?

If you're like many of us today, the thought of doing absolutely nothing for *an entire hour* seems as wasteful as throwing a week's worth of groceries out with the garbage. Indeed, free time with nothing to do can generate near panic among some of us who are overloaded and time-starved. Or it can make us feel guilty, as if we aren't working hard enough or devoted enough to our task to spend every available hour on it.

"We seem to have a complex about busyness in our culture," says Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. "Most of us *do* have time in our days that we could devote to simple relaxation, but we convince ourselves that we don't."

And yet, the harder we push, the more we need to replenish ourselves. As Stephan Rechtschaffen, author of *Timeshifting*, says, "Each of us needs some time that is strictly and entirely our own, and we should experience it daily."

The importance of this downtime cannot be overstated. We see more clearly, we listen more keenly, we work more creatively, we interact more gracefully.

On some level, we know this already. But claiming time to ourselves—time that is often labeled "unproductive"—and sticking to it can be difficult. We need to establish formal boundaries around our idle time to ensure that others—and we, ourselves—honor this time. Some ways to do this are:

Make a date with yourself. Put it in your calendar. Treat it as you would a business appointment.

Be clear about your needs. Don't moan vaguely, "I need more time to myself." State clearly, "I'd like to spend 20 minutes by myself in the morning before everyone gets up."

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL



HERDLINGER
ASSOCIATES

"Turning potential into performance"

P.O. Box 20389
St. Simons Island, GA 31522

912.634.9300
877.626.2960 (toll-free)
potential@herdlinger.com

Herdlinger Associates provides the vehicle to help people expand and develop the skills and attitudes necessary to achieve a higher degree of success both personally and professionally.

Our programs incorporate attitude development, goal setting and skills development into a process that results in greater utilization of the potential inherent in all people.

We help people create a plan that enables them to balance the profit motives of their business with the personal motives of their lives.

Our professional staff is committed to a common purpose:

**Developing People
to
Achieve Their Full Potential
...That's What We Do!**

Learn more about Herdlinger Associates at our website...

www.herdlinger.com

Stand firm. Learn how to say “no” to co-workers, children, spouse or friend. In just a short while, you can say “yes,” but now is your time.

Be on the lookout for stolen moments. Use the canceled dental appointment to sit on a park bench watching pigeons.

Practice doing nothing. “Doing nothing” is an art, and like all art, you need to practice it to reach your highest potential.

How we define idle time varies by individual. For example, for one person, gardening may be meditative downtime, whereas for another, it is one more item on the to-do list (to be done as quickly as

possible). The woods is a great place to stroll through for one person, an opportunity to be in and with nature; for another, it’s a great place for a power walk while dictating letters into a small tape recorder.

Our idle time should be like a beautiful flower: it has no purpose. It’s just there. And yet, it refreshes us and reminds us of nature’s glory.

Do something that has no purpose other than joy. Take a half-hour a day to surprise and delight yourself. Keep it simple, and keep it consistent. If your idle time becomes a “program,” or becomes progress toward some productive goal, begin again.

It’s stunning, how simple it really is. ■

Burnout: A Toxic Byproduct of Not Enough Idle Time

“My candle burns at both ends / it will not last the night.” —Edna St. Vincent Millay

Though burnout resists simple definition, it is clear that it affects us physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

One of the first physical symptoms of burnout is fatigue and a sloth-like moving through one’s day. Intellectually, there may be a loss of creativity and sharpness in problem solving; cynicism may replace enthusiasm. Emotionally, the loss of dreams and expectations can result in feelings of helplessness and depression. In the social realm, isolation overtakes feeling of involvement, and spiritually, the person experiencing burnout may feel a lack of meaning or purposelessness to her life.

According to a recent study, one in three Americans is expected to burn out on the job in the near future and, in the two years preceding the study, 14% of the work force quit or changed jobs due to job stress.

How can you avoid becoming one of the burnout statistics? First, recognize the warning signs:

- feelings of frustration and never being caught up
- a feeling of lack of control about how to do your job or what goes on in the workplace
- emotional outbursts
- withdrawal and isolation
- dread of going to work
- frequent sickness or health problems
- increased alcohol or drug use or food consumption
- desire to quit (or run away) but fear of doing so

Taking a few days off or a vacation to Tahiti won’t contain the burnout. Neither will simply leaving one job for another. Burnout has more to do with attitudes, work styles and behavior than it does the specific job situation.

Here are some ways to avoid burnout:

Self-management. Take the time to set goals and objectives, review them with others, make sure they’re attainable and clear.

Stress management. Know your own responses to stress and develop a plan to manage it. Exercise, take breaks, eat healthfully, leave work at work, make time for play and rest.

Support systems. Family, friends, co-workers, professional organizations—all these support systems can help in times of stress.

Skill building. Look for challenges and opportunities to learn new skills and participate in activities that use your natural skills, talents and abilities. Rather than becoming stagnant, you’ll be able to grow.

Balance. Seek a balanced and well-structured lifestyle. Avoid boredom. Determine what’s important to you and create a lifestyle that embraces and supports you.

Think positively. Replace negativity with optimistic thinking. Helpless thinking is a major contributor to burnout.

Be creative. Look for a different approach to the same problems or to unpleasant situations. Break free from your everyday routine. Let your workspace express your individuality.

Humor and playfulness. Humor reduces stress, promotes physical healing, is essential for mental health and can add years to your life. No wonder they say humor is the best antidote. ■