Planning a Successful Multigenerational Holiday

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Millions of Americans are vacationing with three generations of family

In industrial and post-industrial societies there has been a marked decline in intergenerational contact. In most technologically advanced societies, there is a tendency toward age segregation, which means that in these societies there are fewer and fewer opportunities for intergenerational exchange, communication, and learning. This widening social and cultural gulf has also led to an increase in ageism. Ageism, first introduced by Robert Butler, is a prejudice against older adults often leading to a fear of aging and a distancing from older adults. A lack of intergenerational contact increases ageism (Butler, 1969). One effective way to combat ageist prejudice and...
stereotyping is to increase contact across generations. Proponents of the contact hypothesis, a theory in social psychology, suggest that contact and communication, especially equal contact and communication, have the potential to reduce negative biases and stereotypes (Everett, 2013).

As summer looms on the horizon many of us are planning a holiday that may well include multiple generations of family members. This well-appreciated down time provides people, who are often pressed for time, a rare opportunity to spend extended moments with our younger and older relatives. Indeed, roughly five million vacations in the United States involve three generations of family members. The Chicago Tribune reported that last year more than one quarter of American grandparents spent vacation time with their grandchildren https://www.parentmap.com/article/multigenerational-family-travel.

Most of us have become so pressed for time that we have neglected to affirm that support and exchange across the generations is important at every stage of life. It is well known that maintaining satisfying relationships with children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews promotes a sense of well-being and happiness. If you are on vacation with parents and grandparents you have the time to connect with them in a leisurely manner. You can converse, listen to and express thoughts, concerns or satisfactions without the nagging interruptions of work.

Even though social inter-generational connection is an important barometer of well-being, most of people do not have time to connect. In this blog I have written about the lack of free time before, but studies indicate that the situation is getting worse. There is a free time crisis in America. One in three Americans always feels rushed. 63 % of American children want their parents to work fewer hours. And yet, our work-oriented culture prevents people from taking much needed time off--to recharge the batteries and re-connect with family.

Many American workers have no vacation time. Of the US workers who do receive paid vacation, 33% do not use all of their allotted time (Donnan, 2005). Only 57 % of American workers use their vacation time, which is among the lowest rate in a 24-country survey. Many American workers, who do, in fact, take a vacation, still end up working during their “time off.” It appears that American workers sacrifice down time to the Protestant work ethic. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arian-salzman/millennial-generator-work-... Indeed, cultural values in the US promote a work ethic that is so
powerful it often undermines our health and well-being. Considering that studies have shown that having access to satisfying free time can reduce stress and increase happiness (Lloyd & Auld, 2002), it is a sad fact that workers feel stressed about their time off. We remain fully “at work” even though down time prevents heart disease, fatigue, and depression.

The absence of down time also has a negative impact on intergenerational relationships. The results of my ongoing research underscore the impact of time-compression on relationships across the generations. The majority of my respondent’s state that they enjoy seeing their children and grandchildren, but often feel that these tightly compressed get togethers were rushed. They felt frustrated by the lack of time to talk, to relax, watch a movie, or express thoughts, wishes, or concerns. Many of the people I interviewed said that they knew that their children could and would provide them instrumental support should the need arise. They also said, however, that they could use more emotional support from their children. Older family members receive great satisfaction from emotional family support—empathy, affection, and commitment (Mertz & Schuengel, 2009). A holiday gathering is one way of providing these feelings of connection and support. Indeed, an increasing awareness of the psychological and physical benefits of time off has resulted in a significant growth in the number of families that choose to take holidays together. In 2011, a hotel study group found that 40% of leisure travelers, or 20.8 million Americans, took a trip with family members of different generations. [http://www.nextavenue.org/top-10-multigenerational-vacation-destinations/](http://www.nextavenue.org/top-10-multigenerational-vacation-destinations/). AARP Travel research surveys found that of families that vacationed together 83% stated that their purpose was to bring the family together, to help build special memories (69 percent), connect grandparents with grandkids (50 percent), and enjoy quality time (36 percent) and time with younger generations (29 percent). [http://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2015/aarp-travel-research-multi-generational-travel.html](http://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2015/aarp-travel-research-multi-generational-travel.html).

All holidays are associated with a degree of stress. There are suggestions that make intergenerational holidays more satisfying for all. Recently several members of my large extended family met in Atlanta for my mother’s 80th birthday celebration. It was a great opportunity to talk with nieces and nephews I had not seen for a while. It also made me realize that in order to maximize the enjoyment of such times it was important for each person to be able to “do their own thing.” Given that everyone is busy and has time constraints, intergenerational family time needs to include private moments. Early morning walkers might retreat earlier in the evening, night owls might
stay up into the early morning and sleep late, and vegetarians may not wish to go to a barbeque place. Being sensitive and respectful of personal preferences is likely to increase enjoyment.

There are many effective ways to connect across the generations. Those who successfully construct relationships, especially equal relationships, both within their own generation and with older and younger generations have a better chance of maintaining their well-being and happiness throughout life (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014). Time together can promote intergenerational respect as well as an appreciation for wisdom of elders. If you are planning a holiday, consider one with your children, parents, grandparents, and/or siblings. There is a good chance that the experience will improve your long term relationships, build lasting memories, and make you feel happier and more connected to who you are and where you came from.