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## Summertime Blues

Vacations are an important ingredient in the recipe for a happy & fulfilled life

Posted Sep 19, 2013

Six hundred years ago, the great Persian poet Hafiz said “Time is the shop where everyone works hard to build enough love to break the shackle.”

The summer of 2013 is drawing to a close. School has started. The days are becoming shorter and cooler. Fall is in the air. It is a time of year when many working Americans, especially empty-nesters, can finally plan their summer vacations. Prices are lower; the crowds have thinned and they can hope for a more peaceful get-away. Or can they? All too often long awaited vacations turn into one extended weekend at the beach.

Vacations are an important ingredient in the recipe for a happy and fulfilled life. Unfortunately modern life seems to be ever more busy and more hectic. Research indicates that for most Americans a perceived lack of time is a major source of [stress](#). One in every three Americans state that they “always” feel rushed (Elliot, 2003). When we skip vacations, the lack of unencumbered free time leads to an increased risk for physical and psychological problems including [depression](#) and heart disease.

When Americans do manage to get away, it is all too often for a long weekend during which they remain “connected” to work through the computers, iPhones, and iPads that they bring along. In some ways, vacations have become as frantic as workdays. People feel compelled to cram a wide variety of “leisure” activities—days at the beach, holiday visits, going to amusement parks, or taking hiking trips--into a four-day weekends. When they return to work, they are exhausted, which, in turn, compounds the overwhelming demands of work and home. These scenarios are more likely to lead people away from a happy and satisfying life.

Increasingly, Americans are engaged in long hours of constant arduous work (Gini, 2003). This schedule is threatening the well-being of the country. The recent 2013 World [Happiness](#) Report ranked the happiest countries, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland, as nations in which well-being is promoted individually, socially, and culturally. In these societies, one of the reasons people are happier and healthier is because they have time off. In our wired world, most people spend their time multitasking—rushing from place to place, answering emails and texts. There are very few quality moments when we are not bombarded with technological demands. What’s more, the itch to respond to these demands has further accelerated the busy pace of life. Free time is a rare commodity. It is a rare moment indeed when we can do exactly what we want or spend time in a purposeful lack of activity.

Contemporary notions of “free time” arose out of the industrial revolution. Industrialization structured working hours and was supposed to result in an increase in free time. Evidence indicates, however, that in recent decades, the opposite appears to be the case, at least in the U.S. (Glover & Hemingway, 2005). Working hours have increased as vacation time has decreased. This decrease has corresponded to a nation-wide increase in stress related physical and psychological health concerns. American vacations have decreased to less than five days, often consisting of two long weekends a year. The average American worked 1.978 hours (49.5 weeks) in 2001, an increase of one week since 1990 (Negrey, 2004). The recent recession has

increased the long work day even more. Clearly there is a free time famine in the United States. The number of hours worked can serve as an indicator of a country's general quality of life. It is no wonder that in the aforementioned World Happiness Report, the United States ranks 17. In that happiness report, North American neighbors, Canada and Mexico both outrank the United States.

Americans rank the balance of work and life as an important factor influencing job satisfaction (Weber, 2004). Finding that balance is difficult, especially in a demanding and ageist world. By choice and demand, we continue to work increasingly longer hours and take fewer and shorter holidays. People who work longer hours, of course, understandably complain of fatigue and sleep disruption--conditions that often lead to more severe health concerns (Garhammer, 2002).

In the United States, social norms combined with stringent public and private work policies reinforce a relentless work ethic. The United States is the only industrialized country that does not mandate vacation days for its workers (Francis, 2006). Germany, France, Spain, Australia, Italy, and other developed nations all allow workers to take at least twenty mandated vacation days a year (Francis, 2006).

Like most Americans, I frequently find myself working long hours. I feel compelled to rush from place to place. I have too much to do and not enough time to do it. The pressures of these demands regularly affect my health and happiness. As I get older it becomes increasingly difficult to bounce back after each demanding project. Time for rest and renewal become more important.

As I women I also notice that there is a gendered component to the demands on my time. Women are much less likely than men to have unfettered time off. Many women do not remember when they last had a free day. Studies have found that more than half of American women think that they do not have enough free time. When women do take a vacation, most of them still must confront the second shift--housework, cooking, cleaning, even in if they are "away" at a "peaceful" cottage by the sea.

To compound the problem, older workers experience more [anxiety](#) about taking time off than do their younger counterparts. Older workers do not want their younger colleagues to think they are ill or too "tired" to work, so they avoid or [fear](#) taking time off from work (Tahmaseb-McConatha & Volkweing-

Caplan, 2012). As a result they struggle to put in exhaustingly long days. Despite the fact that evidence indicates that older workers are more reliable, punctual, take fewer sick days and have a higher work commitment than do younger workers, they are still subjected to ageist views.

By 2014, 41% of Americans 55 or older will be still be working and will make up over 21% of the U.S. labor force. It is important to let these older workers know that their work is valuable. They should also be told that it that because their well-being matters, it is acceptable to take earned time off. Regardless of the degree of the commitment, we all need free time to re-charge our batteries, which requires more than a long weekend.



Source: Lazy hazy days of summer