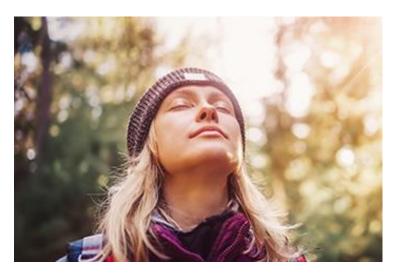# Downtime: Make the Most of Your Breaks

You're rushed. You're overbooked. You're going at top speed. Yet the more you do, the less you seem to get done. But there's a way to stop this stressful cycle.

"Pull the plug and give yourself some downtime," suggests Maryann Troiani, Psy.D., a psychologist in Barrington, Ill., and co-author of "Spontaneous Optimism: Proven Strategies for Health, Prosperity and Happiness." "Everybody needs some time just for themselves, to refresh and recharge both mentally and physically. When you come back after a break, you feel better and you work better, too."

Dr. Troiani defines downtime as a "break from the gottas -- as in I gotta do this and I gotta do that." It's unstructured and usually unplanned time when you do something you really want to do -- or, even better, nothing at all. She prescribes at least one hour of downtime two or three times per week.

Most Americans don't get even this small amount of time to themselves. "Even when you're alone, there are too many ways the world can intrude on you and vice versa -- cell phones, e-mail, voice mail. All those distractions dilute your creativity and energy," she says.

People also become experts at multitasking. Juggling family, career and other demands leaves little time for oneself.

Those lucky enough to have leisure time often believe they have to fill it with hobbies or errands. "But that's not downtime," says Dr. Troiani.

By the same token, you're missing the point if you obsessively schedule periods of downtime at the same time each week, whether you're in the mood or not.

Instead, just go with the flow. Give in to that urge to take a walk or to pick up that book you've been wanting to read. Pour a cup of tea and stop to watch the sunset.

Find the Time

"Don't think of downtime as goofing off," says Dr. Troiani. "It's an investment that helps you get control of your life -- particularly of the stress and tension. It calms down your body and makes your mind more focused so you can deal with things more effectively."

Even when you give yourself permission, though, it can still be hard to spot opportunities to take a break -- at least at first. The following suggestions can help you find more time for yourself:

- Cut the cords. Don't feel you have to respond to every signal from the outside world. Turn off your computer and leave the cell phone behind.

- Say no to "emotional vampires." "People who use you as a sounding board for whining and complaints can drain away a lot of your time and energy," says Dr. Troiani. If someone is constantly coming to you with gripes, set boundaries. Tell the person you have only five minutes, then use the time to focus on solutions.

- Play hooky. Look over your daily routine to see what's truly important and where you might cut yourself some slack. Can you miss that meeting or put off that trip to the store?

- Brown-bag it. Instead of fighting the crowds at the cafeteria, bring lunch from home and find a quiet, pleasant place to enjoy it. Use the extra time to take a walk.

- Seize the moment. The best downtime opportunities are often unplanned. Open your mind to what's happening around you and be willing to respond.

- Free your mind. Worries and other negative feelings can keep you from enjoying your downtime. To get rid of the clutter, visualize a vacuum cleaner as it pulls the bad feelings out of your head.

- Relieve the pressure. Don't expect too much of your downtime. The point isn't to write the great American novel, it's just to relax. Keep your expectations simple.

"Listen to your inner voice," advises Dr. Troiani. "See what your mind and body need at that moment. You don't need to make a lot of plans -- just do what feels right."