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Working hard to relax: Improving engagement in leisure time activities for a healthier work-life balance

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COMMENTS, CRITIQUE, AND INSPIRATION COLUMN


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In a work-centered environment, society, and life, leisure experiences are gifts that we must remember to give ourselves—gifts that we often have to work hard to get. For us, leisure experiences include a relaxed reading of the newspaper from cover to cover (Buettner, Shattell), a leisurely walk with the dog in the park (instead of just around the block; Buettner), taking a tap dance class (Shattell), or planting a garden (Reber). While each of these experiences is quite different, we can get totally “lost” while doing them. What make these activities most enjoyable are the intrinsic rewards we receive from them. Experts recognize that people differ in their tendency to seek out or respond to intrinsic rewards in leisure time activities. These inclinations can be attributable to personality differences and, in conjunction with situational factors, are important for understanding how we engage in leisure.

Leisure time activities do not come easily to all of us. The pressure to be productive that is inherent to life in academe (and other pressured work environments), with the addition of achievement-focused personality traits, can make it difficult to take time for leisure activities. Work-life demands, such as those of an academic (e.g., preparing for classes, working on research and creative projects, writing papers for publication, meeting with students and faculty), and those as an individual member of a social society with responsibilities related to home, family, and community, tend to crowd out time for other meaningful experiences. These other activities seem more important than leisure experiences, yet as Shattell (2010) has suggested elsewhere, leisure time or time in quiet contemplation is important and beneficial to both mental and physical well-being.

Leisure activity, for us, is different from the passive experience of sitting in front of the television and “tuning out.” Rather, it is having experiences (either alone or with others) in which we find ourselves fully engaged, curious, challenged, or delighted. Some of these activities may fall in between strict categories of “work” and “leisure,” such as time spent participating in community events, helping a friend with a project, or volunteering for an organization whose work we find meaningful. Others may be hobbies, such as biking, knitting, or reading. These engaging experiences can serve as a respite from the pressure to “produce” or to “get things done.” The simple act of being engaged in the moment and present to the activity allows a sense of “leisure” or “play.”

Personality style can impact the ability to relax and fully engage in leisure experiences. In the 1950s, Type A and Type B personality types were thought of as “high strung workaholics” or “easy going relaxed” types, respectively, and were associated with one’s chances of developing coronary heart disease. Disavowed by many, the Type A and Type B traits are not commonly used clinically to describe people today. However, a Type D (distressed) personality style has recently come to the forefront and is almost always linked to poor mental and physical health outcomes (Denollet, 2005; Mols & Denollet, 2010). The individual with Type D factors is described as negative, pessimistic, depressed, anxious, and lonely. The individual in this distressed state is not able to relax or enjoy free time experiences.
On the contrary, an autotelic personality type describes a person who is able to “live in the moment” and derive utmost pleasure from leisure experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes these individuals who, when appropriately challenged, can derive the maximum pleasure from the experience, and become so engrossed or wrapped up in an activity that they experience a “flow state.” For Buettner, cross-country skiing on perfect snow between old growth trees provides her with this flow experience. Buettner feels that she could slide and float during this perfect pleasure experience for hours or days enjoying the solitude, the sounds of the skis on the snow, and the sense of peace with nature. The second author (Shattell) has a similar experience when wearing her tap shoes, making sounds and rhythms or working on difficult step combinations. Thus, during a flow experience the individual loses all sense of time, yet feels challenged, capable, and able to enjoy the moment fully.

Leisure experiences could be encouraged in our patients. In a study of 20 individuals with various stages of cancer, Buettner (1980) found that, with coaching and support, some personality factors could be changed (for the better). Participants were provided a free recreation center membership, healthy leisure time and active living coaching, and group support sessions. After eight weeks, participants were more gregarious, more active, and more in control of their leisure time. More recent studies indicate that cognitive behavioral therapy may be useful to encourage more autotelic qualities (Karwoski, Garratt, & Ilardi, 2006). This type of counseling intervention is a perfect co-treatment for a recreational therapist and mental health nurse.

Becoming a person with more of an autotelic personality must be actively practiced. Some steps to help you or your patients becoming more “in the moment” are as follows:

1. Setting challenging goals: To experience a sense of flow, the individual must have clear and obtainable goals. These goals must match the person’s skill level and interest. The individual with an autotelic personality can make leisure time decisions with a minimum of extra effort that allows her or him to focus on attaining those challenging goals. Example: In a leisure counseling session, the goal is more active living and less depressive symptoms. The leisure time activity is walking to work daily and hiking wooded trails with a hiking partner on the weekends.

2. Learning to become immersed in the activity: Environmental triggers, like a cell phone ringing, can set up a state of divided focus. A person with an autotelic personality will give all of his or her attention directly to the task at hand. Learning to turn off extraneous devices and distractions and control one’s focus on the activity at hand is one of the most powerful skills a person can develop. Example: Develop a schedule for meaningful leisure experiences and focus on it. The constantly distracted mind is at the mercy of every passing stimulus; therefore, attention is spread and diluted. With scheduled practice, this focus can become second nature and leisure experiences can become more meaningful.

3. Being in the leisure moment: Human beings have incredible capabilities for enjoyment and inner peace. With a mindful approach, each individual can gain control of thoughts, which opens the mind to experience joy and pleasure from almost anything of interest. Example: Describe the immediate enjoyment that comes from each taste, smell, sound, thought, and observation, and then allow those sensations to anchor the flow experience. Look for types of trees, admire flowers, smell the natural environment, and listen for the sound of birds during weekend walk in the woods.

Although these steps may be simple, some of us have to work hard to relax and to fully engage in leisure experiences. Others may have patients or clients who would benefit from learning how to increase and improve their leisure experiences and to increase the “flow” or intrinsic rewards that can be gained from these activities. We hope that this article will help those who work hard to relax, whether it is you or your patients.

REFERENCES