



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #05:

VACATION: RELAX, REFRESH, AND RECONNECT



Do you remember how you felt on your last vacation?

Transport yourself back to the sights, the sounds, the smells and try to recall the physical and mental release. Recapture the moments where you felt these three R's: relaxed, refreshed and reconnected.

Most of us would agree that we lead over-scheduled, and, in many instances, sleep deprived lives. Our occupations consume nearly 40% of our waking hours. Weekends and days off are typically scheduled with activities and chores to keep the home functioning and seem to pass by with the blink of an eye. There's nothing quite like a change to routine and scenery when you need to recharge. Making time to disconnect from your everyday life will boost your mental health, leave you energized and have you returning to work restored and with renewed vigour.

Relax – it's an essential part of self-care

Would you believe that only about 1/3 of Canadians use their earned vacation days, and of those vacationers, 28% of them took less than 1/2 of their allotted time?¹

Allowing yourself to get away from everyday routines and responsibilities, including time to unwind and removing occupational stressors, can help you "increase your emotional agility, develop empathy and inspire creativity."² But it can be the shared experiences with friends and family that provide some of the biggest benefits over the long run. Taking time to re-establish bonds in a relaxed environment helps create deep memories that can be recalled later. It's these shared experiences that stay, fostering happiness that outlasts the fleeting experience of the vacation itself.



As Canadians, we seem to have a love/hate relationship with vacation time, which may be both surprising and a bit confusing. When asked whether they needed a vacation, 66% of those who work in the food and beverage industry, 62% of agricultural workers and 61% of retail workers responded that they do compared with 47% of those who work in financial services and the legal industries.³ In a survey commissioned by Expedia that looked at vacation habits of people around the world, including Canada, results showed that the average Canadian receives, “17 vacation days but only take[s] 15.”⁴ At the same time, Canadians share a general sentiment that they don’t receive enough vacation time: “53% of full-time employees in British Columbia feel either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ vacation deprived” with that number rising to 60% in Ontario.⁵ Some reasons for this may point back to our inability to entirely disconnect from work.

Why aren’t we using our vacation days?

Employees who don’t take any vacation are often struggling with the belief that they need to be visible or present to be seen as valuable at work. They might be concerned about their job security or worry that, while they are away, they could miss the chance to get recognition or a promotion. Remember that when you don’t take your vacation, you’re leaving part of your compensation on the table.

Often, many of us have a hard time disconnecting. Nearly half of workers surveyed indicated that they would “check work email or reach out to the office while on vacation,” with another 13.8% saying they would be ready to jump back into to help solve a problem at work.⁵ It’s important to turn off your work connections, even for a short time.

As employees, we view employers who offer more vacation time as most attractive, and almost half of us would be willing to change companies to receive more time off.⁶ But, there’s also the real problem that nearly 75% of workers put in anywhere from 11 to 31 extra hours in the weeks before and after scheduled time off.⁷ People are feeling challenged to find work/life balance and are “having trouble leaving work behind when they go on holiday. About 10 per cent said they feel guilty taking their vacation days because they felt they were leaving the work for their coworkers to complete.”⁸

It doesn’t matter when we’re trying to get away – be it seasonally or during the most popular vacation times of the year, all of the additional time spent at work preparing to be away on vacation typically affects our sleep routines. We’re exhausting ourselves before we even leave when we should be maximizing our sleep beforehand so that we start to feel relaxed and begin our time away feeling refreshed.

Adopting a pre-vacation sleep schedule

We’ve adopted the belief that when trying to prepare for vacations at both work and home, it’s okay to burn the candle at both ends – that is, lose sleep before vacation to catch up on it during those first few days off. While this kind of relief is needed, it’s not really positioned at the right time. To maximize your vacation experience, you should actually be getting more sleep beforehand, so you feel relaxed from the moment you’re away.

- Aim to get between seven and nine hours of sleep each night
- Try winding down before bedtime with a warm bath or calming activities like meditation, breathing exercises or listening to soothing music.
- Create a predictable sleep schedule to condition your body and help it learn appropriate times for rest and wakefulness
- Steer clear of caffeine and other stimulants. Coffee, tea, soft drinks and chocolate are all culprits whose effects can linger well into the evening and make it difficult to fall asleep

Having a template for work/life balance and a moderately adhered to sleep routine allows you to feel relaxed and refreshed as you begin your vacation.

Saving for vacation

Another reason many of us are not using vacation time is because of the belief that vacations are too expensive. The reality is that vacations don't need to be lavish. The wonderful psychological benefit, the refresh, actually begins while we're planning what to do. Completing research and making arrangements stimulates our minds and we become excited at the prospect of what we're going to do while on vacation. Once you determine where you want to go, you can plan your vacation expenditures in advance. Saving a little each week throughout the year to put into a "vacation fund" helps you set and commit to a budget. You'd be surprised how quickly giving up a few coffees each week can turn into found travel money! If you decide on a destination that you need to travel to by plane or train, book well in advance – up to 8 weeks – to take advantage of the best possible pricing. You should also find out if there are opportunities to save or special fares available.

Vacations can involve travel, adventure, learning new languages, making new friends, listening to music, trying new foods, and exploring other cultures. Studies have shown that people recharge more, retain the benefits of vacation more and remember the holiday more often when they are focused on experiences rather than souvenirs.

But, if you can't afford to go far, or for a long time, don't worry. Mini-vacations of 2-4 days can deliver the same benefits as an epic vacation, for much less cost. Doing something at low or no-cost, and close to home – typically called a stay-cation – can also provide you with the rest and relaxation of a destination vacation. Look for chances to extend a few days over weekends and take advantage of government-mandated vacations – such as statutory holidays.

How we vacation can also have a big effect on relaxation, refreshing and reconnecting

No matter how long you plan to be away, the destination can matter. Sticking to familiar places you've travelled to before can be great because you can get right to relaxing, knowing what to expect and where to go. But as one psychologist who studied the benefits of taking holidays explained, going somewhere new could be a bit better than returning to the same places because it, "get[s] [you] out of your comfort zone."¹⁰ He argues that uncertainty results in personal growth, deep thinking about personal interactions and learning about how to operate and interact in the world.

There is also increasing evidence suggesting that one of the best ways to reconnect and recharge is to spend time in natural surroundings. Activities like taking a 90-minute walk outside, barefoot, in a practice called "grounding," helped people realize not just mental benefits, but also physical ones. "Ecotherapy" (a name given to a wide range of treatment programs which aim to improve your mental and physical wellbeing through outdoor activities in nature) has even been used to treat psychological problems. People can contribute to conservation projects, garden or work on organic farms.¹¹ Depending on where you are, you might even explore some balneotherapy – or natural hot springs – to reduce stress and relax. One clinical study documented the many benefits ranging from increased blood flow to improved brain function and reduction in anxiety and stress.¹² It's even been proven that "simply watching nature films or listening to audio recordings of natural sounds can reduce stress."¹³ So, don't worry if you experience some bad weather days, because you can cozy up in your hotel room watching nature videos or reading a book and recharge too. These activities all have proven benefits and are low or no-cost ways to help recharge, even if just for a weekend.



Do you really need to take a vacation?

Over time, with everything we take on in our regular routines, we experience stress, and our brains become more cluttered and inefficient. As employees, we need to recharge. Taking a vacation is like helping your body reset its operating system.¹⁴ But skipping vacations will “wreak havoc on your health and well-being.”¹⁴

• Cardiovascular health¹⁴

A woman who hasn't taken a vacation in six or more years is 8 times more likely to develop heart disease. Men who don't take vacations have a 32% greater risk of suffering a serious heart attack.

• Reaction times¹⁴

Splitting attention spans between screens, conversations and also worrying about having enough time to get things done causes stress. “You lose the ability to pay attention to what is going on around you.”

• Stress¹⁴

Stress creates a physical response in that we hold a clenched stance and carry tension in our jaws because we are in a constant state of being ready to react. Vacations can take away the stressors, and your body can relax and return to a healthier state.

• Loyalty, productivity, and job satisfaction¹⁴

People who use their vacation days are happier and less likely to leave their jobs. “For every 10 hours of vacation time taken, productivity improves 8%.”

So, what are you waiting for? Start planning your next vacation now and enjoy the shared experiences to come.



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