

"Plain Talk" about The Art of Relaxation

(from the National Institute of Mental Health)

It is surprising how little Americans know about the art of relaxation. Relaxation is more than getting away from the work-a-day grind, and it is more than the absence of stress. It is something positive and satisfying -- a feeling in which one experiences peace of mind. True relaxation requires becoming sensitive to one's basic needs for peace, self-awareness, thoughtful reflection -- and the willingness to meet these needs rather than ignoring or dismissing them.

The continuing pressure of everyday life take a heavy toll on the physical and mental well-being of millions of people each year. Medical research into the origins of common diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, and headaches shows a connection between stress and the development of such ailments. In the area of mental health, stress frequently underlies emotional and behavioral problems, including nervous breakdowns. Various environmental factors -- from noise and air pollution to economic disruptions, such as unemployment, inflation, and recession -- can make living condition even more stressful. These conditions, in turn, can create a greater need for mental health services to help people cope more effectively with their environment.

In the course of a day, people are frequently distracted from their activities by personal problems -- conflicts with family members, disagreements with employers, poor living conditions, boredom, loneliness -- to name just a few. It is easy to get so preoccupied with living, thinking, organizing, existing, and working that a person disregards his or her needs for relaxation.

Most people reared in our production-oriented society feel guilty, or at least ill-at-ease, when they are not actively involved in accomplishing tasks or producing things. Even their vacations become whirlwind productions that leave the participants exhausted after concentrating too many experiences into a short period of time. Such behavior undermines the value of vacation time as an opportunity for diversion, calm, restoration of one's energies and gaining new experiences.

SECRET OF RELAXATION

Unfortunately, some people pursue relaxation with the same concern for time, productivity, and activity that they show in their everyday life patterns. Far too few people know how to turn off their body clocks and gain satisfaction out of just being instead of always striving. The secret in getting the best results from attempts at relaxation is simple: Find those activities which give you pleasure and, when you pursue them, commit your energies to mental and physical well-being. If your diversion results in an artistic product, musical skills, further education, a better physique, or whatever,

that's great. But remember that relaxation, not achievement, is your main reason for participating in the activity.

Mental health specialists have come up with some suggestions for learning the art of relaxation:

TRY SOMETHING NEW AND DIFFERENT

Keep in mind two important rules of thumb in deciding on relaxation activities: Do not be afraid to try something new and different. Choose activities you really enjoy, not activities you think other people want you to pursue. The following are some activities worth thinking about:

1. Check out various community activities available through recreation departments, adult education programs, volunteer work opportunities, college courses, etc.
2. Consider exercise such as walking around your neighborhood or in the woods, and bicycling, dancing, playing golf, swimming, gardening, bowling, etc.
3. For the more physically fit, more strenuous exercise can prove most relaxing. Jogging, playing tennis, basketball, handball, squash, etc., can give one a feeling of wonderful relaxation after an intense workout.
4. Try some mental exercises to create a sense of peace and tranquility in body and mind. One such exercise involves concentration on relaxing successive sets of muscles from the tips of your toes to the muscles in your forehead and neck. Other mental relaxation techniques include getting fully involved with a good book, drifting off into a quiet state with music, or focusing on a beautiful scene or drawing and losing oneself in it.
5. Creative activities such as painting, drawing, pottery, carpentry, knitting, and even cooking for fun, can also give you a sense of accomplishment, as well as the peaceful relaxation of concentration on something you wish to do.
6. Whether or not the above suggestions for relaxation work in your case, a sure fire method known down through the ages is the use of a warm bath to take away bodily stress and strain. You may choose to enhance this activity by reading a good book, listening to music, or even adding some bubbles if you like.

PRACTICE RELAXATION DAILY

After discovering your favorite relaxation activity, plan to devote at least one-half hour per day to pursuing it. Most people accept the responsibility to meet deadlines and duties imposed on them by others, but it is equally important for them to meet the requirements for relaxation periods demanded by their own minds and bodies. Hard-working homemakers or busy executives must give themselves opportunities for relaxation if they are to maintain their mental balance through stressful events and hectic schedules.

MAKING A PERSONAL COMMITMENT

The third and final principle in the art of relaxation is to enter into relaxation activities with enthusiasm and personal commitment. Let yourself become completely involved in the relaxation activity chosen; do not hold back physically or mentally.

Remember, finding effective techniques for personal relaxation is not merely a pastime for the idle rich. It is essential for everyone's physical and mental well-being.

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