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Vacations Are Good for You, Medically Speaking

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By Alina Tugend

Gas prices are going up, the economy is going down, and it seems hard to justify a vacation when many of us are glad just to have jobs. But now, more than ever, we need to take a break — a real break, not just a long weekend — from our stressed-out lives.

But, it turns out, even before the downturn, a lot of Americans were working through their vacation time, taking fewer and shorter holidays.

A global study by Expedia.com found that about a third of employed Americans usually do not take all the vacation days that they are entitled to, leaving an average of three days on the table.

This is not so unusual. About a quarter of the workers in Britain do not take all their vacation time, and in France a little less. The only difference is that the British get an average of 26 days of vacation and the French about 37 — compared with our 14 days, Expedia.com said.

According to John de Graaf, executive director of Take Back Your Time, a nonprofit organization that studies issues related to overwork, 137 countries mandate paid vacation time. The United States is the only industrialized country that doesn't.

Here are some more depressing figures: The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that about a quarter of all workers in the private sector do not receive paid vacation. And the Conference Board, a private research group, said the number of Americans who said in April that they were going to take a vacation in the next six months is at a 30-year low, according to their regular consumer survey. Only 39 percent of those responding said they would go away on holiday over the next half year.

That is the lowest figure since 1978 and reflects a general decline since 2000, when, in April of that year, 49 percent said they were planning a getaway in the next six months.

But really, should you just stay home, relax in front of the television, read a novel, do a few day trips?

Well, vacations are not simply a luxury. There is increasing evidence that they really are necessary for good health.

Using information from the Framingham Heart Study, which started in 1948, researchers looked at questionnaires women in the study had filled out over 20 years about how often they took vacations. Those women who took a vacation once every six years or less were almost eight times more likely to develop coronary heart disease or have a heart attack than those who took at least two vacations a year, said Elaine Eaker, a co-author of the study and president of Eaker Epidemiology Enterprises, a private research company.

The study, published in 1992, was controlled for other factors like obesity, diabetes, smoking and income, Ms. Eaker said, and the findings have been substantiated in follow-up research.

“It shows how the body reacts to a lifestyle of stress,” she said. “This is real evidence that vacations are important to your physical health.”

Another study, published in 2000, looked at 12,000 men over nine years who were at high risk for coronary heart disease. Those who failed to take annual vacations had a 21 percent higher risk of death from all causes and were 32 percent more likely to die of a heart attack.

So forget about cutting down on cholesterol and exercise — I’m off to the Bahamas.

Well, no. But even if you don’t have heart problems, a vacation of at least one week — and preferably two weeks to really unwind — can help you relax and sleep better. Mark Rosekind, president and chief scientist at Alertness Solutions, a scientific consulting firm, has worked with NASA pilots and astronauts on sleep issues.

In 2006, he was commissioned by Air New Zealand to see if he could scientifically measure the benefit of a vacation. He asked a group of 15 people who were flying from the West Coast of the United States to New Zealand for vacations lasting a week to 12 days to wear a wrist device that monitored quantity and quality of sleep — for three days before the trip, during the vacation and three days afterward.

They kept a sleep diary and took a vigilance test to determine how good their reactions were before, during and after the holiday.

The participants were also hooked up to a brain monitor during the 12-hour flight, and other variables, like health, jobs and gender were factored in.

Here’s what he found. After a few days on vacation — and it usually took two to three — people were averaging an hour more of good quality sleep. And there was an 80 percent improvement in their reaction times.

“When they got home, they were still sleeping close to an hour more, and their reaction time was 30 to 40 percent higher than it had been before the trip,” Mr. Rosekind said.

The trick, these days when going on vacation, is not only to physically remove yourself from your normal routine, but mentally as well. Checking your BlackBerry every few hours or rushing to the nearest Internet cafe doesn’t cut it.

For 10 years, the Faculty of Management at Tel Aviv University has conducted a study looking at what is called “respite effects,” which measure relief from job stress before, during and after vacations.

Professor Dov Eden, an organizational psychologist who has conducted the study, found that those who are electronically hooked up to their office, even if they are lying on the Riviera, are less likely to receive the real benefits of a vacation and more likely to burn out.

Here’s one trick. My neighbor Mark had a colleague who was a workaholic. But when he went on vacation, he made sure to go where there was no cellphone or Internet service.

Mr. de Graaf sees a solution to the vacation deprivation problem, even if it's a long shot. His organization is working with Congress to consider national legislation requiring paid vacation time. He is hoping that such legislation, currently called the Minimum Leave Protection, Family Bonding and Personal Well-Being Act, will be introduced next year. It calls for a mandated three weeks of vacation every year.

"It's tough, there's no question about it, but there's a lot of interest in it," Mr. de Graaf said. "There's less business opposition for this leave than sick leave or parenting leave because it's more predictable."

He estimated that it could add an extra 2 percent to 4 percent to the labor costs of a business, but "that would be balanced by less turnover and maybe less sick days."

Now that I've made such a case for vacations, maybe it's time to acknowledge that in some cases, these trips — particularly with entire families in tow — can be stressful in their own way. The joys of a holiday can also include lugging around a ridiculous amount of paraphernalia, jet-lagged children sobbing on airplanes, hotels that looked wonderful on the Web but are in reality next to a construction site.

Back in 1979, a journalist, Lance Morrow, wrote an article in *Time* magazine about how rising gas prices were curtailing the annual family vacations. (Sound familiar?) He noted that "the real danger of the vacation lies in its capacity to compress all family conflicts into an exquisitely focused drama."

And some years before that, the humorist Robert Benchley wrote that "traveling with children corresponds roughly to traveling third class in Bulgaria."

William Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, said that "vacations tend to create memories more than any other family activity, and the bad times are some of the best memories."

He said he remembers, for example, being at the Jersey Shore when he was a child and his father stepped on a shell that sent him to the hospital.

"I got to ride in the ambulance," Mr. Doherty said. "That was great."

The trick, then, is to have a vacation that enhances family bonding, but not too much. I'll let you know how that works out after our Cape Cod trip this summer, where we will be joined by my sister, her husband and three children and my parents.

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