



Mental Health Corner

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GIVE ME A BREAK!

Do you take a break? Does this occur a little bit every day? Does this occur during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas? Do you take a break periodically through the year? Do you take a break to go on vacation? Did you know that the United States is the only industrialized nation without a minimum paid leave law? Do you know In Europe, four to five weeks of vacation is the average; in China three weeks; in Japan two weeks? In the United States we have a sense of illegitimacy about taking vacations. With the frequent changes of job over a lifetime, many people are not on the job long enough to accrue significant vacation time. Interesting that one of the major stressors of American life is the taking of a vacation and as such is included on the Rahe stress questionnaire. Additionally, interesting is the fact that many law enforcement agencies are busiest during holiday and peak vacation periods. How many of us, even when we do take a break, do so to insure that we are busy.

In Greece, long weekends occur frequently throughout the year because each Saint's day is an occasion of celebration. Almost everybody is named after a saint and that day is special just as birthdays are special in the North American culture. It is also a day that people relax and have friends to the house. Moreover, once spring arrives, and into fall, the custom is to take four-day weekends each weekend and go to the country, the islands or simply to the nearest beach. As well, Greece is one of those Mediterranean countries

which continue the pattern of taking midday break for the main meal and nap, albeit the more Americanized Greece becomes, this is eroding. In addition, it is common, even to this day, for the Greek to go out in the evening, even weekdays, for an hour or two for good conversation and music. An outing to a restaurant is an occasion to rent the table for an evening of fellowship and song. Unfortunately, we have succeeded in Americanizing the world and Greece is not exempt.

I, although the son of Greek immigrants who had to work hard, have had to learn to pause, to take a break and even to have fun. For much of my life, I have been like many North Americans; work hard, keep going and don't stop. A double whammy -- the son of hard-working Greek immigrants struggling to succeed (that is work long enough, make enough money and hope to retire some day) and reared in a culture where the ethic is to work. Even once I began to take vacations in my late 30s, do you think I left my work behind? How many of you go on vacations and bring a cell phone, a laptop or whatever the current umbilical gadget is? How many checked your cell phone and your e-mail Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day as I did? How many of us can take time off without arranging some kind of coverage? Others of us must plan our vacation at the beginning of the year and get permission of some supervisor. How many of us must engage in multiple activities or take lessons to learn some new skill such as golf in order that we legitimize a break? And let us dare not idle in a rocking chair on our porch overlooking the valley in the mountains or the sand and surf at the ocean.

For some time, I have counseled those I supervise to take breaks during the day for relaxation, to pray, or do other active or passive relaxations. Also, I suggest taking a longer weekend at least every 12 weeks and take a longer block of the time, perhaps a week or ten days, during holidays such as Christmas. Plus, another break should be taken with even a longer block of the time during the summer months. In addition, each year celebrate your birthday by taking that day off. Also, take the day off for your spouse's birthday and even for each child's birthday. Furthermore, the time to plan the next break is while still in or on the way back from the current break. Let's not wait until we have forgotten what it was like when we were on break. During breaks, truly disconnect from the day to day messages; forget the cell phone or at least turn it off, give your access data to very few and take only the most essential work if at all. While on break, zone out, smell the flowers, watch the clouds and follow the flight of the birds. After the break, revisit the sounds and the smells, thus extending the break. Ease up on your planned schedule just before and just after the break; do not worry it will fill up. I have heard many a person comment that really living occurs during these breaks. We live and work, we live and eat, we live and play, we live and do many things but first we must live. §

