



Taking Timeouts to Decrease Stress and Increase Creativity

Posted: 03/27/2012 7:00 am

Written in collaboration with Neal Vahle, Ph.D.

The world today is moving faster than ever. Technology has changed the way we communicate and get information and entertainment, and also the way we read, learn and how, when, where and from whom we buy products. And these changes will keep coming faster and more dramatically, causing most of us to be rushing and racing just to keep up.

The result is an enormous amount of stress, tension and exhaustion, which severely decreases the quality of our health, our relationships and our work. When overstressed, we don't sleep well, are more anxious and irritable and are taking [more than 40,000 tons of aspirin](#) a year to counter the ever-increasing stress-related headaches, bad backs, neck pains and stomach problems.

Recovery

The human engine, like any other, runs on energy. The more you have at your disposal, the healthier you'll be and the better you'll feel and perform. But you can't continually run an engine in the red zone, at max output, or it will burn out.

All high-performance machines need a rest cycle. Physical trainers advise us that a recovery cycle is necessary to get maximum efficiency from a muscle. You can work one set of muscles hard one day but need to rest them the next. The same is true for your mental muscle. Without a rest your brain becomes fatigued and doesn't work as efficiently or effectively. When you're tired you don't think as clearly or creatively, and you can make more mistakes.

An essential part of any conditioning program, whether mental or physical, is a recovery cycle, which means programming in some down time. Down time is really a misnomer. Taking a mini break is actually an invaluable aid for increasing the quality of your "up time." Just a short break will help to decrease stress, increase energy and often provide new insights and perspectives.

Timeouts

To preserve your sanity, de-stress and improve the quality of whatever you are doing, you need to step back from the action. In my Peak Performance workshops I give participants three 15-minute "timeout" cards that must be used each day. Taking a short break to refuel and refresh doesn't mean that you are goofing off, that your brain has shut down. The ideas you've been thinking about, the problems you've been working on, shift to a "back burner," where they incubate, moving from the logical left brain to the creative right brain. And then, when you least expect it, lightning strikes!

When I taught at Stanford's Executive Management Program we found that people got their best ideas when they were driving, napping, exercising and taking a shower. Many leaders talked about taking timeout of each day for thinking. Some would leave the building and take a walk, others would exercise. Some talked about just having some quiet time. The CEO of Federated Stores' online division told me that when he drives to and from work he is completely out of touch, with his phone, beeper, pager turned off. "That's when I do my best thinking," he told me.

But the ethic today is never to be out of touch. We walk around with our phones strapped to our belts like gunslingers from the old west and feel just as naked without them. However, when you are never "out of touch" you are not "in touch" with your own ideas, hunches, creative insights and what Steve Jobs called the whispers in your mind. In other words, as you are racing to keep up, you're preventing yourself from developing any innovative new ideas about how to do things quicker and more efficiently.

Taking Down Time

"You can always find reasons to work. There will always be one more thing to do," said Carisa Bianchi, the former CEO of innovative ad agency TBWA/Chiat/Day. "But when people don't take timeout, they stop being productive. They stop being happy and that affects the morale of everyone around them."

The benefits from taking timeouts are decreased stress and tension, deeper relaxation, and more energy. You'll also think more clearly after a short break.

Does that mean that you have to have a shower in your office? Or a cot to nap on? No. There are plenty of ways that you can take timeouts wherever you are and whatever you are doing.

- If you've been sitting for over an hour, get off your butt and take a brief stroll around the building -- or better yet outside and take some deep breaths.

- Several managers I talked to did reps with light hand weights between meetings.
- A single working mom takes several 10- to 15-minute power naps during the day to counter her stress and exhaustion. "Just a short nap really revives me, and I often wake to some new ideas," she told me.
- An ad agency art director does a 15-minute Tai-Chi practice every afternoon when he feels the blahs coming on.
- Many businesses have quiet rooms where you can meditate.
- I know an executive who takes out his putter and practices putting on the rug in his office. It may not lower his handicap he told me, "but it definitely lowers my stress level." It's also important to do something after work to de-stress, because the shift from work to home can be hard on families. (Wonder why the divorce rate is at an all-time high.)
- One manager reads a chapter of a spine-tingler during his evening commute home.
- A banking executive tinkers with her car after work: changes the spark plugs, checks the fluids, put air in the tires. "I don't know if I'm actually helping my car, but it sure helps my state of mind by focusing on the present rather than still thinking about the office."
- A great way to decrease your stress and improve your health is to use this in-between time to get some exercise: go for a bike ride, a swim or a run, do some yoga or meditation.

Remember, taking a timeout, whether it's a 5-minute break in the middle of the day or going for an end-of-the-day jog isn't down time. Just the opposite: These short breaks will reduce your stress and re-energize your up time, increasing your creativity, productivity and enthusiasm. And you'll sure be a nicer person to be around.

For more on unplugging and recharging, click [here](#).

For more by Robert J. Kriegel, Ph.D., click [here](#).