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Why Down Time Is Such a Great Productivity Booster

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Speaking of downtime: while I am on vacation, my friend Sheryl Sisk (see bio below) was kind enough to blog about something we rarely give enough thought to, and make me feel OK about chilling out for a week at the same time! Read on. . .

Busy or Productive? Down-Time or Goofing Off? It's All in the Perspective

The premise behind *Getting Things Done* and other like-minded efficiency programs is that the human mind can only keep track of so much "stuff" before it starts losing its grip on that stuff. The more to-dos you pack into that list in your head, the more likely it is that key details will begin to go fuzzy or vanish altogether. GTD recommends putting it all down on paper, and that's a very good first step.

But there's another step that's just as important — not just for your mental health but also for your productivity level and hence your business's success: taking regular time off and away from work, devoted solely to *self*. Call it down-time, me-time, meditation, play, or vegging out. Whatever you call it, and however you cast it, it's essential – not only for your peace of mind, but also for your productivity level.

It's a sad, simple fact of human nature: the more stuff we accumulate on our tasks lists, the more frazzled and unproductive we tend to become. It's like an extension of the chaos principle: whatever we do, the universe around us tends to devolve into chaos unless outside forces put it in check and actively work to reverse the tendency. That's true of the cosmos, and it's true of our minds, too.

Yet what do we make of that old saw that if you want something done, give it to a busy person? Well, believe it or not, that's true too — up to a point of diminishing returns, that is. And if you think about it, these two seemingly contradictory statements make perfect sense together: the most productive are those who can switch gears quickly. Those who have a lot on their plates consistently and are getting it done routinely are those with the most practice at switching gears. And how do we learn to shift gears?

By shifting into neutral — regularly and consistently dedicating a certain period of time for unplugging from the computer, the task list and all obligations, and focusing solely on the self.

It's a matter of perspective, in other words. You can look at your bulging tasks list as a burden or an opportunity. You can choose to embrace your down-time habit as a must for personal health and effectiveness, or you can choose to feel guilty about it, thereby making it just one more thing to kick yourself over.

Regular down-time — even if it's just a habit of ten or fifteen minutes a day — will result in a fresher perspective, greater sense of optimism, a balanced and calm mind, and a renewed "can-do" attitude. It also has physical benefits, including lowered blood pressure, reduction of physical stress, and decreased muscular tension. It creates an atmosphere of mindfulness, which in turn allows us to return to our activities with a fresher, keener, more focused sensibility. And that enhances productivity in quite profound ways.

Why It's So Hard for Solos and Professionals to Embrace the Down-Time Routine

Solos and freelancers in particular seem to have a rough time allowing themselves necessary down-time. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that we're the only ones left standing on the top rung of our individual ladders. There's no one else higher up or around us we can look to when things are boiling over. It's *all* up to us. And so it's easy to start to pressure ourselves into constantly being busy, and just as easy to overlook the fact that "busy" does not equal "productive."

For the longest time, I struggled with this concept. Whenever I was faced with an empty few minutes, I'd try to "do" the down-time thing. I'd settle into a comfortably relaxed cross-legged position and just meditate. But then my meditating became yet another thing I had to do "right." Had to do, period. Had to do every day, for thirty minutes, with correct posture, proper breathing, no exceptions.

Then I tried to just "veg out." Surely this was manageable, I thought. Others veg out routinely. They sit and watch television. They sit and read. They just *sit*. But when I tried it, my brain took over like a rageaholic dictator with impotence issues:

"What the hell do you think you're doing, just sitting there? Don't you know there's WORK to be done? Do you honestly think you can AFFORD to just sit there and do NOTHING? When you've got an ebook to write? And clients that need coaching? And projects that need developing? And housework to do? And a child to raise? What about your whole weight loss plan? And your other blog? Or that book you wanted to write about chronic pain? Or the novel you're working on? You think those things are gonna get done with you just sitting there on your brains? LOSER! Get up and WORK!"

I couldn't even allow myself ten measly minutes to unplug and wind down without kicking myself into a whimpering, cowering mess. The guilt was too much.

How to Stop Guilt from Interfering With Your Daily Down-Time

Here's what I've learned, though. That guilt — the inner monologue you keep running on endless playback, the one that keeps you from sitting still because you haven't "earned" a break — is a faulty emotion. I won't say it's useless — no emotion is useless, if you know where to look. But simply feeling guilty doesn't change anything. It isn't *helpful*.

We don't need to suss all our emotional crap out at the moment we feel the guilt, though. We could say to ourselves, "OK, self, those are interesting points and I'll look at that later. Right now, though, I'm gonna meditate/nap/read/go for a walk." Instead, we worry with the thought like a little pebble that we keep turning over and over in our hands, trying to get the "right" perspective when all we really need to do is put it up somewhere and look at it from a distance. Or later. Or not at all. And end up doing nothing very well.

The point is, you can choose. The point is, you can decide to chill out in the moment, and all your stuff — the worries, the anxieties, the guilt, and that monster-long task list — will still be there for you to pick up again when you're done.

How to Create the Down-Time-for-Productivity Habit Without Pain

If you're convinced it's a good thing to schedule some down-time for yourself on an ongoing basis but you're anxious about claiming that time from the rest of your day and your other obligations, here are a few tips to consider implementing.

- If your children are an issue here, or your significant other, consider sitting down with them and explaining in an age-appropriate way that your new habit will make you a better parent, spouse, worker, whatever.
- Set some ground rules with others in your life: this is your time, it's sacrosanct, you're not to be disturbed unless the house is burning, the phones must be quieted, no loud noises, etc. Go over the rules so that everyone's on-board.
- Start with small increments at first, if you think guilt will be an issue for you, and then work up to larger chunks of time. Sometimes a ten-minute breather is all we need or can allow ourselves at first. Don't feel guilty that you're not giving yourself a half-hour; instead, be grateful for those ten minutes, and then start to explore extending it a bit at a time.
- Schedule your down time just like you would any appointment. Pencilling it in, or creating a digital alarm on your calendar program, somehow makes it more "real" to us and increases the chance we'll take it seriously.
- Use your down-time for meditation, prayer, sitting still, daydreaming, journaling — whatever gives you a sense of renewal and self-reflection. Don't use it for reading or tackling anything on your "self-improvement to-dos" list. This isn't about improving yourself. It's about taking time to recognize that you're already fine, just the way you are. If you need a nap, desperately, then take one, but generally I find it's better to stay conscious and meditative.
- If you'd like to explore meditation, a very simple way to start is by simply sitting and observing your breath. When thoughts come — and they will — don't get angry or frustrated. Instead, just gently bring your attention back to your breath. Tell yourself those thoughts will still be there when you're done, and always return your focus to the inhale/exhale.
- If you mess up — you don't meditate one day (or ten), you have a particularly rough schedule one week and can't quite fit in your full allotted down-time — don't use it as one more thing to flagellate yourself over. Simply accept that you're doing the best you can, be gentle with yourself, and try to do better tomorrow.

Down-Time Takeaways

So, to recap:

1. Regularly scheduled downtime is essential for mental health and productivity, and also benefits you physically by reducing stress symptoms.
2. Effective downtime can be spent in a number of ways but should always focus on *self,* not self-improvement.
3. If you find yourself resistant to downtime, start with short increments of ten or fifteen minutes.
4. Communicate your need for downtime to your family and others, making sure they understand how important this is to you and how it will benefit your relationships with them.
5. Try meditation for a powerful mind-body boost. Start by simply observing your breathing.

About the Author: Sheryl Sisk is a marketing consultant for solo professional service providers. She's also the blogger and Head Muse behind _The Inspired Solo_, where she writes about marketing, work-life "balance," creativity, technology, and health for the solo entrepreneur engaged in delivering professional services. You can follow her on Twitter at http://twitter.com/theinspiredsolo and you can read more from _The Inspired Solo_ on Tumblr.