Getting Away From it All
The Importance of Vacation and Downtime Recovery from Work

I have used these editorials in part to encourage you, and remind myself, to take better care of ourselves. There were pieces on mindfulness (Shattell & Johnson, 2017), self-compassion (Shattell & Johnson, 2018), and work-life balance (Shattell, 2017), and elsewhere I have written about leisure activities (Buettner, Shattell, & Reber, 2011). The purpose of this editorial is to highlight the importance of getting more downtime, away from work, specifically by taking vacations away from home.

Traveling away from home for vacation from work is my ideal. I have no objection to so-called “staycations”—when one takes time away from work but stays at home to do projects or other activities—however, I am not sure that they have the same effect as vacations away from home. Vacations and travel allow us to detach from work (de Bloom, Nawijn, Geurts, Kinnunen, & Korpela, 2017). Getting away from work is not on the American Psychiatric Nurses Association (n.d.) self-care tip sheet for whole health and mental health for nurses, but unplugging is listed. “Downtime recovery” is what those in the occupational and work disciplines call it (Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2017). Downtime is a state of “physical relaxation and psychological detachment from stressors” (Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2017, p. e46). According to Vandezvala et al. (2017), “Work recovery or unwinding from work is a process that facilitates psychological and physical restoration, and the impairment of recovery from work stress may result in poor health (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006)” (para. 2).

Too much work and not enough downtime recovery is bad for us. I am lucky. Privileged. I can afford to take vacations. I have a full-time job plus additional contract work. I have shelter, food, and transportation. My needs are met; I have disposable income (gross income after taxes have been deducted) and discretionary income (gross income after essentials, such as shelter, food, and clothing, have been deducted), which I spend on vacations away from home.

Vacation and travel are ways for us to get away from work, to recharge. I frame vacation away from home as a self-care activity. I think I get this from my mother. Growing up in a working-class neighborhood, we did not have a lot of money, but my mother worked hard and valued getting away. One of my first vacations was a 24-hour bus trip from Syracuse, New York (my hometown) to New York City. An approximate 4.5-hour ride from my home, we rode a bus to “the city.” It was my mother and me—my mother, a single mom, and me, a young teenager. The vacation was a cost-effective way for us to get away (we did not need to pay for hotel accommodations). After a long day touring New York City, we boarded the bus at Port Authority and headed home. (Incidentally, when we were in New York City on December 8, 1980, we walked past a building, which I now know was The Dakota, where they were putting yellow crime scene tape; in fact, we had to cross the street to avoid it. Later that day we found out it was the building where John Lennon had just been shot and killed.)

Another one of my early vacations away from home with my mother was the 1980 Winter Olympics, which were in Lake Placid, New York. Another bus trip from Syracuse, but this time we spent a couple of nights. My mother got tickets for two Olympic events—women’s speed skating and men’s hockey. Neither of us knew or cared much about either sport but we were excited about the “once-in-a-lifetime” experience of being at the Olympics. (We happened to be at the hockey game on February 22, 1980, between the United States and Russia, on which the film Miracle on Ice [Garcia, Greenwald, Hay, von Zerneck, & Stern, 1981] was based.)

Getting away from home and work is important, even if it is brief. Meaningful activities and events can and do happen when on vacation.

My most recent vacation was a 7-day tour of wine vineyards (bodegas) in southern Uruguay. I was on a flight between Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Montevideo, Uruguay and two things struck me. First was part of the pre-flight safety video and demonstration: “If we lose pressure in the cabin, an oxygen mask will drop in front of you. Put yours on first before assisting others.” It made me think of how im-
important it is to be sure that we take care of ourselves so that we can take care of others or be more present in our day-to-day work–home lives. The second thing I noticed on this Saturday morning flight of approximately 60 individuals, who were mostly Brazilian, was that I was the only person on the flight with an open laptop. Other passengers seemed to be resting or sleeping, talking to one another, reading, or eating. (Managing and minimizing work while on vacation may be the subject of my next editorial.)

I encourage individuals at work and my friends and family to take vacation away from home and to “unplug,” if they can make it happen, but I often have to convince them. Do we think we don’t deserve it? Are we too important to be away from work? Do we have too much work to do? Whatever the excuse, we need to take care of ourselves by getting away. Whether a 24-hour bus trip to a city/mountain/beach near you, or a 2-week trip to another continent, the time away from work is good for our mental health.

**REFERENCES**


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