

The Health Benefits of Pausing and Taking Breaks

Stopping, calming, and resting are preconditions for healing.
-Thich Nhat Hanh

Why is pausing important?

No matter how you spend your time, it is important to pause every so often. When we think of our health—and of Whole Health—it can easily become a question of “What do I need to *do*?” It is normal to get caught up in a routine, or to really want to push through a project or activity. However, in order to make the most of an experience—to learn from it or to solve problems or to improve on something we are doing—it can help to take a break.

Taking a break may mean that we are changing over to a different activity for a little while, like trying to get some movement after we have been sitting. It can also mean taking time for “not-doing.” It can help to stop for a moment to notice, to be aware of what is going on with our thoughts and our bodies. This does not mean that you just change over to watching TV or other ways of distracting yourself. It is not about avoiding or escaping, but about being more fully aware of what is going on. Sometimes that is not easy, because unwanted thoughts and feelings can come up during a pause. You should only do it when you feel ready to.

Pausing in a healthy way can help us handle the challenges life gives us with greater skill. It keeps us from living life on auto-pilot. It can give us room to be inspired with new ideas or to see new opportunities. The key is to find a healthy balance between activity and inactivity.

How can pausing and taking breaks improve my health?

When things are busy around us, the odds are it will affect our body and state of mind. With busy-ness and high activity levels comes stress. Too much stress puts our bodies into ‘fight or flight’ mode. Our body functions rev up so we can escape danger, even if there is nothing dangerous going on. That state might be helpful if you are being chased by a lion that wants to eat you, but it is harmful if you stay in that revved up state all day long.

In addition to pausing, consider practicing, “motion is lotion.” To use the medical term, being *sedentary* is unhealthy. Taking moments out of the day to be in motion can lower your risk of heart disease just as much as not smoking, having good blood pressure, and removing other risk factors.¹ Even people who already exercise regularly get an additional benefit from taking breaks from sitting throughout the day. We know that problems, like type 2 diabetes, cholesterol problems, and some cancers are less likely in people who take breaks to move or change position every so often.²

Like pausing to move, pausing to be aware can also be good for our health. In order to tune in to what is going on with us, we need to stop every so often and bring our attention to the

present moment. What do our senses tell us is going on around us? Is our body in pain? What is our mood like? Are there any symptoms calling for our attention? If we notice these sorts of things, we can do something about them. It can help us catch health issues at their early stages. See the handout, "[Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#)" for more information on the benefits of being mindful.

To sum up, pausing and taking breaks can help in many ways, including the following:

- Increasing focus,
- Boosting awareness to make healthy choices
- Reducing stress
- Helping to maintain interest and energy level
- Making it possible for you to do better work after you take the pause
- Decreasing your risk of the types of injuries that can happen to a person if they lose focus, like overuse injuries

What about taking vacations?

Vacations—whether you leave home or not—can be a chance to take a longer pause or break. If you are lucky enough to be able to take vacations, you might use part of that time to think about your health and explore ways to find balance. We do know, as you might guess, vacations can contribute to health and wellbeing. One study of over 12,000 men with risk of heart disease found that the ones who didn't take yearly vacations had much more risk of death and illness over the nine years of the study.³ (There are not many studies in this area that include women, but it is assumed this is true for them as well.)

Studies show that vacations don't make a very big difference for many people, mainly because people find vacation time just as stressful or busy as their time doing anything else.⁴ For a vacation to count as a real break, you actually have to find time to relax and quiet your life down. Some people worry so much about what is going on at work or at home while they are on vacation, or get so caught up in staying busy during their vacation, that it is not really a pause or a break.

What are some tips for pausing and taking breaks?

Here are some things you can do to take breaks that are helpful:

- **Use an automatic reminder.** To remind yourself to take a break, set some sort of chime or signal on a smartphone or a watch. There are apps and computer programs that can help you refocus, like www.calm.com.
- **Decide How Often.** Pause at least once an hour, maybe with a shorter break every half-hour.
- **Decide How Long.** Two larger (10-15 minute) breaks are a good idea in the middle of the morning or the afternoon. Other breaks should be at least a few minutes. One study looked at "booster breaks." These breaks were made up of a warm up, some kind of exercise, and a cool-down, with relaxation at the end. People in the study thought that these breaks were helpful and good for their health.⁵



- **Make Meals a Break.** When you take meal breaks, don't do other things while you are eating. Focus on your meal. Don't work during meals. In a 2013 study, people who worked during lunch were rated by coworkers as more tired at the end of the day.⁶
- **Relax.** Use at least part of your break time as a chance to relax your mind and body.
- **Notice.** Explore what goes on in your mind when you are taking a break. Do you get stir crazy? Nervous? As you notice how you are doing, ask where those feelings come from? Use your pauses as moments for mindful awareness.
- **Mix It Up.** Anything you can do to change things up for a while can leave you feeling more like the break was useful. Change locations during a break. Listen to music—most songs are 3-5 minutes. Move sometimes. Be still sometimes. Get to know a friend or coworker better.
- **Make Small Changes.** Be kind to yourself. Let this be a gift to yourself, not something that feels like another item on your "to do list."

For You to Consider:

- If you are working outside of the home, what is the policy regarding when you can take breaks and how long they can be?
- Do you ever find yourself trying to keep busy to avoid something else? If so, that might be worth exploring.
- Make a plan to take a certain number of breaks every day for a few weeks. What do you notice about your energy level? Is there a difference in how much you get done?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of Integrative Whole Health handouts on your surroundings	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/



ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Free Applications for Smartphones and Computers (various platforms)	<p>Examples of free apps for taking a break include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness • Big Stretch Reminder • EVO • Eyeleo • Randomly Remind Me • Stand Up: The Work Break Timer • Time Out • Workrave 	<p>http://www.va.gov/PATIENTCENTEREDCARE/resources/multimedia/index.asp</p>

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