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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

SUMMERTIME – TIME FOR RELAXATION

Or is it? Our frantically paced lives too often require lawyers to squeeze ten or more hours of work into one day and may abbreviate weekends as well. The long-awaited days of summer may not bring the needed opportunities for extended vacations in places sufficiently distant to permit a complete break from work-related stress. Despite our best efforts to plan ahead and make it happen, work, financial, or family circumstances or crises can arise and may interfere with our best intentions. When the big getaway is not possible, briefer “vacations,” ranging from one minute to one hour to one day, may be more achievable and should not be overlooked. The “one-minute vacation” can provide very real benefits. For example, take just one full minute of deep diaphragmatic breathing (breathing into the diaphragm – rather than the usual constricted breathing into the chest – to the count of five in and five out). Or take just one minute to visualize yourself in a beautiful, peaceful place (e.g., the beach, the mountains, a cozy room) and engage all your senses. Either exercise can produce physiological changes that help rebalance your body in a way that you can feel immediately.

A day on the bike, the beach, the boat, or the golf course, or a day with a good book, a good friend, or a good hobby can provide similar and even more profound results. We all know the benefits of a change of scenery, even if we have to find it in a book or a movie. We all know, too, the rewards of exercise, given that our bodies are designed for motion, instead of our modern, sedentary lives.

Such time-outs are extremely valuable and necessary to our optimal health and well-being, and they invariably enhance our social and occupational functioning. Why is it so difficult, then, for many lawyers to give themselves the benefit of these relaxing strategies?

One possibility is that relaxation means letting go, quieting one’s mind and body. Lawyers who feel driven, overwhelmed, overworked, or anxious may be afraid of losing their edge, motivation, momentum, and energy. In reality, true relaxation *increases* energy and *improves* mental and emotional clarity. Regular practitioners of even minimal meditation attest that life becomes easier. The ability to focus attention and energy in more productive ways increases, and useless expenditures of energy fall away.

Letting go of muscle tension and a racing mind may, surprisingly, result in uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Some individuals may initially experience an increase, rather than a decrease, in mental activity. Don’t let this deter you from spending some “down time.” Especially for hard-working professionals, it may take a while to transition to a state of true ease. Despite initial distractions, most people are eventually able to unwind. If, however, you find that you are preoccupied with certain thoughts or feelings that prevent you from really relaxing, you may want to consider talking to someone so that the unresolved issues don’t become a permanent drain on your energy.

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Some people hold fast to the belief or feeling of “I don’t have time.” This is, in fact, the best argument for making sure to schedule time out. In the end, you will use your time and energy much more efficiently and more than make up for time “lost” to relaxation.

Taking a time-out falls into the “less is more” category. In our action-oriented culture that increasingly values the human doing over the human being, it is counterintuitive not only to sit and do nothing, but, worse, to sit and think nothing. Such apparent unproductiveness may initially appear to us or others as wasteful and self-indulgent. But given the potential access to healing, perspective and wisdom, ideas and creativity, and general well-being through a calmed mind and body, the philosopher Pascal’s observation is quite apt: *“I have discovered that all of man’s unhappiness derives from only one thing, not being able to sit quietly in a room.”*

We don’t have to be led astray by our culture into ignoring a very real resource that we can readily tap by merely changing gears, slowing down, stopping, letting go, and shifting our attention – even for just one minute.

This article was adapted from the Summer 2007 issue of Briefings, published by Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, the Massachusetts Lawyer Assistance Program.