



# Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

July 2015

## Pack your bags: The case for taking that vacation

Vacations make people happier, healthier and more productive.<sup>1</sup> Yet on average, American workers who receive paid time off only use about half of it. And just one-fourth of us use all of the vacation time we've earned, according to a survey conducted by Harris Interactive. The survey also revealed that most of us — 61 percent — have worked while on vacation.<sup>2</sup>

This strong work ethic may in fact shorten our lives, according to a long-term study by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.<sup>3</sup> Taking a vacation helps reduce stress. High levels of stress raise the risk of heart attack and stroke, weaken the immune system and lead to weight gain. It can also affect mental health.<sup>4</sup>

Taking time off also boosts productivity. Before the trip, we may have a burst of activity as we wrap up projects. And when we return, according to several studies, we're more productive.<sup>5</sup> Getting away helps people get a fresh perspective. Ideally, we return feeling refreshed and with an improved attitude.

### Plan on having fun.

Of course, not all vacations are refreshing or stress reducing. Traveling with children has its set of challenges, and relationship issues do not travel well. Long lines at the airport or botched hotel reservations don't help improve one's attitude either. That's why it's important to plan ahead. Control what you can control so setbacks like bad weather don't ruin your trip. And keep in mind that even vacation mishaps can bring a family together, or at least make a good story for years to come.

The good news is that much of the pleasure of taking a vacation comes in the planning. A recent study of Dutch vacationers

shows that looking forward to a trip boosts happiness for eight weeks — and that's before we've left home. The same study found that post-trip happiness lasted two weeks at the most. However, compared to those who don't take a vacation, those who do are happier.<sup>6</sup>

### Unplug and unwind.

According to a survey by the American Psychological Association, 44 percent of people check their work messages while on vacation. While staying connected may help us feel less nervous about being away, about one-third of those surveyed feel the technology increases our workload and makes it difficult to stop thinking about work. Being plugged in to work may also annoy spouses, children and other traveling companions.<sup>7</sup>

To truly get away on your vacation, leave your laptop at home. Turn off email notifications on your smartphone. If you're ready for "digital detox," look for getaways that cater to travelers who want to unplug.<sup>8</sup>

## Go-to getaway sites

### TripAdvisor.com

Search hotels, vacation rentals and restaurants around the world. Boasts 150 million user reviews.

### HomeAway.com

More than 625,000 listings for vacation rentals, including apartments, cottages, castles and everything in between.

### Airbnb.com

For the budget-minded traveler, rent a room, apartment — or treehouse — from hosts all over the world.

### Travelers' Health

[www.nccdc.gov/travel/](http://www.nccdc.gov/travel/)  
Search by country and circumstance to learn what vaccines you may need, and tips to help you plan a healthy and safe trip.

## SEAP

Call Toll-free  
1-800-692-7459  
1-800-824-4306 (TDD)

or log on to  
[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)  
access code: Pennsylvania



## Resources

[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

At [liveandworkwell.com](http://liveandworkwell.com), use the keyword “vacation” to search for resources and articles on a variety of travel-related topics. Examples include planning an affordable vacation, traveling with pets, and tips for travelers living with a chronic condition.

### Savor the experience.

Remember the Dutch study that found planning a trip can boost happiness for up to a couple months before you depart? This suggests we may be able to spread the joy throughout the year by taking a few shorter trips rather than one longer one.<sup>9</sup> However, if you’re feeling really stressed, it may take two or three days for your shoulders to quit touching your ears. Only then can you truly relax. Also, a week or two in a new locale allows you to become more immersed in the place.

Don’t forget to consider the time it takes to travel. A long flight with several connections can eat up precious vacation days, and leave you frazzled by the time you get there. Be sure to factor in time to recover from jet lag or road fatigue. For your return, try to take an extra day at home before going back to work so you can ease back into your routine.

### Share the journey.

If you’re traveling with others, talk about what each of you wants from the trip. Do you prefer an action-packed schedule or a more laid-back approach? We all have different ways of unwinding. You may have your heart set on sunrise yoga, while your partner wants to sleep in. Will you be joined at the hip or set out on solo adventures?

If it’s a family trip, get everyone’s input before committing to a plan. Take into account ages and personalities. Younger kids may have trouble adjusting to a lot of different settings. So you may want to pick a place to use as a base camp and take day trips from there. Teenagers may want more adventure and independence. Set ground rules ahead of time. Discuss any safety concerns you may have.<sup>10</sup>

Remember that planning the trip is part of the fun. Hopefully, you’re already feeling a little less stressed just thinking about it.

1. Framingham Heart Study, as cited in A. Tugend, Vacations are good for you, medically speaking, *New York Times*, June 7, 2008. [www.nytimes.com/2008/06/07/business/yourmoney/07shortcuts.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/07/business/yourmoney/07shortcuts.html?pagewanted=all); Ernst & Young study, cited in T. Schwartz, The productivity myth, *Harvard Business Review*, May 5, 2010, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2010/05/the-productivity-myth-2/>

2. Glassdoor® Q1 2014 Employee confidence survey, [www.glassdoor.com/press/wp-content/files\\_mf/ecsq114supplement.pdf](http://www.glassdoor.com/press/wp-content/files_mf/ecsq114supplement.pdf)

3. Framingham Heart Study, [http://courses.umass.edu/econ340/vacations\\_health.pdf](http://courses.umass.edu/econ340/vacations_health.pdf)

4. [www.uhc.com/source4women/health\\_topics/stress/how\\_stress\\_affects\\_your\\_health.htm](http://www.uhc.com/source4women/health_topics/stress/how_stress_affects_your_health.htm)

5. An assessment of paid time off in the U.S., Oxford Economics, Feb. 2014; [http://traveleffect.com/sites/traveleffect.com/files/Oxford\\_UnusedTimeOff\\_FullReport.pdf](http://traveleffect.com/sites/traveleffect.com/files/Oxford_UnusedTimeOff_FullReport.pdf); [www.businessweek.com/stories/2007-05-20/do-us-a-favor-take-a-vacation](http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2007-05-20/do-us-a-favor-take-a-vacation)

6. Nawijn J., Marchand M. A., Veenhoven, R., & Vingerhoets, A. J. Vacationers happier, but most not happier after a holiday, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, Feb. 2010. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2837207/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2837207/)

7. Americans stay connected to work on weekends, vacation and even when out sick, [www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2013/09/connected-work.aspx](http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2013/09/connected-work.aspx)

8. [www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/digital-detox](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/digital-detox); [www.travelandleisure.com/articles/best-places-to-unplug](http://www.travelandleisure.com/articles/best-places-to-unplug)

9. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2837207/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2837207/)

10. Family travel tips, [liveandworkwell.com](http://liveandworkwell.com)