

# Rest and Recreation

## ***Before You Gather***

The bow too tensely strung is easily broken.

—Publilius Syrus

Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath. Stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency. Nothing is that important. Just lie down.

—Natalie Goldberg

There cannot be a stressful crisis next week. My schedule is already full.

—Henry Kissinger

To sit with a dog on a hillside on a glorious afternoon is to be back in Eden, where doing nothing was not boring—it was peace.

—Milan Kundera

Is everything as urgent as your stress would imply?

—Carrie Latet

Slow down and everything you are chasing will come around and catch you.

—John De Paola

If your teeth are clenched and your fists are clenched, your lifespan is probably clenched.

—Adabella Radici

Sometimes the most urgent and vital thing you can possibly do is take a complete rest.

—Ashleigh Brilliant

I think God's going to come down and pull civilization over for speeding.

—Steven Wright

## **Consider This**

Most of us take a vacation, and we all have some hours of leisure in our everyday life. These breaks from work are very important to our well-being. They re-create us, allowing us to rest, connect with family and friends, and attend to our spiritual lives. They deepen and broaden our experiences and give us new scenery in which to gain new perspective. Among the many benefits of leisure time is something vital that we often don't attend to: the need to break up patterns of stress in our lives.

### *Stress*

Stress in itself is not bad and, in any case, can't be avoided. Our bodies and minds have well-developed mechanisms to deal with stress. These mechanisms, however, are supposed to work with an ebb and flow of stress. They are good for the peak times of work or danger or difficulty. They evolved when dangers were many but quite specific: the lion about to pounce on the baby, the need to run from fire, and so on.

In our modern lives, stress is less immediately dangerous but more relentless. The sense of difficulty is constant, and the need to be alert (while driving, for instance) goes on for hours at a time. As a result, stress hormones pour into our bodies more regularly, with significant damaging effects. In many people, these hormones signal the body to store fat in internal organs, damaging the liver's ability to process cholesterol and keeping the pancreas from producing insulin appropriately. Thus the overlapping epidemics of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease are not just due to supersized portions—they are also due to the constant stress in our lives. Breaking up these patterns of stress is vitally important.

### *Addiction to Stress*

You can make a good case that many of us are not only stressed out, but addicted to stress. We are habitually so busy, hurried, and overscheduled that we can't relax, even when we have time to do so.

This is true of kids who take two or three kinds of lessons, go to several team practices and a game each week, and have play dates and birthday parties all weekend. They're "in training" for life in the twenty-first century. It is true of their parents, who work, drive their children's carpool, volunteer, and have their own parents to worry about. It is true of those who work sixty-hour weeks and then rush about to try to enjoy a social life, get some exercise, and lend a helping hand to friends and neighbors. It is even true of retired elders, who volunteer for good causes, travel to beautiful, interesting

places, and want time with their grandkids too.

Addiction to stress and work is not a new thing. It has been a part of human life for thousands of years. But technology has given us the power to take stress to new heights. In modern society, we take this high level of stress for granted; we may not even notice it anymore. And sometimes we don't have a lot of choice about it. Life *is* stressful at times. But choice or not, we're no less addicted.

Addiction to stress works just like all other addictions. At heart, it is a stimulus/response feedback loop that has been set up within the very chemistry of the brain. If the stimulus is stopped, the balance is disrupted, and we go through withdrawal symptoms.

When we are habituated to stress, our bodies are constantly compensating for us in ways that are very productive in short-term emergencies, but not very productive in the long run. That's why stress reduction needs to be a vital part of our daily, weekly, and yearly routines.

Addiction to stress and work is not a new thing in human life, although technology has given us the power to take stress to new heights of productivity and rushing about. Stress, worry, the temptation to work all the time, and demand that others around us do the same, has been a part of human life for thousands of years. We know this because comment on it and cures for it are offered in all the world's age-old faiths.

### *Sabbath Time*

In the Judeo-Christian world, one strategy for dealing with addiction to stress is called the Sabbath. Taking a Sabbath, a day of rest, disrupts the feedback loop that keeps us perpetually stressed and sets up a different kind of feedback loop, one of peace, ease, relaxation, and inwardness.

It may seem that the day of rest, considered to be so important by the ancient Hebrews that they wrote it into the very story of creation, was put there so that an egotistical God could collect all the worship due to him. But it's abundantly clear from scripture that the Sabbath was made for humanity, not for God. All the Sabbath rules are focused not on proper worship, but on refraining from productive work. That's what Jesus meant when he said that "the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Observing the Sabbath is a spiritual discipline. It requires trust that enough will get done in six days of work. It also gives us a chance to know ourselves and each other as it is said that God knows us—as precious beings who deserve to enjoy one another and creation, not simply as workers or producers whose only purpose is toil. It's

a time when we step out of the habits of being stressed, focused, and task-oriented and get in the habit of being relaxed, receptive, and related.

A Sabbath would be a day in which we went fishing without caring about whether we caught any fish, because the point would be to enjoy nature, not produce food. A Sabbath would be a day in which we got to know our neighbors, listened to music, and pattered around in the garden because we enjoyed it rather than because there was work to be done. The point is not so much the exact activity we engage in as its re-creating potential and the spirit in which it is done.

The impulse to be legalistic and kill the spirit of the Sabbath goes back at least two thousand years, and some people who grew up with Blue Laws or other Sabbath restrictions have some negative feelings about it. But discarding the Sabbath as a whole is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We all need regularly scheduled times in our lives when we allow ourselves to just be, enjoy, relate, and reflect.

There's no going back to the days when everyone took the same Sabbath, when by law, the stores and recreation areas were closed and the streets were quiet. For most of us, it would be an extreme spiritual discipline to take a full day of Sabbath each week on which we did no work or shopping and turned off our phones and computers. But a Sabbath can mean a block of hours that we have carved out for ourselves. It might mean deciding that Friday evening is for yoga, a quiet dinner at home, and a good book, or that our Sunday routine will be a walk, church, lunch with friends, and a call to Mom and Dad. The Jewish people, who take the Sabbath more seriously than any other faith group, believe that couples should make love on the Sabbath to enjoy each other and nurture their relationship.

Sabbath time can come in daily, weekly, seasonal, or yearly doses, and we probably need all of them. When we rest and engage in recreation regularly, we can work with our bodies to set up healthy feedback loops about relaxation and freedom from stress.

## **Activities**

Before the gathering, reflect on rest and recreation by doing one or more of the following activities.

### *Relaxation Techniques*

Try one or more of these relaxation techniques.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation*: Begin by breathing in a relaxed way. Slowly focus on tensing a muscle group for about five seconds and then relaxing it for about five

seconds. Start with one foot, then the other. Then tense and relax one calf, then the other. Move up through the thighs, buttocks, stomach, one hand at a time, one arm at a time, the shoulders, neck, and finally the face.

- *Visualization:* Begin with relaxed breathing. Close your eyes and take an imaginary journey to a peaceful, calming place. Try to use as many senses as you can, including smells, sights, sounds, and textures. If you are imagining walking along the beach, for instance, think about the bright sun, the sound of the waves, the feel of the water, the crunch of the sand, and the smell of salt water.
- *Follow your breathing:* As you breathe in and out, focus on your nostrils or the back of your throat. Some people focus on the moment of stillness between the intake and the outflow of breath. On the in-breath, you may want to say to yourself “breath in,” and on the out-breath, “breath out.” Some people count the breaths.
- *Listen to music:* Usually we listen to music as we are doing other things. Try doing nothing but closing your eyes and focusing on quiet, meditative music.

### *Journaling Suggestions*

- Make a quick list of your daily, weekly, and occasional recreation activities. Include all the things, outside of your vacations, that you use to relax, rest, and play—TV programs, computer games, spiritual practices, hobbies, staying in touch with friends, outdoor activities, family activities, and so on. Once you have your list, go back through it. Put a star by the activities that you think are especially satisfying. Put a dollar sign by the activities that cost money. Mark an X by those that are not serving you well. Put a Y by activities that help you maintain good relationships and a Z by those that don't. Put an exclamation mark by those activities that involve physical exercise. Make up other symbols for your particular needs. Look over the list. Does anything jump out at you?

- Think about the impact of your recreation activities on your life and their cost in time and money. Journal on the activities you want to keep or increase in your life, then on the activities you find to be unhelpful at this time.

- Think back to a time during the past year that was a break from responsibilities and your daily routine. Write about how satisfying (or not) that time was.

- Consider the purposes of “re-creation” time described in the essay: it allows us to rest, connect with family and friends, and attend to our spiritual lives; it deepens and broadens our experiences; it gives us new scenery to gain new perspective. Which of these purposes do you think you meet pretty well? Which ones could use more attention?

- Write about a special vacation memory for you. What made it special?

Think about the recreation activities you listed (see Journaling Suggestions above). Which of these are most effective in relieving stress? Decide which ones you are willing to talk about with the group.

## ***Gathering***

### **Candle Lighting**

Calm your hurried pace.

For the next hour or so let the cares, the fretfulness and worry be set aside.

Know that you are not alone.

There is strength and caring support for you here.

Come into this space.

—Carolyn Owen-Towle, adapted

### **On Our Hearts**

10 minutes

### **Silence**

3 minutes

### **Shared Readings**

There are times, then, when in order to keep ourselves in existence at all we simply have to sit back for a while and do nothing. And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform: and often it is quite beyond his power.

—Thomas Merton

When you experience yourself in stillness—that is, when you give your undivided attention to experiencing the truth about you—you will experience the conflict-free, calm, dynamic peace of perfectly centered abundant life energy. This exquisite peace deep within you is actually the experience of God, or the harmony of oneness felt within you as you.

—Erich Schiffmann

We collect data, things, people, ideas, profound experiences, never penetrating any of them. . . . But there are other times. There are times when we stop. We sit still. We lose ourselves in a pile of leaves or its memory. We listen and breezes from a whole other world begin to whisper.

—James Carroll

## **Sharing**

60 minutes

## **Announcements**

## **Closing Activity**

Tensing and Relaxing

5 minutes

## **Closing Words**

Walk softly.

Speak truthfully.

Love gently.

Breathe deeply.

Live wisely.

Go in peace.

—Elaine Gallagher Gehrman

## **Song**

Sing “Thank You for Your Loving Hands”