



LEAVE YOUR STRESS BEHIND

ANY VACATION IS A GOOD VACATION.
BUT THE BEST ONES CAN
CALM YOUR MIND, REFRESH YOUR BODY,
REVIVE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS,
AND MAYBE EVEN EXTEND YOUR LIFE

BY BILL STIEG

achieved complete disengagement

on the fourth fairway at the Pacific Dunes golf course in Bandon, Oregon. To my right, roaring surf. In front of me, 180 yards distant, the flagstick. In my hands, a 3-iron. Which I cannot hit to save my life. But this time I did, and as the ball hung splendidly in the blue morning sky, nothing else mattered. Not the pile of work back at the office 2,400 miles away, not my son's pending college applications, not the potholed driveway at home, not my crippled car that barely reached the airport. None of it. Psychologists call this experience disengagement, or detachment, and it's what you want in a vacation. If reducing stress is the primary goal of a getaway (and for busy American men it should be), then you must detach yourself from work. And that means far more than yanking the recharge cord out of the BlackBerry. Believe me, it'll feel good.

Researchers who study vacations take their work seriously, because modern medicine and modern business take the subject of stress seriously. One study found that the fewer vacations a man takes, the higher his risk of having a heart attack. Nothing less than a healthy, productive workforce is at stake. Not to mention the happiness of those workers. I've sifted through much of their research and talked to Ph.D.'s from Tel Aviv to Vienna to Arizona. (I could use another vacation, maybe in one of those places.)

But first, let's look at some of the experts' peer-reviewed conclusions on "respite effects." You want to take a vacation that replenishes your psychological resources, and to find ways to make that vacation afterglow last. We're talking about the psychology of summer.

See those happy faces of children on summer vacation? Let's bottle it and mark it with an R_x. Here's a prescription for downtime that will extend your lifetime.

1

THINK DIFFERENTLY

A vacation should use a part of your brain that you don't use at work. This is a path to detachment. "The more different your vacation activities are from what you normally do, the easier it is to stop thinking about work," says Charlotte Fritz, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University.

My most memorable recent vacations—to London, Alaska, and Oregon—were about as different from my workaday, deadline-shadowed world in small-town eastern Pennsylvania as I could reasonably afford.

"You're recharging yourself, body and soul," says Tel Aviv University's Dov Eden, Ph.D., a pioneer in vacation research. One of Fritz's studies revealed that people who take on a challenge





WHEN YOU'RE BIKING OR HIKING, YOU'RE DETACHED. YOU CAN'T DWELL ON WORK. THE EFFECT IS HEALTHIER, AND IT MAKES THE VACATION AFTERGLOW LAST LONGER.

while on vacation feel less exhaustion back on the job and perform their jobs more efficiently. "A challenge boosts your self-esteem and your self-efficacy," she says.

That's important for over-achievers, says Gerhard Blasche, Ph.D., of the Medical University of Vienna. "If you are used to being challenged, it will be difficult for you to disengage unless you are challenged in a different way."

You can master a skill (painting, say, or a language) or challenge yourself physically. "I always wanted to climb that mountain," Fritz says. And sometimes a new skill is a true lifestyle shift—as specific as learning to meditate or as general as adopting healthy eating habits. "Doing something creative may also change your approach to things in everyday life," Blasche says.

TRY THIS Maybe you've been resisting the spa vacation your wife has been pushing on you. Give it a shot—if there are plenty of activity options for you at her spa of choice. In one study, Blasche found that people sustained several quality-of-life improvements for a full year after taking a 3-week spa vacation. "It's important to have a pattern of rest and activity," he says. "Not too much or too little of anything. At a spa you have treatments, and you have a lot of rest. If you combine these cleverly, you'll feel occupied, you won't feel bored, and you'll certainly have enough rest time." The Canyon Ranch spas (in Arizona and Massachusetts) offer plenty of healthy challenges—no need to fear a fortnight of cucumbers pressed onto your eyelids. (canyonranch.com)

2

DISCONNECT

You can thank Brooks Gump, Ph.D., of SUNY at Oswego, for providing your best get-out-of-work card: As unused vacation days mount, so does your heart-attack risk. A vacation provides a "signaled safety opportunity," he says, which is prof-speak for an interval of time when you don't have to worry about what might happen to you. Testing people's "vigilance for threat" shows clear effects on blood pressure and heart rate, he says. Cutting yourself off from potential stressors—allowing yourself to shut down that vigilance—is crucial.

Gump's dream vacation: "You would not check your e-mail, you would not bring your work with you, you would not call your office, you would not let colleagues know where to call you."

Does he do this? Not always. But he knows he should.

Tel Aviv's Eden probably has more years in this field than anyone. The scholar's considered advice: "Leave your damn cell-phone at home."

Eden once measured the well-being of Israeli men who left their jobs to go on noncombat military reserve duty for 2 weeks or longer. When the reservists returned to work, they were asked about stress and burnout.

"The ones who detached less benefited less from the respite, because they didn't have a respite—they took the job with them," Eden says. And the more they detached, the more they

enjoyed their time away from the job. A cellphone is an electronic tether, says Eden. "People don't realize what's happening—they become company property."

TRY THIS **Don't tell only yourself that you won't check in with the office, because you'll be racked with guilt for days and eventually cave. Instead, tell everyone. Suffer through the 5 minutes it takes to explain to your boss that you will not be checking in, by phone or e-mail. Prepare a list of pending work and the people covering it for you. "Healthy bosses understand," said James Campbell Quick, Ph.D., a longtime stress researcher at the University of Texas at Arlington. Just think about your boss's responsibilities beforehand, "so when you're gone the boss's backside is covered."**

3

SWEAT

Blasche and his Vienna colleagues once studied men who'd taken a 3-week hiking vacation. (It helps to have those Alps nearby.) They found that the positive effects lasted a full 8 weeks after the vigorous trip. The men benefited both physically (lower blood-pressure and cholesterol levels) and psychologically (quality of life and feelings of well-being).

In an officebound world, an active vacation serves the dual purpose of detaching workers from work and building fitness. "For men, it may be even more important—the physical, maybe the competitive part of it," Fritz says. "If you're sitting in an office all day, dressed up and acting appropriately, maybe you should take on more of a physical challenge on your vacation."

TRY THIS **Chill occasionally. You shouldn't go hard all day long. "A lot of people, but especially men, do a lot of exercise and get into an overtraining syndrome," says Blasche. "They're not deriving benefits—they're accruing more stress."**

4

RECONNECT

Vacation experts agree that reconnecting with friends and family is one of the best ways to reap the full benefit of a getaway.

Generally speaking, says Blasche, "Company usually improves mood." He recently completed a study (not yet published) that examines the effects of a weeklong vacation on work

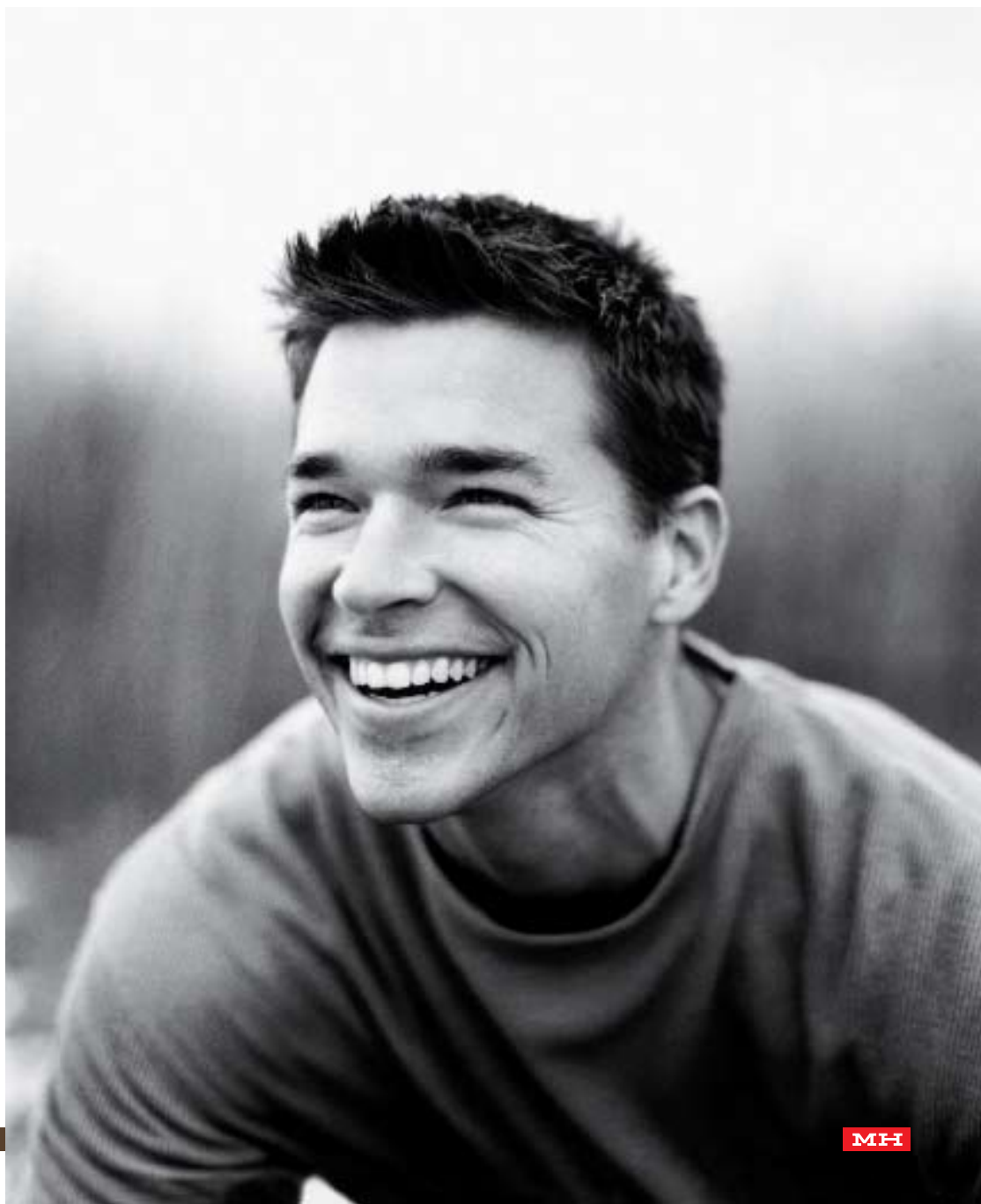
burnout—yes, the same work burnout you're familiar with. Each participant had the opportunity to join others for activities such as hiking or photography walks.

"Most people reported that the group was instrumental in helping them disengage and restore themselves," he says. "That would be an optimal combination for men." Yep, there were eight of us on my golf trip—me, three old friends, and four new friends. They all lifted my spirits.

How's that work? Being with other people, Blasche says, improves your mood by providing help during activities ("What club

did you hit?") as well as an opportunity to disclose bothersome feelings. ("Dammit, Ralph is going to miss the tee time!") Moreover, a group offers distraction and mutual positive reinforcement, which also raises self-esteem. ("Great 3-iron, Bill!")

For fathers, this is also true. Paradoxically, a family is rarely as close as when it's away from home spending time together in close quarters (motel rooms, car rides, tents). And for men in general, well, do we really have to remind you of the wonders of hotel-room sex? If the kids are along, book the suite.





TRY THIS No family? No problem. A vacation with strangers allows you to unpack your psychological baggage. "If you're in a new group, in a new social surrounding, then you can be somebody different." The result can be a new, refreshed you, says Blasche.

5

MAKE IT LAST

As for the fadeout of the respite effect, "The classic study shows that burnout is reduced very nicely during a 2-week vacation," says Blasche. "Three days after your return you still see a nice reduction in burnout. But 3 weeks after a vacation, you're back at pre-vacation level."

That's sad. One trick for preserving the afterglow is to load your office computer with vacation photos. Our experts also strongly suggest staying in contact with fellow travelers to reinforce memories—and maybe to plan the next trip.

TRY THIS Book a vacation that begins with a train or boat ride, Blasche recommends. The slower travel pace will help reinforce a physical separation from the worries you're leaving behind, and gives you time to achieve a vacation mindset. It beats airport security lines.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE studies is about spring break, and it doesn't even involve girls going wild. Researchers gave PDAs to college students, and queried them at random during their break about how much fun they were having.

The real-time ratings (the ones given during the trip) weren't so great. But ratings afterward were much higher. "There are two vacations—the experience itself and the way you remember it," says Derrick Wirtz, Ph.D., who conducted this study while at Northern Arizona University. "The most memorable parts end up defining the experience for us."

We're all mentally writing a book of our lives that gives us identity, says George Loewenstein, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University who studies how memory affects behavior. Some of the best chapters are vacations. Loewenstein is a mountaineer who knows how miserable he's been clinging to a mountainside, but he treasures the memories.

"People care about meaning in their lives," he says. "The purpose of life, who they are, things like that—identity. The stories that we tell about our vacations and our lives in general take on lives of their own. They shape the way we remember the events."

It's true. Just ask me about my golf trip. ■



THE 5-MINUTE VACATION

Escape your office—without notifying the boss

- 1 **TURN OFF YOUR PHONE AND LEAVE THE OFFICE FOR YOUR LUNCH BREAK** "Our bodies are designed to deal with stress intermittently, not 24 hours a day," says David Posen, M.D., the author of *The Little Book of Stress Relief*. "Removing the source of stress, even for a short time, allows your body to recover, restore, and relax." Brooks Gump, Ph.D., who found that taking more vacations cuts heart-attack risk, says we need to grab chances to be safe from stressors. "And that may mean going out to lunch and not telling anyone where you go."
- 2 **LOAD VACATION PHOTOS ONTO YOUR WORK COMPUTER** Many vacation researchers practice this trick themselves. "Viewing pictures of a restful scene allows you to recapture the feelings associated with the image," says Posen. Make them your screen saver or upload them to a free site like Flickr or Picasa for less frequent revisiting.
- 3 **TALK ABOUT YOUR TRIP WITH COWORKERS, AND RELIVE IT WITH THE PEOPLE WHO WENT WITH YOU** Psychologists call this "rehearsal"—the more (and sooner) you talk about an experience, the better it lodges in your memory, says George Loewenstein, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University. "You may think it's cheesy to give a slideshow," he says, "but the benefit of boring your friends and neighbors is that you're more likely to retain the experience yourself."
- 4 **GO BACK OUTSIDE** Chances are, you spent much of your trip outdoors. Keep it up when you return home. Columbia University researchers found that exposure to the negative air ions created when air molecules are exposed to sunlight, radiation, moving air, and water generated feelings of alertness, mental clarity, and elevated mood. Tip: Those ions exist outside your office, too.
- 5 **RE-CREATE THE SOUNDS THAT LULLED YOU ON VACATION** The steady, calming sound of waves, for instance: "The natural rhythm of the waves' ebb and flow helps slow the mind and relax the body," says Alan Keck, Psy.D., a psychologist with a private practice in Altamonte Springs, Florida, whose specialties include clinical hypnosis. Slip on your earphones and download a 15-minute nature-sound MP3 for \$2 at soundsleeping.com.
- 6 **BREATHE DEEPLY, AS YOU DID ON VACATION** (and as you probably don't, hunched over your keyboard). Close your eyes, place both feet on the floor, and breathe deeply through your nose for 5 to 10 minutes. This is an example of body-focused meditation. "Deep breaths stretch out muscles in your chest and diaphragm and alert your mind that you're ready to relax," says Peg Baim, clinical director of the training center at the Bensen-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital.
- 7 **KEEP A VACATION SCENT IN AN OFFICE DRAWER** like that resort soap you swiped, the sunscreen you used at the beach, a sachet of Provençal herbs, or an envelope you stashed with pine needles. "Scent becomes strongly connected to whatever you felt when you first came into contact with it," says Rachel Herz, Ph.D., author of *The Scent of Desire*. The parts of the brain that regulate emotion, memory, and smell are close neighbors; they'll transport you back even when the vacation seems far off.

ALISON GRANELL

