

The Case for Doing Nothing

Stop being so busy, and just do nothing. Trust us.

By **Olga Mecking**

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Keeping busy?

Running from place to place and laboring over long to-do lists have increasingly become ways to communicate status: I'm so busy because I'm *just so important*, the thinking goes.

Perhaps it's time to stop all this busyness. Being busy — if we even *are* busy — is rarely the status indicator we've come to believe it is. Nonetheless, the impact is real, and instances of burnout, anxiety disorders and stress-related diseases are on the rise, not to mention millennial burnout.

There's a way out of that madness, and it's not more mindfulness, exercise or a healthy diet (though these things are all still important). What we're talking about is ... doing nothing. Or, as the Dutch call it, *niksen*.

What is *niksen*?

It's difficult to define what doing *nothing* is, because we are always doing *something*, even when we're asleep.

Doreen Dodgen-Magee, a psychologist who studies boredom and wrote the book "Devised! Balancing Life and Technology in a Digital World," likens *niksen* to a car whose engine is running but isn't going anywhere.

"The way I think about boredom is coming to a moment with no plan other than just to be," she said.

Sandi Mann, a psychologist at the University of Central Lancashire in Britain, added that *niksen* can be "when we're not doing the things we should be doing. Because perhaps we don't want to, we're not motivated. Instead, we're not doing very much."

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More practically, the idea of *niksen* is to take conscious, considered time and energy to do activities like gazing out of a window or sitting motionless. The less-enlightened might call such activities "lazy" or "wasteful." Again: nonsense.

We at Smarter Living have long been fans of taking regular breaks throughout the day, as study after study shows that feeling drowsy, exhausted or otherwise mentally depleted during the workday drastically hinders performance and productivity.

In other words: Whether at home or at work, permission granted to spend the afternoon just hanging out.

Why we need *niksen* in our lives

Generally speaking, our culture does not promote sitting still, and that can have wide-reaching consequences for our mental health, well-being, productivity and other areas of our lives. Technology doesn't make it any easier: The smartphone you carry with you at all hours makes it almost impossible to truly unplug and embrace idleness. And by keeping ourselves busy at all times, we may be losing our ability to sit still because our brains are actually being rewired.

Indeed, the benefits of idleness can be wide-ranging.

Ms. Mann's research has found that daydreaming — an inevitable effect of idleness — “literally makes us more creative, better at problem-solving, better at coming up with creative ideas.” For that to happen, though, total idleness is required.

“Let the mind search for its own stimulation,” Ms. Mann said. “That’s when you get the daydreaming and mind wandering, and that’s when you’re more likely to get the creativity.”

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Counterintuitively, idleness can be a great productivity tool because “if our energy is totally shot, our productivity is not going to be good because we’re not going to have fuel to burn with which to be productive,” said Chris Bailey, a productivity expert and author of the blog “A Life of Productivity.”

Niksen can help you solve problems as well.

“It takes you out of your mind, and then you see things clearly after a while,” said Manfred Kets de Vries, a professor of leadership development and organizational change at Insead in Paris.

But stopping the cycle of busyness can be challenging in a culture that prizes getting things done. Here are some tips to help you stop and be:

Make time for doing nothing, and do it with purpose.

Figure out when you're most productive and creative, then notice when your mind starts to shut off or you start performing tasks just for the sake of doing them, Mr. Bailey suggests. That's when you should go for a walk or take a break. The intention behind the decision is what counts.

“I do nothing with purpose,” Mr. Kets de Vries said. “I know that without breaks I cannot be effective.”

Prioritize the things that are important to you and the things that bring you pleasure, and outsource everything else when possible. Focusing on the truly relevant parts of life can help you build free time in your schedule. And take advantage of convenient opportunities to practice idleness, like when you're standing in line or waiting for the children to come home from school.

Resist the culture of busyness.

If you're doing nothing, own it. When someone asks you what you're doing during a nothing break, simply respond, “Nothing.” Be unapologetic about taking breaks or holidays, and if you start to feel guilty about being seen as lazy, think of nixen not as a sign of laziness but as an important life skill. Choose the initial discomfort of nixen over the familiarity of busyness.

Manage your expectations.

Learning takes time and effort, so don't get discouraged if you don't catch on immediately to the benefits of idleness. Know that sitting still might actually be uncomfortable at first and might take practice — just like exercise.

Ms. Dodgen-Magee likens it to beginning a new workout routine: At first, you might get sore, but “after a while, you'll find yourself in this moment where you're like, ‘Oh, this feels fantastic.’”

Reorganize your environment.

Your surroundings can have a major impact on how much nothingness you can embrace, so consider the physical space in your home and workplace. Keep your devices out of reach so that they'll be more difficult to access, and turn your home into a nixsen-friendly area. Add a soft couch, a comfy armchair, a few cushions or just a blanket. Orient furniture around a window or fireplace rather than a TV.

"If those spaces are present, people will use them," Ms. Dodgen-Magee said.

Think outside of the box.

If you can't sit still in your home or workplace, go to the park or book a relaxing day at the spa. Ms. Dodgen-Magee encourages people to host boredom parties, during which a host invites over a few friends to ... be bored together.

Mr. Bailey suggests experimenting with different lifestyles to find the right one for you. For example, he lived like a slob for a week and learned that it's important to "let the air out of the tires" once in a while.

If you're still uncomfortable with the idea of doing nothing, try to trick your mind into thinking you're being productive. Ms. Dodgen-Magee suggests using open-end toys such as kinetic sand, Baoding balls or marble runs.

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