



e-quilibrium

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Leisure

How often in the last month have you been able to spend time in activities that you enjoyed? Specifically consider the following activities:

- Spending quiet time alone
- Spending time unwinding
- Visiting others
- Eating with others
- Doing fun things with others
- Club, fellowship, and religious group participation
- Vacationing
- Communing with nature
- Sports
- Hobbies

Participants in research conducted in the Pittsburgh area by a team of health psychologists were asked to indicate how often they were able to spend time in each of these categories of leisure activities. Responses ranged from “never” to “every day” to “not applicable/do not enjoy.” Lots of other information was also obtained, including positive and negative moods, symptoms of depression, satisfaction with life, sense of purpose and meaning in life, social network size, social support, recent stressful life events, health behaviors (exercise and sleep), health status, body mass index, waist circumference, blood pressure, and salivary cortisol (physiologic indicator of stress). The broad research question was whether or not engagement in leisure activity is associated with better health.

On virtually every measure of health, individuals who reported more frequent enjoyable leisure activities also had

better psychological and physical functioning. Having a range of leisure activities was more strongly associated with health than was involvement in any specific category of leisure activity. This suggests that there may be some benefit in having a variety of leisure activities.

The investigators were also able to determine that participation in leisure activities served to buffer the negative psychological effects of stress. Time spent in leisure activities may serve a restorative function.

It needs to be noted that the research was cross sectional (measures were obtained at a single point in time) not longitudinal (measures taken at various points over a period of time), which means that it cannot be concluded with certainty that spending time in leisure activities actually contributes to good health. It is also possible that having good health promotes participation in leisure activities. Most likely it is a two-way process.

Whether or not Americans have more or less leisure time now than in the past is a subject of some controversy. While some data suggest that Americans are working more hours than in the past, others suggest that there is a trend toward having more leisure time. Perhaps a more important issue is how non-work time is spent. Hours spent commuting to and from work, and hours spent watching television, likely don't have the same benefits as do the leisure activities studied in the research described above. Restorative leisure may require "enjoyable engagement."

Spending time in enjoyable leisure activities appears to be one important contributor to maintaining healthy equilibrium in our lives.

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