

Making Your Vacation Count

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Preventing Job Burnout

In today's fast-paced, high-stress work environment, it may seem that there is no time for vacation. But a good vacation is very important to help maintain your effectiveness throughout the rest of the year. One key to preventing job-burnout is to maintain perspective about your work and how it fits into your life.

When you are in the midst of an intense job situation, and have to deal with the day-to-day demands of modern family life, it is easy to become caught up in a sense of overwhelming demands and urgency that can eventually lead to burnout. According to Pines & Aronson, *burnout* is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding. Highly motivated and idealistic people, and individuals who expect their work to give their lives a sense of meaning, are most at risk for job burnout. (A. Pines, & E. Aronson, *Career burnout: Causes and cures*, 1988). Although Maslach & Leiter's research suggests that organizations hold the key to preventing burnout (C. Maslach, & M. P. Leiter, *The truth about burnout: How organizations cause personal stress, and what to do about it*. 1997), it behooves individuals to take whatever steps they can on their own to prevent burnout. Taking meaningful vacations that let you get away from the current urgent situation, think about your life goals and priorities, and unwind from your every day stressors, is one important element in a on overall plan to prevent burnout.

It is next to impossible to gain perspective when you are right in the middle of a stressful situation. Getting some distance by reconnecting with family, traveling to a different location, or simply by doing something entirely different, can help you regain your perspective about your life and work. Holding onto this perspective can allow you to maintain your balance in the stressful everyday world of work, and prevent burnout.

Unfortunately, vacations, can increase rather than reduce stress. That is why it is so important to plan your vacation carefully. Begin by examining what your goals are for your vacation. Expectations for vacations are often set by one's childhood experiences, and unless you take the time to consciously examine your expectations and your current needs, as well as your partner's expectations and current needs, you may not create the optimal vacation for your situation.

Enhancing Family Relations

Vacations are often a time to be with family, whether it is your immediate family, extended family, or both. Vacation can be a time for bonding more with your immediate family. It may be the one time of year your children see you relax, have fun, and laugh. Parents are often so busy juggling their own busy schedules, and their children's schedules, while trying to keep up with the demands of day-to-day living, that it is hard for family members to find time to just enjoy being together. A vacation that takes you away from the daily hassles can leave more time for really connecting with other family members. But if one of your purposes is to connect, you want to look at what kind of vacation you are taking. Some "so-called" family vacation destinations, such as theme parks, encourage no more interaction between family members than sitting and watching TV. You have a much better chance of engaging your ten year-old in a meaningful conversation about life while you are walking along a quiet stream, then when you are standing in line with tired, crabby children, waiting to ride on a roller coaster. If enhancing family relations is one of your goals, make sure that the vacation will include a time and space for the family members to be together when they are not hot, tired, and cranky.

Vacation can also be a time for enhancing relations with extended family. This may be the one time in the year that the children see their grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. However, family gatherings can bring about additional stress, and there may be times when it is important to have time away from family. If your family-of-origin expects you to spend every holiday with them, as well as a week at the beach each summer, you may want to examine how much togetherness makes sense to you. This will be different for each person. If you are going to be with your family-of-origin, you need to be prepared to deal with long-standing issues, such as your mother's constant criticism of your children, Uncle Fred getting drunk and belligerent, and your brother showing up with yet another girl-friend. Even if you can take all this in stride, your partner may not find it very relaxing. Relations with your family-of-origin are important, but you may need time for just you and your partner to get away some time during the year. Think about your purpose for this vacation in particular. If you or your partner have been very stressed at work recently and just need a chance to decompress, this may not be the right time to be with extended family.

Stimulation/Challenge

If your job is fairly routine, and not particularly challenging for you at the moment, you may find that what you want most out of vacation is stimulation or challenge. For one person this may mean backpacking for three weeks with no contact with

the outside world, for another, it may mean traveling through a country where you don't know the language, and for a third it may mean joining a world-record skydiving attempt. These activities are not usually optimal for family vacations - one person's idea of challenge may be another's idea of a nightmare. If you are in a relationship, and you want to have challenge as part of your vacation, you may need to think about taking separate vacations occasionally.

Education/Broadening

On-going education is a priority for some people on their vacation. Whether it is a chance to learn more about history, other cultures, the arts, or the environment, many people put education as a priority for vacations. However, unless you are really lucky, it is unlikely that family members will have similar tastes about what is interesting. What one-person finds interesting and educational, another is likely to find deadly boring. It also makes no sense to drag your children to an historic site that you have no interest in, and then resent it when they are bored. Visit sites you are interested in; your children will automatically be more interested if you are enthusiastic about a subject. But be fair to both your children and your partner - just because you have a passion for forts, or impressionist art, or antique airplanes, it is not fair to expect someone else to want to spend more than a few hours indulging your passion. This is where the art of compromise is necessary if you want to have a successful vacation.

Volunteer Work/Community Service

Some people like to use their vacation for doing volunteer work. These opportunities can range from volunteering at a summer camp for special needs children, to repairing trails with the Sierra club, to painting guana in Australia with a conservation group. Once again, in planning a service vacation, you need to keep in mind your overall goal for the vacation. If you work in a highly people-intensive job, and are anything less than exceedingly extraverted, then a vacation that is also highly people intensive is unlikely to give you the same opportunity to get perspective, unwind, and reconnect with yourself that a more low-key, solitary, vacation would allow. On the other hand, for someone in a more solitary job, working with special-needs children could be a wonderful way to regain perspective about your life values.

Relaxation

Most of us think about vacation as a time to relax. But what is relaxing to one person can be stress-producing for another. It is important to know what *you* find relaxing, rather than what some advertiser thinks you should find relaxing. If you have never thought about it, you may just be going along with your partner's idea of a relaxing vacation, and may not be getting your needs met. It is also important to distinguish relaxing from just zoning out. You want to be able to find time to think and reflect on your vacation. If you use the time to become drunk or stoned, or to just stare at a TV, you are not relaxing, but rather are avoiding being with yourself and your feelings.

Reflection

A good vacation allows time for reflection. What have I accomplished in the last year? How does this fit into my life goals? Am I making adequate time for my relationships? Am I taking time to just enjoy *being*, rather than concentrating on *doing* all of the time? If I am not happy with all of my answers to these questions, what do I want to do differently this coming year?

Clearly, reflection requires having some quiet time. If you are traveling alone, this can be easy to achieve, but if you are with family, you may need to carve out some special time to allow for reflection. This may mean taking an early morning walk along the beach, or staying up after everyone has gone to bed to journal briefly. Some people find driving long distance is a good time for reflection. Viewing the world from 20,000 feet in the air while flying to your destination, can also be a good time to reflect upon one's life.

Obsessing about Work While on Vacation

If you have been going full-speed ahead at work, it can be difficult to suddenly switch gears, and move into a relaxation mode. Going on vacation often entails working extra long-hours before you leave, tying up any loose ends, and making sure things are going to be covered while you are away. It can take a few days, and sometimes as much as a week before you can begin to wind down enough to enjoy your vacation. This is why it is helpful to plan longer vacations, having at least one two-week vacation in a year, so your mind can have a chance to really unwind.

Some employees feel compelled to check into work regularly while on vacation. While at times there may be legitimate business pressures that necessitate your checking-in, if you feel compelled to check in whenever you are away, you may want to examine what this is about. Sometimes individuals have a need to feel indispensable, or a great need for control. If your employees become paralyzed in the face of making a decision without you, is it because they are poor decision-makers, or because you have insisted that everything thing be done your way in the past? Are you someone who defines yourself solely by your work, so that you feel lost when you are away from it? Is checking-in just a habit that needs to be broken? Whatever the reasons for checking-in, you will not be able to get the full benefits of your vacation if you do not really "get away". Checking-in regularly via voicemail, email, or by phone does not qualify as "getting away".