



# DOING NOTHING

## Why Timeouts Matter

by April Thompson

In a harried world where our work is never done, it's tough to take timeouts to do nothing. Yet, when we pump the brakes on Americans' obsessive drive, we discover fresh productivity, creativity and contentment.

"We're socialized to pride ourselves on accomplishment and achievement, yet when you step back, you realize doing nothing produces a valuable currency, especially in enhanced mental health," says Colleen Long, a Boston psychologist and author of *Happiness in B.A.L.A.N.C.E.: What We Know Now About Happiness*.

Italians call it *la dolce far niente*, or the sweetness of doing nothing, while the Dutch word *niksen* translates as "doing something without a purpose." Here are a few tips to reclaim the art of be-ing over do-ing.

**Create a "do nothing" ritual.** Set aside a special time and make it known. It can start the morning or wind down an evening. It may be meditating a few minutes or enjoying a bit of aromatherapy, wherever the heart leads.

**Relax into the moment.** Acknowledge guilty feelings when they arise, but don't heed them. It takes time to undo mental programming and learn to quiet the voice urging, "Don't just stand there, do something!"

**Mindfully do nothing.** It's not about vegging out with passive activities like watching TV or checking email. It's a time to come alive to our senses and surroundings, whether listening to music or people-watching, free of distractions from phone calls or anxious thoughts.

**Doing something is okay.** The aim is to let go of the compulsion to check off every item on our to-do list—but that doesn't mean blankly staring off into space. These are purposeful moments without a specific purpose. Doodle in a sketchbook, wander around the neighborhood or lie in the grass and look at clouds. Spontaneously go with the flow.

**There's no one way or right way to do nothing.** "Just by carving out space, you'll get a benefit even if it doesn't feel like you're doing it right or perfectly," advises Long. It looks different for different people. "Before I had kids, my 'nothing time' might be just being out in nature or simply doing one thing mindfully at a time, like washing dishes. Now I incorporate the principle into family time. One day a week, I shut off the phone, get on the floor with my kids and just let life get messy."

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