



The Upside of Downtime

We live in a fast-paced world. Our daily plate may be packed with projects, errands, appointments and stimulation. Over time, life in the fast lane can chip away at our mood and our health.

But there's hope: Slowing down and taking breaks can nurture the mind and body, giving both the rest they need to function their best.

Downtime can take on many forms, making it easy to find relaxing activities that reflect your unique interests and lifestyle.

“For some people it might be eating a healthy lunch and then going for a walk. For others, it might be spending time in their garden in the afternoon,” says Heidi McBain MA, LMFT, and a licensed professional counselor in Texas.

“Every one of us is unique, but it's helpful to do something you enjoy, just for yourself and your own well-being, each and every day,” she adds.

Whatever you do, McBain suggests prioritizing downtime by scheduling it into your daily routine just like other essential activities, like eating and exercise.

And downtime doesn't have to be a once-a-day break. In fact, scheduling little pockets of rest and rejuvenation throughout the day can reduce burnout by replenishing your energy in increments.

If you feel guilty about scheduled pauses, know this: Downtime isn't just for fun; it packs in a lot of health perks, too.

Here are three reasons to unplug and unwind:

It lowers blood pressure.

Taking a nature walk, listening to your favorite tunes, boogying to some old vinyl — what do these activities have in common? They've all been shown to lower blood pressure, says the National Institutes of Health (NIH). If music isn't your style, you can also try two other downtime favorites, meditation or yoga — which NIH research reveals may lower blood pressure, too.

It boosts your mood — and reduces anxiety.

Whether you prefer reading a good book or tending a garden, engaging in fun activities you enjoy may reduce both anxiety and depression. Bonus? Downtime also frees up mental energy, so you can refocus and pivot toward positive change, says McBain. “It can give people time to reflect on their lives and on the changes they would like to make so they can better appreciate what truly matters to them.”

It may protect brain health.

As we age, it's natural for the brain's gray matter — the neuron cells that control memory, speech and emotion — to shrink, leading to poor brain function. However, mindful-based activities such as meditation and yoga may preserve the brain over time, slowing down its rate of aging. National Institutes of Health notes that Studies of MRI scans have shown that meditators have considerably more gray matter than their non-meditating peers, and yoga practitioners perform better on cognitive tests.

Ready to relax?

Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- *Take a nature walk*
- *Listen to music*
- *Dance*
- *Meditate*
- *Do some yoga*
- *Read a book*
- *Journal*
- *Draw, paint or color in a coloring book*

