The Art of Rest

What’s in it for me? Learn how to incorporate more restfulness into your life.

If you find life stressful, you’re not alone. Life is stressful. From pressure at work to tension at home, unread emails to unwashed dishes – the little things add up, and the constant existential angst doesn’t get any easier. Luckily, there’s an easy antidote to stress: rest. That’s why the largest survey on rest ever conducted, the Rest Test, tried to pinpoint precisely which activities people find most restful. In 2016, over 18,000 people from 135 countries responded to this 40-minute questionnaire. And the top ten restful activities made it into The Art of Rest. These blinks offer insight into five of those ten activities. Along the way, they explain both why these activities are restful and how finding the right kind of rest could improve your life. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how doing nothing can improve your memory; what kind of music is most relaxing; and the optimum balance between solitude and social life.

Stress causes damaging effects to health and well-being. Rest can help.

You can find it at your job. You can find it at home. In fact, you can find it pretty much anywhere. Current concerns can be a source of it, as can regrets about the past and worries about the future. If all this riddling is stressing you out, well, that’s only appropriate – because stress is precisely what’s being referred to. We live in stressful times. The hubbub of the bustling world demands an always-on mentality of chronic busyness. It can feel like there’s no time to slow down. Or, if there is, there’s still that nagging, guilty feeling that rest is undeserved. But the consequences of not resting are potentially far more severe than a fleeting pang of guilt. The key message here is: Stress causes damaging effects to health and well-being. Rest can help. The dangers of too much stress are well documented. A 2018 study by the Mental Health Foundation found that half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress. And according to the same research, nearly three-quarters of Brits felt so stressed at some point during the year that they couldn’t cope. People who’re overwhelmed by stress also tend to sleep less. And this can have devastating consequences. One US study found that fatigue was responsible for 13 percent of workplace injuries. Sixteen percent of respondents also admitted to recently falling asleep at the wheel. As if this weren’t enough, insufficient sleep is tied to a long list of potential health problems, from hypertension and stroke to mood disorders, obesity, and colorectal cancer. So getting quality sleep is essential. Overtiredness – from lack of sleep or lack of rest – also affects your cognitive abilities. Exhaustion can cause memory lapses, trouble focusing, and impaired judgment. And tasks that might normally be a piece of cake can become much more difficult. Adults aren’t the only ones suffering from too little rest. In UK schools, the last 20 years have seen break times eliminated to make more time for extra lessons. Today, only 1 percent of English secondary schools have an afternoon break, despite evidence indicating that breaks improve pupil concentration. From baby boomers to millennials to Generation Z, we could all benefit from being more rested. But here’s the thing: there’s only really one way to get sleep – by sleeping. Restfulness, on the other hand, can be found in many different activities while we’re awake.

Doing nothing in particular is a popular restful activity, but people still find it difficult.

What comes to mind when you hear the word rest? Perhaps you think of practicing mindfulness, or vegging out in front of the television, or of going for a nice walk. You might relax by daydreaming, or by indulging in a hot bath. Of the more than 18,000 responses to the Rest Test, many people listed these as their favorite restful activities. But while they do fall within the top ten, interestingly enough – none of them is in the top five. So it may come as a surprise that the first restful activity on our list, coming in at number five, isn’t really much of an activity at all. It’s doing nothing. The key message here is: Doing nothing in particular is a popular restful activity, but people still find it difficult. Doing nothing may sound like the ultimate form of relaxation, but nonactivity isn’t exactly smiled upon in society. Excessive sitting or days spent lying in bed can both lead to any number of health problems, such as reductions in calcium absorption and muscle mass. Luckily, there are some encouraging benefits for would-be doers of nothing. For starters, boredom can have a positive influence on creativity. In one study, two groups of participants were asked to think up as many uses for a plastic cup as possible. The first group spent some time copying numbers out of a phone book by hand before being asked to

brainstorm. The second group simply got right down to it. Guess who came up with more plastic-cup uses? That's right, the group that'd carried out the boring phonebook task. Doing nothing in particular could also improve your memory. A 2004 study tested people suffering from amnesia following a stroke. They were given 15 words to memorize. For ten minutes, one group performed mental exercises, while the other sat in a dark room. Then, their memories were put to the test. On average, the first group remembered 14 percent of the words, while the second – let's call them the do-nothing group – recalled 49 percent. So doing nothing in particular does have its benefits. But what if you struggle to justify engaging in a restful bout of nothing-doing? Well, one solution is to do almost nothing – something like knitting, coloring books, or jigsaw puzzles. After enough practice, you can do it without too much thinking, and your mind can wander guilt-free.

Listening to slow music is relaxing, as long as you like the song and it's not too complex.

Imagine you're a volunteer in a psychology experiment at your university. You've just been given the task of solving some especially difficult anagrams. The problem is, your brain just can't seem to crack the codes. What could these words be? Think! To make matters worse, the other participant is making rapid progress. He easily solves the anagrams and uses the extra time to taunt you. He questions your intelligence. He wonders, aloud, how you ever got into college. Before long, you're thoroughly annoyed. And annoyed you remain, even after learning that this arrogant knucklehead wasn't a participant at all. He was the researchers' accomplice. Now the researchers ask you a question: What kind of music would you choose to help you calm down? A simple melody – or a complex one? The key message here is: Listening to slow music is relaxing, as long as you like the song and it's not too complex. This experiment, designed by Serbian-American psychologist Vladimir Konečni in 1976, generated clear results. The majority of participants – 79 percent – selected simpler, quieter music. In the Rest Test, listening to music was the fourth most popular restful activity. But that doesn't mean all music is restful. Different music affects our moods differently. Fast music in a major key is more likely to spark excitement; slow, dissonant music in a minor key is associated with sadness. So what type of music has the ability to lull you into restfulness? A slow song with easy, flowing rhythms, all in a major key could do the trick. We seem to know this intuitively. In another study, one group of participants lay on a quilt and relaxed for seven minutes, while another group cycled vigorously on exercise bikes. When asked to choose music to listen to afterward, those on the quilt had mixed preferences – they either wanted a pick-me-up, or something slow to continue their relaxed mood. The cyclists overwhelmingly opted for the slower music. But that doesn't mean simple, slow music is the only music that can be relaxing. For example, in a recent survey, 96 percent of the 600 respondents said that music helped them clear their minds and fall asleep. But their pre-sleep music preferences varied widely. Yes, 32 percent did choose classical music, but many others selected Ed Sheeran, and a few opted for house music. In other words, restful music isn't limited to generic relaxation playlists on YouTube. The criteria are, in fact, much simpler: the music shouldn't be too fast or too complex – and, most importantly, you should like it.

"It seems that having an eclectic musical taste might help us to relax better because, after all, we have a wide range of moods too."

Small doses of alone time can be restful, as long as you choose the place and the time.

Perhaps you've noticed that many of the Rest Test's most popular sources of restfulness are solitary activities. So it may make perfect sense that being alone also ranks high on the list: at number three, to be exact. Wanting to be alone is something we can all relate to. Some respondents even put down some quality me-time as their favorite way to relax, in particular women under the age of 30. More social activities, such as spending time with friends and family, didn't even make the top ten. But where do we draw the line between relaxing solitude and forlorn loneliness? The key message here is: Small doses of alone time can be restful, as long as you choose the place and the time. As with doing nothing in particular, being alone is only relaxing in certain situations. If isolation is forced upon you, as it is with solitary confinement in prisons, it's usually the opposite of restful. Psychology studies have shown that extreme isolation can have detrimental effects on prisoners' cognitive abilities. After a time, the lack of stimulation can even cause people to forget who they are, obliterating their sense of identity. Other, less drastic types of forced alone time, such as extended bouts of unemployment, are also not exactly restful. Whether you feel relaxed or lonely also depends on your social connections. If you have fewer friends than you'd like to have, you may feel lonely when you're alone. Oddly enough, the same goes for having lots of friends. A study from Iowa State University indicates that it's less about having some precise number of friendships and more about how close those friendships are. If you have close friends to return to, your time spent alone will be restful. For alone time to be restful, you also have to recognize it as such. After all,

on average, people spend about 29 percent of their waking hours engaged in lonely activities – commuting to work, shopping for groceries, staring into smartphones. But these activities usually aren't counted as wholesome solo time. The key to finding restful solitude is to do it on your own terms. It's not just about escaping people, work, or nagging obligations. Taking a little time for yourself also lets you listen to your emotions and reflect on who you are – removed from the pressures or judgments imposed by others. But remember: don't impose your own pressures on yourself during this time.

Spending time in nature can be restful and improve your mood.

Where do you spend most of your time alone? If you're like most people, you spend it at home. Now, where would you most like to spend your alone time? If you're still like most people, the answer is in nature. Many of us associate nature with some form of restfulness – even if we're devout urbanites with a lifelong aversion to mosquitoes. We may not do it as often as we'd like, but spending time in nature is still high on the list of restful activities, coming in at number two on the Rest Test. The key message here is: Spending time in nature can be restful and improve your mood. Advocates for more time with the birds and the trees claim that nature has the capacity to soothe our troubles and brighten our spirits. But is a dose of the outdoors actually restful, or do we just think it is? Let's look at a few studies to find out. In one study, researchers at Stanford University used brain scanners to measure activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex – the brain region linked to feelings of sadness and negative thoughts. Then, participants went for a 90-minute walk, half of them along a six-lane highway, and half on a nature trail. After returning, their brains were scanned again. Only those who walked in nature showed decreased activity in the same part of the brain. In other words, they had less negative thinking than those who walked along the city highway. It's also possible that a tiny dose of nature could improve mood and concentration – even if that dose is only virtual. In a 2015 experiment, participants were given a difficult computer task and then allowed a 40-second micro-break to look at a picture of either a gray roof or the same roof edited to be covered in a green meadow. After the micro-break, those who looked at the green roof were able to stay focused for longer. So spending time in nature, or even just being exposed to it, is beneficial. Still, whether or not you find nature restful depends on who you are and what meaning you associate with certain landscapes. If you've been visiting the same forest since childhood, it may hold special sentimental value for you. Whereas an unfortunate jellyfish incident could mean that the tropical seaside is no longer among your happy places.

Reading is the most popular restful activity.

So maybe your lifelong fear of mosquitoes means that nature therapy isn't your favorite restful activity. Maybe you'd rather stay indoors, nestled up with a novel. Not to worry. In the Rest Test, 58 percent selected reading as their number-one way of getting rest. Reading beat out other activities like mindfulness and watching TV. And unlike late-night screen time, reading before bed isn't linked to poorer sleep quality. Those who selected reading also had higher levels of self-esteem and optimism. The key message here is: Reading is the most popular restful activity. Reading is often accused of being a passive activity, but this isn't quite accurate. For one, it's cognitively demanding – you see shapes of letters and build words, stringing them together to create meaning. Then you compare what you read to what you know. Reading is also physiologically stimulating. Consider this 1988 experiment by Zimbabwean clinical psychologist Victor Nell. Conducting his research in South Africa, Nell recruited self-described bookworms to test the physiological effects of reading. First, he put volunteers in a state of boredom by giving them translucent goggles and playing white noise for ten minutes. Then he had them either read for 30 minutes, close their eyes and relax for five minutes, look at photos, or solve mental math problems or logic puzzles. Nell measured their breathing, heart rates, and muscular activity during each task. With the possible exception of arithmetic, participants were actually more physiologically stimulated by reading than any of the other activities. In other words, reading is restful – but it doesn't turn off the brain. Nor does it turn off the body. Reading's reputation as a lazy pastime has led other researchers to underestimate its power. A 2009 American study aiming to prove the greatness of yoga had the misfortune of comparing it to reading. After 30 minutes of yoga, stress levels and blood pressure dropped. But the same happened after half an hour of reading Newsweek articles, an activity requiring far less physical flexibility. We still don't know why reading is so restful. One clue might lie in your control over the experience: you can read at your own pace, in your own way. Reading – of fiction or nonfiction – can also transport you into other people's worlds. The experience of reading can stick with you for hours, days, or even years. And instead of tidying up your thoughts, it adds new ones.

Prioritize the right kind of restfulness.

As we've seen, rest is an essential part of our well-being. In order to live healthy lives, we need to get enough of it. And the first step toward doing that is taking rest seriously. We don't treat sleep as a luxury, and yet restfulness is routinely considered a nice-to-have. Chances are, you know how many hours of sleep you got last night, and whether or not you slept well. But how many hours of rest did you get yesterday? What kind of rest was it? Was it enough? Everyone rests differently, so it's important to find the rest that's right for you. Your best friend might relax by running ten miles every morning, but if you don't find running restful, don't do it – at least, not in the name of rest. The key message here is: Prioritize the right kind of restfulness. Here are some tips. There may not be a one-size-fits-all restfulness cure. But as the results of the Rest Test show, people with the highest well-being scores rested an average of five hours a day. It might sound like a lot, but you also probably rest without realizing it over the course of your day. Part of focusing on rest is also recognizing when you're resting – be it during your commute or while you fix yourself dinner. And it's a matter of balance: well-being scores sank for those who said they got no rest each day, but also for those who rested more than six hours. Again, everyone is different. If you find that three hours of rest is enough for you, don't push it. One of the most difficult things about taking time to rest is the guilt factor. Especially because of the modern obsession with busyness, we have trouble giving ourselves permission to relax. To lead a more restful life, practice allowing yourself to take a break and engage in a restful activity. It may also help to schedule time for rest in your calendar among your appointments. When you're pressed for time, consider incorporating shorter moments of restfulness – or even micro-breaks – into your day. Daydream for a few minutes, stare out the window, doodle, or dawdle. And finally, a word of caution: in your quest for rest, it's possible to lose sight of the goal – restfulness. In moderation, restfulness has its benefits. But if you become so preoccupied with getting enough rest that it starts causing you stress, it's time to reevaluate.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: To deal with the stress of life, you need to find a balance between restfulness and busyness. Some activities, like reading, listening to music, spending time in nature, or doing nothing in particular, are popular sources of restfulness. But since everyone rests differently, you should find one or more restful activities that help you unwind and refresh. Actionable advice: Confront stress with 15 minutes of your favorite restful activity. Whenever you're feeling stressed, take out your prescription pad – everyone is their own doctor here – and prescribe yourself 15 minutes of rest. This restful activity should be something that immediately soothes your anxious mind. It's different for everyone. You might want to listen to music, practice mindfulness, or read a chapter in your book. It also might be something that didn't make it into the top ten in the Rest Test, such as gardening or cooking. Whatever you choose, it's just 15 minutes, so there's nothing to feel guilty about. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Art of Rest as the subject line and share your thoughts!