

Health

KAUAI BUSINESS REPORT

TGIM: Thank goodness it's Monday?

I had big plans and the best intentions. I could hardly wait. Finally, Friday came, and along with it my freedom. Ah, the weekend! I decided not to make plans for the weekend. My week was so hectic I wanted to just rest and relax. My fiancée and I went out to eat and we spent the rest of the night vegetating on the couch. I slept in on Saturday and watched some television. You know how it goes; one show melts into another. I have a hard time turning off the History Channel anyway. Before I knew it, it was late afternoon. I thought about playing some tennis, but balked at the effort it would take to arrange a game, change into my tennis clothes, and drive to the courts. Instead we decided to go for a quick walk before the sun set and then see a movie. We stayed up late, resulting in my getting a late start on Sunday. I did some reading and watched some football. Before I knew it,

it was getting late again. When I saw the clock I noticed some tension in my gut. The weekend was slipping away and I was feeling unsettled and dissatisfied. I hadn't really accomplished much. I felt a bit guilty, realizing I had not made the most of my free time. Instead of being relaxed and refreshed, I felt drained and deflated.

While I can't pronounce his name, University of Chicago psychologist Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has figured out my problem. In his book, "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience" (Harper & Row, 1990), Dr. C says we hold the erroneous belief that we are happier when we are not working, be it during the weekend, on a vacation, or after retirement. Shockingly, Dr.

C's research has found that free time is actually much more difficult for us to enjoy than work. For the majority of us, free time can be downright dangerous, as our physical and emotional health is compromised by a lack of focus and goals.

Psychologists can attest to the fact that people experience more symptoms of anxiety and depression during the weekends. Holiday breaks are certainly no panacea. Often they are wrought with loneliness, stress, and family turmoil. Chronic depression is a common consequence of retirement. Even my teenage clients tend to get into more trouble during school breaks, and while they won't admit it around their peers, the majority of them confess that they are happy to return to school because they were bored.

So why is our idle time so difficult for us to enjoy? The fact is that although we may complain, work has benefits that unstructured leisure time lacks. Jobs have built-in social interactions, goals, challenges, rules, and feedback mechanisms. While we are working we are often focused and required to use and improve our skills. In contrast, many of us spend our idle time in isola-

tion. Our minds wander and end up focusing on our problems, which leads to feelings of uneasiness. To cope with our anxiety, we seek out activities to take our mind off of difficulties. It is easy for us to avoid taking the effort required to engage in more challenging activities. Instead we watch television or movies, read mindless novels, or abuse substances — none of which leave us feeling stimulated or fulfilled. While passive leisure activities have their place, problems arise when they are the only strategy we use to fill up our free time.

But take heart. Dr. C has some suggestions to help us make the most of our leisure time. Dr. C suggests that "flow" is the key to optimal experience at work and play. Flow is the mental state we achieve when we are fully immersed in what we are doing. It occurs when we have clear goals and put our skills to use to meet a challenge. Rather than being bored, we are energized and fully involved in the activity. When we experience flow, in essence, we forget ourselves as our talents are brought to bear to achieve a challenging and desired outcome.

Below are some strategies inspired by Dr. C's research to help you bring more "flow" into your free time:

1. Don't isolate. Initiating a conversation with a friend or a family member is an easy way to add more flow to your day. Take

some time for yourself, but don't spend all of your free time alone. A lonely, isolated mind can be a dangerous neighborhood.

2. Limit your television time. Research shows that people who watch a lot of television report fewer flow experiences. They are also more prone to gain weight and to have relationship problems.

3. Set some clear goals. Without goals you may end up limiting yourself to passive and unfulfilling activities. What is it you want to achieve or experience in your free time? What have you always wanted to learn or do? How can you improve your performance in an activity in which you already have some skill?

4. Get active. Instead of listening to music, make music. Take voice lessons or learn to play the guitar. Instead of just viewing art, paint a picture. Rather than watching sports on television, get outside and play yourself. Instead of watching a game show, play chess or Scrabble with someone you love. Rather than reading a mindless novel, read an autobiography of someone you admire or a self-improvement book.

5. Challenge yourself, but don't overdo it. If your skills exceed the demands of an activity you will end up feeling bored. If an activity is too challenging you will wind-up feeling anxious, self-conscious, or defeated. Choose an activity that excites or intrigues you, but doesn't terrify you.

This weekend I am going to take charge of my free time by building in some flow activities. Not only will I have more fun and feel more fulfilled, I might actually learn something.

Tennis, anyone?
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