





MAXIMIZE YOUR MELLOW

Does your post-vacation calm turn to chaos once you're back at work? Here's how to make the benefits of a break last longer

by Lisa van de Geyn photo by Eric Martin/Figaro

IT'S DAWN ON A CLEAR MORNING IN JANUARY and Lisa Ligori is about 2,000 feet above Arizona's Sonoran Desert. It's her first time in a hot-air balloon and the view is nothing short of spectacular. Ligori and the two friends she's travelling with marvel at the golden sunrise, majestic red rock and thorny cacti below. When they land, the trio takes a 580-km road trip to San Diego, then head up the coast to La Jolla, Calif. Highlights of the trip include a tour of a retired US military aircraft carrier and a day at the famous San Diego Zoo watching a family of gorillas. These five vacation days that Ligori tacked onto the end of a business trip were just the break she needed.

But by Tuesday, work is beckoning. Ligori, an associate manager in financial planning and analysis at SC Johnson, flies home to Brantford, Ont., and is in the office the next morning. She catches

When we return from a holiday we so quickly become consumed by work that we forget to think about the positive experiences we just had. Psychologists call this the “fade-out effect”

up on what she’s missed, crosses to-dos off her list and prepares for her next work trip. “The vacation glow wore off very quickly,” Ligori says. “There wasn’t really time to reminisce or enjoy any post-vacation happiness.”

And just like that, her holiday was long gone.

This experience — relaxing on a much-needed vacation only to return to the hustle and bustle of the daily grind, with any contentment fading about as quickly as your flight home — is certainly not unique to Ligori. In fact, this phenomenon, known as the “fade-out effect,” almost always occurs when we return from a holiday because we “so quickly become consumed by our work that we simply forget to think about the positive experiences that we just had,” says Paul Krismer, the chief happiness officer at the Happiness Experts, a Victoria-based firm that offers training and coaching in happiness, positive psychology and mindfulness. “Since we put our holiday out of mind upon return, we inadvertently put away the positive emotions that we created while away.”

Fred Bryant, a psychology professor at Loyola University in Chicago who studies savouring, adds that jumping back into our old routines right away is counterproductive. “Work has piled up, we have 1,000 emails in our inbox and things have had to be put off till after our trip. The stress of struggling to catch up can quickly erode the effects of the vacation. It becomes a distant memory at best.”

A 2010 study published in the journal *Applied Research in Quality of Life* surveyed nearly 1,000 Dutch vacationers and looked at the overall happiness levels of people who took time off, as well as how long their happiness lasted post-vacation. Researchers found that only people who said they had a “very relaxed” trip benefited from any lingering happiness when they returned to work. Those who described their time away as “neutral” didn’t show any post-vacation happiness — their afterglow faded almost instantly upon return.

“Almost all studies show that effects of vacationing wear off immediately or after a short period of time,” says the study’s lead author, Jeroen Nawijn, a senior tourism lecturer at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. “I believe the reason we generally feel good on vacation is the enhanced level of freedom. You can decide what to do in terms of activities, where to go, whom to spend time with. This is quite different from everyday life, where you cannot avoid certain people, activities or environments.”

Another study published in 2013 in the *Journal of Happiness*

Studies looked at the after-effects of vacations on health and well-being and showed that while people’s overall health improved during a vacation, the positive effects were short-lived. Researchers found that the well-being of vacationers — including their level of fatigue, satisfaction, tension, energy and mood — rapidly improved while off work and peaked on the eighth day. But by the first week back at work, levels of health and well-being decreased and resembled where they were prior to the vacation. What’s more, folks had to experience pleasure, relaxation, savouring and control for the persistence of any lasting effects.

Even so, time off work truly is beneficial to us and there are a slew of mental, physical and even work-related advantages to prolonging that post-vacation glow. “Those who don’t get a break from work are more prone to burnout, discontent and lethargy. They may feel like they are just going through the motions,” says Jaime Kurtz, an associate psychology professor at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., who studies happiness. “More hours at work doesn’t always translate into more productivity; people need breaks.”

Jamie Gruman, an associate professor of organizational behaviour at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ont., adds that vacations can enhance our quality of life and recharge our batteries. “Research shows that people who use their leisure time well actually perform better at work; vacations can improve motivation and attitude.”

This is fairly significant, given that more than half (53%) of all Canadians consider themselves “vacation deprived.” Online travel provider Expedia.ca’s 2015 vacation deprivation survey found that Canadians receive an average of 17 vacation days each year from employers, but only take 15.5 of those days. (Since the annual survey’s inception 13 years ago, Canadians have “collectively left more than 350 million vacation days on the table.”) The world’s least-deprived vacationers come from Germany, France, Spain, Brazil, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Italy, where employees are given 30 vacation days each year. (Folks from the first five countries listed take nearly every day of their allotted time off.)

The first step to avoid feeling deprived of time away from work is obvious — take time away from work. But when it comes to maximizing and prolonging the satisfaction and chill factor you get from a vacation, it’s not quite as simple. The following techniques, however, will help you keep your post-holiday happiness alive long after you’re back.

Anticipate and plan

Nawijn's study revealed that vacationers reported "a higher degree of pre-trip happiness ... possibly because they are anticipating their holiday." This anticipation can actually set the stage for post-trip happiness, since your stress level will be lower while you're away since you've done the legwork in advance. What's more, says Krismer, "prior to their vacation, people are already 'away' on their trip. Positive anticipation provides lots of happiness."

This is a technique Bryant employs when he takes off on climbing expeditions — he plans summit days down to the detail. "We know where we want to get photos and where the milestones are in the climb. It's possible to look forward in a prospective, proactive way instead of being purely reactive," he says. "Looking forward to the trip heightens overall enjoyment."

Go your own way

Studies have also shown it's important to do what *you* want to do when you go on vacation, as opposed to tagging along with a friend who has vastly different interests or a spouse who, say, has more fun shopping than taking in the local arts scene. "Not all of us like going to beaches, skydiving or being trapped on a cruise liner," says Greg Chung-Yan, the head of psychology at

the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ont. "If you want to read at home or sleep in, do it."

Kurtz suggests using vacation time as a tool for your own reflection and growth: "What made you really happy or relaxed while on vacation? Can any of that be incorporated into your daily life?" For example, Kurtz discovered she enjoyed walking rather than renting a car when travelling abroad, so she started walking more at home. "Use your trip as motivation to make happier habits in your life," she says.

Relax, engage, experience

It should go without saying, but be sure to relax while you're out of the office. "Only a very relaxed holiday boosts vacationers' happiness further after return," Nawijn's study finds. Chung-Yan reckons fully relaxing requires both a "psychological and physical detachment from work. Although it might be anxiety-provoking at first to stop reading emails or turning off the mobile, it is simply the process of adjustment, which may be short-lived."

Kurtz recommends prioritizing "active engagement" when on holiday. So if lying on the beach staring at the ocean isn't relaxing to you, get involved. "Take a cooking class, go on a guided hike, learn to surf or visit cultural sites," she says. "It's more invigorating and creates more positive memories."

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If you have two weeks off, don't stay away from home the entire two weeks. Give yourself a day or two before going back to the grind to unwind, do the laundry, grocery shop and check email

Be mindful while building memories

Bryant says actively building memories is a savouring strategy that's universal across all cultures. "When people are in a happy moment, they build memories. It's not just a memory of what's going on, it's also a memory of how you feel in that moment."

Here's one easy way to do it: collect objects from your travels and note the way each makes you feel when you're collecting it. "When I climb a summit, I'll take a small rock from the top, close my eyes and smell it," Bryant says. "When I get home, all I have to do is take the rock off the shelf and sniff it and it brings back a flood of memories. I can get back the joy of any vacation I want if I have built the memories and encoded the feelings I had at the time."

Being mindful — or paying attention and being consciously aware — is crucial to this technique. "We can smell the tropical earth, taste the local cuisine and be fascinated by the novel culture," says Krismer. "When we attend to the holiday — that is, truly immerse our full being in it — we deeply enjoy the experience, and when we return from vacation, we can savour that experience."

Leave a buffer

One reason studies show there are few (if any) prolonged effects on our post-vacation happiness, says Kurtz, is because we don't leave a buffer to ease back into our regular life. "We think that if we have, say, two weeks off, we should stay away for the entire two weeks, especially if we're spending a lot of money on a plane ticket or travelling far from home. But studies show that a hasty return can counteract the stress-reducing properties of a vacation." Your best bet is to give yourself a day or two before going back to the grind to unwind, do the laundry, grocery shop and, sure, now's the time to check your email.

Reminisce

Months after returning from a fishing lodge on BC's Haida Gwaii last summer, Kerry Reinke, chief risk officer of the Canadian division and group head of enterprise risk at Manulife Financial, gleefully recalls not only the camaraderie at the cottage where he stayed with his father, father-in-law and two friends, but what it was like being aboard the fishing boat.

"We're in the middle of the North Pacific. There are humpback whales swimming by and bald eagles above. We were pulling in 15- to 25-pound salmon that gave us the fight of our lives," he says.

That ability to reflect and recollect is perhaps the most important tool to help keep your vacation happiness going strong. Remember those pictures you took and the souvenirs you brought back? Do something with them. "A postcard, napkin, matchbook, a shell from the beach — don't just put it in a drawer and forget about it," says Bryant. "Put it on the coffee table at home or on your desk at work. Make yourself a menagerie of memories and they'll remind you of when you were on the trip."

Reinke brought each of his three kids a stuffed animal that was related to the local wildlife on the islands. Plus, he brought back the *pièce de résistance* — the fish he caught, smoked and packaged. "It was delivered to my door a few weeks after I returned. When the fish arrived it gave me another opportunity to engage in telling stories about the trip," he says.

That's another great way to reminisce — tell stories. "Invite people over and bore them with your slides," Bryant says with a laugh. "Collect stories to share with friends and colleagues the same way you collect memorabilia."

This technique rings true for Reinke. "I was looking for excuses to talk about the trip. I still look for excuses to talk about it," he admits. What's important here is actively engaging in reminiscing about your trip, which is different from simply posting photos with short descriptions on Facebook or Instagram, for example.

"Posting images on social media would be a nice way to augment real-time, interactive storytelling, and it would help prolong the post-vacation joy more than doing nothing at all," Bryant says. "But without the telling of the experience to others in one's own words and the perception of their reactions to one's shared stories, it's harder to relive the positive feelings, to go back in time to re-experience the best moments of the trip."

When it comes down to it, Bryant says our capacity for mental time travel is a skill we should be taking advantage of before, during and after our vacation. "If you approach it the right way, recognizing that nothing lasts forever, you can keep enjoying the moment after it's happened," he says.

So your holiday is over and you're back at the office sitting in endless meetings, but that doesn't have to mean your trip is long gone. As Bryant says, "The vacation has to end at some point, but the effects of it don't have to."

LISA VAN DE GEYN is a Toronto-based freelance writer