



Radical Rest: 3 Creative Ways to (Finally!) Relax

By Tim Jarvis

O, *The Oprah Magazine* | July 14, 2009



Photo: © 2009 Jupiterimages Corporation

We all know the feeling of desperately needing to unwind. But sometimes real relaxation requires a creative approach.

It's four days into your vacation and you still haven't been able to let go: You're fretting about your end-of-month reports, answering e-mails from coworkers, and now your boss wants to know if she can conference you in on a call tomorrow.

Not that you really need another thing to worry about, but being unable to unwind can be dangerous, says stress expert Elissa Epel, PhD, an associate professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California at San Francisco. "Chronic stress is like having your engine in overdrive all the time," Epel says. "It can damage DNA. Relaxation is crucial for overall health and longevity."

So how do you get real rest before sliding your feet back under the desk in a week or two? One good way to start is to shut down the laptop, turn off your BlackBerry, and silence your cell phone, says Martin Batty, PhD, a relaxation researcher at the University of Nottingham, England. And you may want to mix in meditation or yoga—you've probably heard of the numerous studies demonstrating how these activities can help you unwind. But if you're looking for a new approach, the options below may deliver a much-needed break.

1. Indulge your interests. Sometimes the best way to hop off the stress treadmill into a state of positive well-being is to engage your brain fully in something you enjoy, says Epel. Cooking can occupy your mind and be relaxing at the same time, and culinary vacations make a good thing even better. The International Kitchen offers them in Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Portugal, the Caribbean, Mexico, and Morocco. You can stay three to seven nights and cook alongside notable local chefs (TheInternationalKitchen.com).

Cooking isn't your thing? Consider courses in massage, dance, or art: Artista Creative Safaris for women offers three-day courses in painting and printmaking in Carmel, California. The expert instruction is served up with hors d'oeuvres and beverages; to learn more, go to ArtistaCreative.com.



Radical Rest: 3 Creative Ways to (Finally!) Relax

By Tim Jarvis

O, *The Oprah Magazine* | July 14, 2009

2. Step into a different world. You can completely disconnect from life's demands at any one of the hundreds of monasteries across the country. Whether you sign up for a Zen retreat or visit a Benedictine order, you're guaranteed a few days of simple living, quiet, and solitude. "We open our doors to anyone," says Benedictine Sister Josie Sanchez, of the Benet Hill Monastery in Colorado Springs (BenetHillMonastery.org). "And if a person can't afford the \$50 per night fee for accommodations and food, they can work around the property," she says. (OSB.org/Retreats lists Benedictine retreats in North America and Europe.) Zen monasteries and centers offer retreats that can run \$300 to \$600 a week; find options around the United States at LivingCompassion.org/Calendar.html.

3. Retrain your brain. If relaxing is seriously difficult for you, you might want to try neurofeedback—using readings of brain energy to teach your mind to unwind. (There are neurofeedback practitioners all over the United States; for a directory, go to EEGInfo.com.) You'll be hooked up to an EEG—a device that measures brain activity through electrodes attached to your scalp. Then, using visual and auditory cues such as a video game, you'll train yourself to regulate your brain to help you slow down. (For example, when your brain waves start making a race car speed up, it means you're learning how to move into a more relaxed state.) "Over time a client learns how to achieve the desired state without the visual feedback," says Martin Batty, who has used the method with success in clinical studies (though he notes that the technique is still being studied and more research is needed to help determine its long-term efficacy).

One company with centers around the world is Brain State Technologies (BrainStateTech.com). "A set of ten sessions could cost \$1,200 to \$4,000, depending on the level of services and the location," says Lee Gerdes, Brain State's CEO. "But once you've balanced your brain, you'll achieve the same relaxed state you get after taking a vacation, and the effects can last a lifetime."

We all know the feeling of desperately needing to unwind. But sometimes real relaxation requires a creative approach.