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Why you need a vacation



President Barack Obama cycles with his daughter, Malia, during their family vacation at Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. (Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

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Just before he flew off to Martha's Vineyard for a two-week vacation, President Barack Obama fielded some questions about the U.S. military campaign against Islamic State militants in Iraq. We imagine that he also had Syria (rebels besieged in Aleppo), Afghanistan (election recount debacle), Ukraine (plane shot down, Russian troops lurking), West Africa (Ebola epidemic spreading fast), Libya (militias rampaging), Iran (nuclear negotiations floundering), Obamacare (court ruling could bury it), the stock market (bubble bursting?) immigration (what to do with all those kids) and, oh, about 947 other crises on his mind.

Critics carped that now was not the time for him to take a vacation. They always do, when presidents, Republican or Democratic, decamp in August. (George W. Bush took 25 days at his Crawford ranch in 2002). How can the president leave when the world is in crisis, they ask. Bulletin: The world is *always* in crisis.

Would a long weekend suffice to recharge? No way.

Maybe you've seen the movie, "Lucy," or heard the notion that humans use only about 10 percent of those billions of neurons floating around in their skulls and many brain cells are, in a sense, on permanent vacation,

just waiting to be roused from their idyll. Wrong. That notion grew from a 19th century experiment in which a researcher removed ever larger portions of brain tissue from a range of animals and then observed how that affected their behavior, University of California at Irvine cognitive science professor Gregory Hickok recently wrote in *The New York Times*.

Trouble is, the French neurophysiologist who did the experiments, Pierre Flourens, got it all wrong, "because his methods for assessing mental capacity were crude and his animal subjects were poor models for human brain function," Hickok wrote.

Conclusion: If we had a huge amount of brain power in reserve, we might not need vacations. We could just tap those beach-lolling brain cells. But we don't. Time off tunes up a well-functioning brain.

Why? Because "the processing capacity of the conscious mind is limited," wrote Daniel Levitin, director of the Laboratory for Music, Cognition and Expertise at McGill University. Your brain basically has two modes: 1. Undistracted, focused on a task and 2. Daydreaming and mental wandering. When one is active, the other is not.

As information floods in — news, Facebook posts, tweets, YouTube videos, text messages, conversations — your brain juggles and juggles ... and sometimes loses something. What's her name in the elevator. Where you put the iPad. The brilliant sentence that goes here.

A vacation hits the brain reset button.

Unfortunately, too many Americans — about 1 in 5, according to a recent Monster.com poll — say they "never fully relax" on vacation. Hmm. A few questions: Did you turn off your cellphone, laptop and Google glass? Did you issue a dire warning to office mates not to call unless the collapse of the empire was imminent? Did you build in some time to let your mind wander (see No. 2 above), serene in the scientific fact that this could be the best way to prime the creativity pump for when you return to work. Did you, in other words, just shut down and ... exhale?

We all know misguided humans who believe that the electronic tether cannot be severed, that the world cannot possibly survive without their instant and constant input. These are people who are *not* using 100 percent of their brains.

Some people dwell in a constant state of dread that — ack! — they could be bored for a few milliseconds. Boredom is not fatal. It is *vital*. It can boost imagination and creativity. It can lead to new hobbies and interests. Or it can lead to a realization that you really do like a busy, calendar-choked life.

Encouraging news: America's "vacation deficit" is declining. More Americans — just over half of those polled — say they intend to take a vacation in 2014, reports Ipsos Public Affairs. That's up 5 percentage points over last year.

So let your neurons roam free this summer. Take a break. The challenge: Try hard to use less than 10 percent of your brain.

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