

## Claiming the Empty Spaces The Importance of Idle Time in a Fast-Forward World

**Y**ou're just about to leave for your dentist appointment, when you receive a phone call saying the dentist has been called out on emergency and will have to reschedule your appointment.

Congratulations! You are the winner of one unexpected free hour!

What will you do with your winnings?

Pay bills? Answer your email? Return to the project you were working on before you had to leave? Start a load of laundry?

Ever consider doing nothing?

If you're like many of us today, the thought of doing absolutely nothing for *an entire hour* seems as wasteful as throwing a week's worth of groceries out with the garbage. Indeed, free time with nothing to do can generate near panic among some of us who are overloaded and time-starved.

"We seem to have a complex about busyness in our culture," says Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. "Most of us *do* have time in our days that we could devote to simple relaxation, but we convince ourselves that we don't."

And yet, the harder we push, the more we need to replenish ourselves. As Stephan Rechtschaffen, author of *Timeshifting*, says, "Each of us needs some time that is strictly and entirely our own, and we should experience it daily."

The importance of this downtime cannot be overstated. We see more clearly, we hear more keenly, we're more inspired, we discover what makes us feel alive.

On some level, we know this already. But claiming time to ourselves—time that is often labeled "unproductive"—and sticking to it can be difficult. We need to establish formal boundaries around our

idle time to ensure that others—and we, ourselves—honor this time. Some ways to do this are:

■ **Make a date with yourself.** Get to know someone who deserves your attention—you.

■ **Stand firm.** Learn how to say "no" to co-workers, children, a spouse or a friend. In just a short while, you can say "yes"; now is *your* time.

■ **Be clear about your**

**needs.** It's not, "I need more time to myself." It's more like, "I'd like to spend 20 minutes by myself in the morning before everyone gets up."

■ **Be on the lookout for stolen moments.** Use the canceled dental appointment to sit on a park bench watching pigeons.

■ **Practice doing nothing.** "Doing nothing" is an art, and like all art, you need to practice it to reach your highest potential.

How we define idle time varies by individual. For example, for one person, gardening may be meditative downtime, whereas for another, it is one more item on the to-do list (to be done as quickly as possible). The woods is a great place to stroll through for one person, an opportunity to be in and with nature; for another, it's a great place for a power walk while dictating letters into a small tape recorder.

Our idle time should be like a beautiful flower: it has no purpose. It's just there. And yet, it refreshes us and reminds us of nature's glory.

Do something that has no purpose other than joy. Take a half-hour a day to surprise and delight yourself. Keep it simple, and keep it consistent. If your idle time becomes a "program," or becomes progress toward some productive goal, begin again.

It's stunning, how simple it really is. ■

**"What is this life if,  
 full of care,  
 We have no time to  
 stand and stare."**

—W. H. Davies

## 10 Ways to Get Through Tense Family Gatherings

*Let's face it. Family gatherings are not always roses and cotton candy. For some families, they're masked balls, with everyone straining to maintain a façade of harmony. For others, they're Wild West shootouts. Try some of these tips, if your family get-togethers are tense.*

**1. Make a pro-and-con list.** Clear your head, find a calm moment and decide whether it is best for you to go.

**2. Consider smaller portions.** Plan to visit only for appetizers or dessert.

**3. Educate yourself.** Seek information on the issues or dynamics that tend to come up in your family.

**4. Dig deeper.** How do you contribute to the tension? Can you adjust your understanding of other points of view?

**5. Seek to understand.** Get to the heart of things by asking questions in a relaxed, open, non-defensive way. Read Sharon Ellison's *Taking the War Out of Our Words* or *Non-Violent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg.

**6. Be prepared.** Holiday-related emotions may arrive early. Recognizing the source can help you deal with them more effectively.

**7. Take care of yourself.** If the atmosphere isn't safe, leave. Gather with friends, do volunteer work or pamper yourself.

**8. Call a friend.** Debrief after the visit with someone you trust.

**9. Be patient.** Real change—in you and in your family—takes time.

**10. Be gracious.** Aim for maturity and compassion in dealing with family situations. ■

# A Letter From

Mary Ann Newwood



Idle time...what's that? That seems to be the response of our day. Maybe, just maybe, we managed to eke a little bit of it during the summer. But fall usually brings with it a certain busyness, a scurrying about before the winter arrives. Then the holidays bear down on us, and idle time goes out the window.

But idle time is important to our well-being, even in little bits, as you'll read in this issue's page 1 article. Try adding 10 or 15 minutes of do-nothing time to your day. You may be surprised at what's getting done on the inside!

The holidays are often times we gather with our families, and even the healthiest families generate their own brand of tension. This issue's Top 10 suggests ways to deal with tense family gatherings. The quiz lets you test your temper. And the back-page article suggests ways to use playfulness to make getting exercise fun, not drudgery.

This issue's feature article on page 3 addresses a topic that a growing number of us deal with every day: computers and the Internet. How do they affect our relationships with family, friends, colleagues, community? What can we learn about ourselves?

And finally, a reminder: Pathways EAP counselors are available to you and your family to discuss the above issues or anything causing problems in your life. Call us at 815-398-7483 to schedule an appointment. Meeting with an EAP counselor is confidential and free of cost to you. For more information on Pathways, visit [www.eapathways.com](http://www.eapathways.com).



# Test Your Temper

Everyone gets angry. But people who "fly off the handle" easily may be at greater risk for heart attacks or other illnesses—not to mention the risks of damaged relationships, unfulfilling lives, feelings of worthlessness, even trouble with the law. Test your temper with this Thriving quiz, to see how much risky business there is in your life.

### True False

- 1. I feel infuriated when I do a good job and get a poor evaluation.
- 2. When other people's mistakes slow me down, it can upset me for the whole day.
- 3. When I get mad, I say nasty things.
- 4. I feel annoyed when I'm not given recognition for doing good work.
- 5. I feel like hitting someone who makes me very angry.
- 6. I feel stupid and inadequate in challenging situations, and I hate that.
- 7. I get furious when I'm criticized, corrected or embarrassed in front of others.
- 8. Sometimes I feel so powerless.
- 9. I often wish people who have hurt me could be punished somehow.
- 10. It doesn't take much to get me mad.
- 11. People call me hotheaded and tell me I should calm down.
- 12. I blow up at terrible drivers.
- 13. I have a hard time forgiving others when they hurt or frustrate me.
- 14. I hate the way I get treated at restaurants or stores.
- 15. I swear loudly to blow off steam.
- 16. I'm a very ambitious person, so sometimes I get impatient and angry with other people.
- 17. I've been known to break things when I'm frustrated.

*If you answered "true" more often than "false," you may have a problem controlling your anger. It's helpful to realize that underneath anger are usually feelings of fear and hurt. Understanding your deepest feelings will help you curb your anger, get along better with co-workers and bosses, improve relationships and improve your life. Please call if you need help examining your anger. Here are some healthier ways to respond to anger:*

- 1. I can—and often do—laugh at myself, or at a difficult situation.
- 2. When I'm really angry, I remove myself from the situation and go for a walk or do some light exercise.
- 3. I try to use "I messages" as much as I can instead of pointing fingers.
- 4. When I begin to feel angry about a situation, I try to step back and figure out why I have let other people get to me.
- 5. I understand where my anger comes from, as well as my habit of acting out angrily, and I am actively trying to learn a different way.
- 6. I accept the fact that only I can make myself feel anger, that it is actually my choice to feel or not feel anger.

## www.LifeLoveandtheInternet.com

Every day, millions of people come home from work or school, boot up their computers and enter a world we wouldn't have dreamed of 15 years ago.

They "talk" with anonymous strangers in chat rooms and news groups; "visit" museums and African plains; "kiss," "hug" and "have sex" by typing into a computer; "swim underwater" in simulated oceans.

It's a new world, alright—one in which we are confronted daily with new emotional issues, or new twists on age-old issues. These three brief vignettes illustrate some of the uncharted waters we are wading in today.

### Real Life vs. Net Life

George spends five to eight hours a day on the Internet talking with a vast assortment of friends in various chat communities. He presents himself alternately as an assertive and confident Casanova, an opinionated scholar or a focused, take-charge businessman.

In "real life," George is none of these. Painfully shy and extremely self-critical, George keeps to himself.

"I feel more like myself when I'm online," he says. But what he really means is, "I feel more like who I wish I was."

Internet interactions don't carry the same risks as face-to-face conversations, and people often use the anonymity to put forth an alternate "self." While this can free people to explore previously underdeveloped parts of themselves, without integrating those new parts into real life, identities remain dependent on a machine. The computer becomes simply a safe haven in which to hide.

### Virtual Infidelity

Every time Cynthia's husband heads upstairs to his desk, her stomach tightens and her jaw clenches.

"I feel paranoid whenever he is on the computer," she says. "I can't get it off my mind that he is cheating."

Cynthia confronted Victor after reading an email from a woman who lived in another country. Victor denied having an affair. After all, he had never actually seen the other woman, much less touched her, and he had no plans to do so. "A bunch of typed words don't amount to an affair," he maintained. It was just talking and exploring fantasies.

But to Cynthia, the intimacy expressed in the email is more threatening than a purely sexual relationship. She wonders why her partner can't be that intimate with her.

Intimacy issues are often at the heart of Internet affairs. And time spent on-line serves only to distract from the marital problems at hand. Plus, the absence of visual cues tends to give flight to the imagination, making the person at the other end of the keyboard seem infinitely more wonderful than the imperfect, live person who shares your bed.

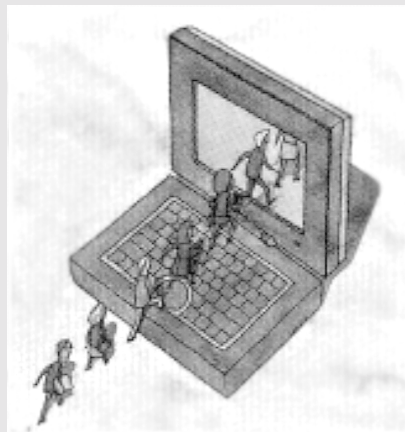
### Simulated Experience

Four-year-old Eddie spends hours at a computer screen studying whales and porpoises; he can identify almost anything that swims. But Eddie has never seen real fish, though he lives near the ocean and a world-class aquarium.

Like pint-sized hermits peering out of their windows, Eddie and huge numbers of children today are learning about nature on a computer screen, not from direct contact with the natural world. Adults, too, are increasingly willing to accept simulation as sufficient.

Simulation is seductive; it avoids imperfections, cracks, rough edges. Watching elms shimmer in the bright fall sunshine on a flashy website is not the same as actually strolling through a wood of shimmering elms.

Ultimately, it's a matter of balance and awareness. There is no question that computers and the Internet are here to stay. The most important question is: How can we get the best of both? ■



## When the Internet Becomes a Problem

People get addicted to all sorts of things: drugs, eating, gambling, exercising, spending, sex, etc. Problematic addiction can be defined as anything that never really satisfies needs, that ultimately causes unhappiness and disrupts lives. Here are some questions that psychologists offer to people who are trying to determine if they are indeed addicted:

- Are you neglecting important things in your life because of this behavior?
- Is this behavior disrupting your relationships with important people in your life?
- Do important people in your life get annoyed or disappointed with you about this behavior?
- Do you get defensive or irritable when people criticize this behavior?
- Do you ever feel guilty or anxious about what you are doing?
- Have you ever found yourself being secretive about or trying to "cover up" this behavior?
- Have you ever tried to cut down, but were unable to?
- If you are honest with yourself, do you feel there is another hidden need that drives this behavior?

Answering yes to one or two of these responses may not mean anything. Yes to three or more of them could mean trouble. Please call if you need help.

## Is Your Modem Leaking?

Handling email and "surfing the Web" can eat hours from each day. Bit by bit, our days dribble away, trickling out our modems. Every hour behind the keyboard is 60 minutes not spent doing something else. During the hours you spend online, you could instead plant a garden, volunteer at a senior citizens' home, teach your child (or a neighborhood kid) to catch a pop fly, throw a vase on a potter's wheel. It's all about balance. Is there something you'd feel better about doing?

## Putting Childhood Play to Work for Us

**G**abriel Rando was Mr. Target Heart Rate. Every day after work, he dutifully trucked to his health club to climb the stair machine, jog on the treadmill and pedal up “huge inclines” on the stationary bike.

Trouble was, he was hugely bored and began to dread the gym.

Cindy Samlith wasn't bored. She was too busy with *very important work* to take time out to exercise.

But a near-miss with breast cancer woke Cindy up to the need for physical activity and a reprieve from her previously high-stress, sedentary living.

Both found their answer by adding the simple childhood ingredient of play to either enhance or encourage physical activity.

We all know how important exercise is and what a lack of it can do to us.

Or do we?

Researchers recently described sedentary life as the second largest threat to public health, saying that chronic diseases have increased dramatically because of physical inactivity.

There must be a way to help ourselves get the regular physical activity that has long been associated with better health, longer life and greater well-being.

Perhaps play is the way.

Play is the ultimate in cross-training, as

you move your body through many ranges of motion at different intensities. You are likely to see gains in strength, stamina and even weight loss—not to mention an increased feeling of liveliness



and enthusiasm. And when you're having a good time, you'll forget you're actually working out.

Here are a few ways to inject fun into your physical activity. Be as zany as you want in adding to this list.

- Infuse a little “silliness” into your walk by skipping or doing a bit of hopscotch.
- Organize childhood games for an adult

party, such as: relay races, tug-of-war, burlap sack races, tag, follow-the-leader and Twister.

- For the super-adventurous, learn how to swing on a trapeze.
- Create little obstacle courses out of trees, curbs, creek beds, potholes, park benches.
- Learn to juggle. You'll forget how much you're doing for your upper arms and back.
- Jump rope—alone or with a partner.
- Play tag with your own children or the neighborhood kids.
- Bounce on a trampoline.
- Turn on your favorite high-school dance music and shake your bootie right there in the living room.
- During the summer, play “Shark and Minnow” or “Marco Polo” in the pool rather than do laps.
- Head for the nearest roller-skating or ice-skating rink, or rollerblade in your neighborhood.
- Rent a canoe or find a rowing group, and enjoy being on the water.
- Run through the sprinklers at your neighborhood school.
- Challenge a kid to a bike race.
- Throw a flying toy around. Chances are you'll have to run for it!
- Chase the dog.

You may be surprised at how good it feels to act five years old again. ■