Vacation Depression: How to Cope

Psychologists explain how to avoid vacation depression, plus tips on creating a vacation that matches your personality.

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WebMD Feature
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We love our vacations -- those great escapes from the humdrum and the hassles. But if you're depressed, the annual vacation may seem like yet another obstacle -- especially with soaring gas prices and an unstable economy. Vacation depression is a fact of life for many people.

You feel guilty spending the money -- and pushing yourself to plan the trip becomes a burden. Every flat tire, delayed flight, and tantrum (child or adult) is simply draining. When your vacation ends, there's the depressing return to the stresses of everyday life.

Vacation and Depression: What the Research Shows

And yet, the data is clear, "you're impacting both physical and mental health if you don't take vacation time," says John de Graaf, executive director of Take Back Your Time, an organization that is working with Capitol Hill to get guaranteed three-week vacation time for every working American.

Here's the research on vacation, depression, and heart disease:

• One 2005 study from the Marshfield Clinic in Wisconsin found that women who don't take regular vacations were two to three times more likely to be depressed compared to women who take regular vacations.
• Another study followed 12,338 men for nine years -- and found that men who didn't take annual vacations had 32% higher risk of death from heart attack and 21% higher risk of death from all causes.
• One study analyzed surveys completed by women enrolled in the 20-year Framingham Heart Study. Researchers found an eight times higher risk of heart attack and death among women who rarely took vacations (every six years or less) -- compared to women who took at least one vacation every two to five years.

"Vacations are not trivial," says Frank Farley, PhD, a leading clinical psychologist, professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, and former president of the American Psychological Association. "In this workaholic America, we have to treat them as precious stuff ... keep alive the good feelings and relaxing times."

To help do that, WebMD talked with several psychologists who offer insights on vacation depression, why vacations help our mental health, plus tips on creating a rejuvenating break that fits your personality. You'll also find advice to offset post-vacation depression when the fun ends.

Why Vacations Help Depression

Here's the good news: Vacations give us a chance to recharge our batteries -- change the pace, alter the scenery, and improve our attitude.

"It's also a really important time for bonding with whoever is important in your life -- your partner, kids, friends, parents," says Nadine Kaslow, PhD, a clinical psychologist and professor at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.
"Relationships are probably the most important thing that keeps people going, the reason for living for most people," Kaslow tells WebMD. "They nurture us and we nurture them by having fun together. So often in our normal workaday life we don't have time in the same way to devote to that."

**Why Vacations Help Depression continued...**

Vacations also offer us a sense of control over our lives, explains Howard Tinsley, PhD, an emeritus professor of psychology with Southern Illinois University who now lives near Seattle. He's studied the benefits of leisure since the 1970s.

"It's a critical element that's necessary for happiness, this feeling of control, this freedom of choice," Tinsley says. "We often don't have a lot of that in our everyday lives." Sure, we make choices -- sign up for yearlong symphony tickets, for example. But after awhile, that sense of control deteriorates into obligation, a feeling of "guess we better go, since we've got the tickets."

Vacations help us regain that sense of spontaneity and self-expression. "They let us control the things that are intrinsically enjoyable -- things that are simply pleasurable at the moment we're doing them," he explains.

When we're on vacation, there's a boost in two brain neurotransmitters -- dopamine and serotonin -- which are involved in mood and depression, says Baird Brightman, PhD, a Massachusetts-based psychologist and organizational consultant.

People who are depressed have low levels of these neurotransmitters, and the work environment can make that worse, Brightman tells WebMD. "We call it work strain -- high workload and low control. Some interesting research shows that animals lower in the power hierarchy have lower levels of these neurotransmitters."

That's why depression eases when we have a sense of control, Brightman says. "When you go on vacation, you're calling the shots, so neurotransmitter levels will rise. You're also doing pleasurable activities, which will boost them, too."

**Shaking Off Vacation Depression**

But sometimes it's a fact of vacation depression -- the energy just isn't there to do it all.

"Depression doldrums are a vicious cycle," Kaslow explains. "You feel badly, so you don't do fun stuff -- which makes you feel worse. I encourage patients to find a way to break the cycle. You have to do something you used to think was fun. It may not be as fun as it used to be -- but that has the greatest chance of making you feel better."

To avoid vacation depression you need to also consider: What's your "vacation personality"? What type of vacation would benefit you most? "It's a very important issue -- adapting the vacation to your personality, to your family's personality," says Farley.

"Some people are what I call Big-T, big-thrill people -- they have a great sense of adventure and need a lot of novelty, intense experiences," he explains. "They want the Big Scream ride at the amusement park, or sleeping under the stars at a dude ranch, or exploring a city. That's actually relaxing for them, invigorating, because it fits who they are."

But if stability, predictability and the quiet life are more appealing -- a week at the beach or beside a pool will suit you fine.
"It's all about creating a vacation that fits your personal style -- so you arrive home feeling truly refreshed," he says. "A week by the pool is not going to appeal to a thrill seeker. You'll only be miserable, get home feeling like you've wasted your time."

7 Tips to Ease Vacation Depression

Next step: Decide what stresses you the most -- money issues, your boss' attitude, itineraries -- then design your vacation to eliminate those hassles.

• If your employer frowns on two-week vacations, plan mini-vacations. In fact, many people find that long weekends -- three or four days at a time -- work better than big trips for relieving stress, says Kaslow.
• If money is tight, investigate biking, hiking, and camping options. "There are all sorts of ways to be creative and also be financially responsible -- so you don't just add more stress," Kaslow explains. "Kids love stuff like exploring caves or kangaroo parks."
• Negotiate with fellow travelers, including the kids. If you prefer a motel and pool over camping, compromise. Make it two nights camping and hiking -- then head for civilization.
• If the logistics are a hassle -- choosing hotels, planning an itinerary -- leave it to the professionals. Do a group tour. Take a cruise. Look for package deals. Or, simply explore a great city with mass transit and foot-friendly neighborhoods -- such as New York City, Chicago, or San Francisco.
• Check out Meet-Up groups -- either in your own region or at an interesting destination. "These groups bring together people who have that adventurous impulse," Farley says.
• Don't overschedule your vacation. A little breathing room -- with a few days to just kick back -- helps keep stress at low levels.
• Leave your problems behind, advises Kaslow. "Don't talk about school problems, marital difficulties. Stuff is going to come up, and you will have to deal with it -- but don't bring it with you. Let your kids know they are off the hook on vacations -- there will be no talk about grades [or whatever]."

Prevent Depression After Vacation

If you do it right, you can ward off post-vacation depression, too.

Take mental note of the "stand-out moments" that happen on vacation, advises Farley. "These are the fleeting moments of real joy."

Maybe the kids did something crazy, something funny. Or you found yourself totally immersed -- in a tiny roadside diner, or a museum of rusty nails. Those memories are "precious stuff, like gold in a family vault," Farley tells WebMD. "You can laugh again and again, relive those great moments. Don't let the door close on those memories. ... Keep it alive."

Other tips to prevent depression after vacation:

• Get home early the day before work starts. Take care of bills and laundry. Get a good night's sleep.
• Ease yourself into the old routine. Don't plan big meetings for the first day back. (Hopefully you created vacation messages for voice mail and email, so there won't be fires to put out.)
• Keep a positive outlook on your vacation, Farley advises. "Don't focus on things that went wrong. No 'shoulda, coulda, woulda' allowed."
• Look for positives in your everyday life. "Every day, think about things that you did well, that you enjoyed that day," he says.
• If anxiety creeps up, try to understand what's at the root. Try to form a plan to get rid of it. Meditation can help, and should be your first choice before medication. "Take a deep breath from way down low," Farley advises. "Then bring to mind those wonderful moments from your vacation."
If you're on a vacation high, share it, he says. "We are social animals. One of the biggest predictors of divorce is a failure to communicate, a failure to share. If you got it going during your vacation, keep it going afterward."