

BUSY DOING NOTHING

Overpacked itineraries, unhealthy work boundaries and chronic people-pleasing – when did holidays get so stressful? Amy Bonifas learns how to let go and recharge

Arrived at your destination, ready to sink your toes into the sand, only to find that holiday feeling is missing? Whether you can't stop checking work emails or are too focused on everyone having 'the best time', you're not alone – many of us are unable to relax once we get away. 'It's hard to switch off because modern life trains us to be constantly reachable, useful and always half-thinking about the next thing,' says Andy Cope, wellbeing expert and co-author of *The Art of Being Brilliant* (Capstone, £12.99). 'We've become very good at doing, but not very good at being, and then we get annoyed with ourselves for not being able to relax on command.'

Guilt about doing nothing may ring true, and it can feel strange to allow yourself to rest. 'We assume that if we're not being productive, we're somehow falling behind,' says Andy. 'Even on holiday, we start optimising: going to the best restaurants, creating the best itinerary and taking the best photos. The challenge isn't just getting away, it's letting yourself just be.'

If you're with family or friends, there might also be a quieter form of sabotage going on. 'Many of us undo our own contentment by feeling responsible for everyone else's,' says psychotherapist Charlotte Fox Weber, author of *What We Want* (Wildfire, £10.99). 'If you spend the holiday focusing on everyone else's needs, the "break" can become a form of emotional labour that's exhausting in its own right.' But there are ways to properly unwind...

1 SET A PRE-HOLIDAY BOUNDARY

Be upfront about your intentions before the break – either finish or postpone things you keep telling yourself you'll do in your time off. 'We frustrate ourselves when we make and break false promises, so be honest about what you won't get done, rather than carrying it throughout your holiday,' says Charlotte. If it helps, make a 'when I'm back list' before you go. 'Your mind relaxes when it trusts things have been parked,' adds Andy.

2 EMBRACE THE DECOMPRESSION PHASE

Instead of expecting instant chill, give yourself time to get there. 'It can take a couple of days to decompress,' says Charlotte. 'If you've been particularly stressed at home, your nervous system will have been running on stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline.'

Your body needs time to learn that it's okay to slow down, which can be unsettling at first. 'You might feel irritable, flat or restless... often signs your body is shifting out of performance mode,' says Charlotte. You'll know you're coming out the other side when your attention begins to soften. 'Small pleasures start to register again, food tastes better, and you're able to focus on a few chapters of your book.'

3 LOWER THE BAR

'A good holiday isn't one where every moment is magical,' says Andy. 'It's one where you remember there's more to life than performing and being efficient.' Try not to chase the 'perfect break'. Take a few pictures each day, but don't feel like you need to document the whole trip. And leave space for spontaneity – you might have a bad meal or get lost, and that's okay.

4 REST SERIOUSLY

'When work and tasks drop away, the exhaustion we've been holding at bay can make itself known,' says Charlotte. 'It's not the holiday making you tired – it's just given you space to notice it. Have lazy mornings or naps whenever you can.'

YOUR HOLIDAY WIND-DOWN PLAN

THE DAY BEFORE

Clear the runway. 'Finish what you can, then set your out-of-office. Tell key people you're properly off, and mean it,' says Andy.

THE EVENING BEFORE

Anticipate good times. 'Throw one last thing into your suitcase that excites you, like a new book, then get some sleep,' says Charlotte.

TRAVEL DAY

Embrace the shift. 'Don't try to be productive, let it be a slow corridor between two worlds,' says Charlotte. **Start signalling to your nervous system that it's time to shift down a gear – try not to rush, and breathe.**

FIRST MORNING

Go slow. 'Sleep in, try gentle movement like a swim or walk, and notice what your mind reaches for when there's nothing to check or keep on top of,' says Charlotte.

FIRST FEW DAYS

Resist the urge to cram. 'You don't need to optimise relaxation,' says Andy. 'Keep your phone out of reach, walk without tracking it and eat without photographing it. Boredom is often the doorway back to yourself.'

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5 EMBRACE A NEW ROUTINE

Build in tiny rituals that tell your body, 'We're safe now,' suggests Andy. Try a deliberately slow breakfast in the sun, a quiet morning walk without a podcast or music, or 'dusking' – a Dutch tradition where you take 10 minutes to sit quietly and watch the light fade in the evening. It's like a form of meditation and can help you quieten the noise.

6 PROTECT YOUR ENERGY

If you're always planning, pleasing or smoothing over tension, it's time to take a load off. 'Remind yourself that you're not the emotional concierge of this holiday,' says Charlotte. 'You can care about other people without making yourself responsible for their every mood or whim; let them be bored, hungry, disappointed or grumpy without taking it as evidence you've failed. It can help to decide in advance what you're not going to manage. For example: "I'll suggest one or two plans, but I won't fill every gap."'

7 GET SPACE FROM YOUR PHONE

Just glancing at a notification can spike our stress hormones, so put phones away in a drawer or another room. 'Delete work or social apps for the trip; you can reinstall them in minutes when you're back,' says Charlotte. At least go device-free for the first and last hour of each day, to avoid the expectation of that ominous ping. Or set one check-in window per day, and treat it like a meeting that ends. 'The rest of the day, let yourself not know, and see what happens.'

One final reminder: give yourself a break from that inner critic. 'You don't need to do the holiday well,' says Charlotte. 'It's amazing how much more enjoyable life is when you replace judgement with curiosity.'