

The benefits of taking time off

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Credit: nattu via flickr

Rae and Bruce Hostetler not only work very hard, they also relax just as well. Numerous vacations help the suburban Indianapolis couple to maintain their health and emotional well-being -- and it's no surprise to health care professionals.

"Rest, relaxation, and [stress reduction](#) are very important for people's well-being and health. This can be accomplished through daily activities, such as exercise and meditation, but vacation is an important part of this as well," said primary care physician Natasha Withers from One Medical Group in New York. Withers lists a decreased [risk of heart disease](#) and improved reaction times as some of the benefits from taking some time off.

"We also know that the mind is very powerful and can help with healing,

so a rested, relaxed mind is able to help the body heal better," said Withers.

[Psychologists](#) echo the value of vacations for the mind.

"The impact that taking a vacation has on one's mental health is profound," said Francine Lederer, a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles who specializes in stress and relationship management. "Most people have better life perspective and are more motivated to achieve their goals after a vacation, even if it is a 24-hour time-out."

The Hostetlers combined short and long breaks in 2010 and 2011 that included a cruise, a ski trip, two beach trips, a weekend in Chicago, and have another cruise trip scheduled this upcoming fall. Counting the weekend days that buffer some trips, they'll have been on vacation for 38 days since October of last year.

But they are not the norm among full-time working Americans.

The online travel agency Expedia conducted a survey about vacation time in 2010, and according to their data the average American earned 18 vacation days -- but only used 14 of them. Every European country included in the survey reported both more vacation days earned and used. France topped the list, with the average worker earning 37 vacation days and using all but two of them. And according to Expedia's data, only 38 percent of Americans said they used all of their vacation time, compared to 63 percent of French respondents.

Americans' responses may not be surprising in a culture where long hours on the job often are valued, but that's not always good for the individual, the family or the employer.

The on-the-go Hostetlers believe their trips are good for their health,

good for their family and good for their businesses.

"Because we're not thinking about schedules and where we need to be, we aren't anticipating what's coming next. We relax and enjoy the moment," Rae said. "I also find myself with better and more creative ideas for clients when I return from a trip."

"Time with the family is invaluable when we're as busy as we are," Bruce said. "The biggest benefit is just spending time away from work and with each other."

The Expedia survey backed their claims up, finding that 45 percent of Americans agreed that "they come back to work feeling rested, rejuvenated, and reconnected to their personal life" after vacation, and 35 percent said "they return from [vacation](#) feeling better about their job and feeling more productive."

Vacations like those that the Hostetlers enjoy help restore the body and mind.

[Clinical psychologist](#) Deborah Mulhern of Bethesda, Md., also has found that people who don't take enough time to relax may find it harder to relax in the future.

"Without time and opportunity to do this, the neural connections that produce feelings of calm and peacefulness become weaker, making it actually more difficult to shift into less-stressed modes," Mulhern said. "What neuroscience is showing is that we require down time in order for our bodies to go through the process of restoration. It is only when we are safe from external stresses that our bodies can relax enough to activate restoration."

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