

Time off, small steps can reveal your true happiness

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Give me a break. No ... seriously.

In an overworked, fast-paced world, many employees are yearning for time off.

"I think there is pent-up frustration," says Mary Lou Quinlan, author of "Time Off for Good Behavior" (Broadway Books, \$23.95). "There's a huge appetite. The economy of the last few years has kept people in jobs they hated."

Quinlan and others suggest a short sabbatical could be what many people need to renew their zest for life. With the new year started and vacation days still left, this may be the prime time to plan a getaway, they say.

Sabbaticals are typically thought of as part of the academic world. A seasoned college professor might take a semester off from teaching. Sabbaticals, though, aren't just for academics. Workers in all fields are taking time away from their jobs to travel the world, hike the Appalachian Trail or relax at a spa.

Few businesses offer employees formal sabbatical programs. Only about 2 percent of U.S. companies have them, according to an annual survey conducted by Hewitt Associates, a global human resources consulting and outsourcing firm based in the Chicago suburbs.

Companies have stayed away from sabbaticals because it's difficult to cover the work of an employee on extended leave, says Jon Van Cleve, a time-off and work-life consultant with Hewitt. However, more companies are asking how to create sabbaticals or give employees extra time off to unwind, he says.

In the next five years, Van Cleve expects these programs to grow.

Companies are finding that time off can be an important benefit for attracting and retaining employees, especially in high-stress fields such as information technology, legal services, accounting and consulting. Companies also are finding that a rested employee is a more productive employee.

"When that employee returns, they get a newly recharged employee where their mind is clear and they're ready to embrace new ideas and concepts," Van Cleve says.

Formal or not, experts say people can create their own sabbatical programs. They can stack vacation time together or ask for an unpaid leave. If the time is used wisely, a few weeks away from work can make a big difference.

Six years ago, Quinlan took five weeks off from her job as an advertising executive to sort out her life. She eventually left her job as CEO of a large New York advertising company and started her own smaller marketing firm, Just Ask a Woman.

Her book chronicles the stories of 37 other women who took some type of sabbatical. The experiences varied but they had common bonds, Quinlan says.

Sabbaticals aren't a time to sit on the couch, watch soap operas and eat chocolates, she says. Most of the women used the time off to exercise and meditate. They spent time outdoors and started a journal. In her time off, Quinlan took up salsa dancing and visited the classroom of a friend who teaches poetry to elementary-school children.

Before a sabbatical is over, Quinlan suggests that people make two lists: one filled with what they love to do and what they're good at; a second filled with what they hate to do and what they're not so good at.

"Be honest with yourself and think beyond your day-to-day job," Quinlan says. "You might find there are some passions or talents that you've had for a long time and put aside."

On a daily basis, the staff at Lake Austin Spa Resort in Texas tends to clients looking for a renewed outlook on life. Most people don't take enough time to slow down and think about their lives, says Deborah Kern, the spa's executive director of lifestyle enrichment.

A few days away from work can help people relax, but at least two weeks off is necessary for lasting change, Kern says. "It takes people about three or four days just to wind down," she says.

Spending time in nature is an important first step, Kern says. Natural settings have a calming affect.

She often encourages guests to keep a journal, writing with the nondominant hand. It forces them to take their time and think about what they're writing.

Yoga also is a useful activity, allowing people to clear their minds and move their bodies. "Stress is not just in people's minds," Kern says. "Stress is also in their bodies."

When they go back home, Kern suggests clients simplify their lives. Clean out the garage, cut down on activities and quit watching so much television, she tells them.

"They start looking at what they could cut out that's not necessary," she says. "Before they came, they thought everything was necessary. ... They find that if they just turn off the television, it gives them more hours each day."

Even if someone can't get away to a spa, people can start taking small steps to refresh their lives, says Pamela Ammondson, author of "Clarity Quest: How to Take a Sabbatical Without Taking More Than a Week Off" (Fireside, \$15.95).

For starters, learn how to get away from work, Ammondson says. Stop checking company voice mail and e-mail from home. If someone can't afford a vacation, they can just tell everyone they're leaving town and stay home for a weekend, she says.

During the sabbatical, Ammondson instructs people to identify the activities in their lives that drain their energy and those that replenish their energy. They then need to make a conscious effort to spend more time on those activities that give them positive energy.

Once people get back to work, she encourages them to find ways to keep the sabbatical going. Every three or four months, they should set aside a day or weekend to renew themselves.

On a daily basis, she also encourages people to take what she calls "seven-minute sabbaticals." Use a short break at work to listen to soothing music or put up a poster with a calming image.

Instead of eating lunch at their desk, people should get up and take a walk. "You could go to a flower shop, art gallery or museum -- some place that transforms your frenzied mind into a place of serenity," Ammondson says.

If people take time out, they'll be more productive and make better decisions, she says. They may decide to pursue a new career or position, but many find they simply need a new outlook on the job they already have.

"Sometimes, it's just stepping back and getting a perspective with a clear head," Ammondson says. "You don't have to have drastic, radical changes. I think sometimes it's not being aware that the little things do add up."