

Take that vacation...now!

A fatigued brain on an MRI scan looks like a brain that is asleep

By Anayat Durrani

Sipping a pina colada while relaxing on a tropical beach. Exploring a new city in a foreign locale. Hiking to a spectacular waterfall. Summertime has arrived and there's no better time to schedule that much needed escape. The kid's are out of school, the days are longer, the sun is shining, the birds are chirping. Cue the Go Go's catchy tune. "*Vacation All I ever wanted. Vacation had to get away*." It's time to put those fantasies of a "vacay" to fruition.

And, there's sound evidence for one too. Recent research shows that vacations are not just a good reason to take a break from work, but also good for one's health. More than nine out of 10 Americans reported feeling happier after taking a vacation. And seventy-seven percent believed that their overall health improves after a getaway, according to "The Takeaways from Getaways," survey commissioned by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority and conducted by the Washington, DC area firm, Heart+Mind Strategies. Yet, many lawyers skip vacations altogether.


Robinson

"The legal business is one of the worst offenders when it comes to work-life balance and taking vacations. That's highly counter-productive," said Joe Robinson, Santa Monica-based author of Work to Live and a work-life trainer and executive coach at www.worktolive.info. "Particularly in the legal business, the source of productivity is a refreshed and energized mind, not one that's tapped out. MRI scans of fatigued brains look just like ones that are sound asleep."

Band-aid for burnout

Robinson cited many reasons that lawyers should take vacations. Health is a major factor. He said vacationing once a year slashes the risk of heart attack in men by 30 percent. For women who vacation more than once a year, it's 50 percent. "Vacations cure burnout, the last stage of chronic stress, which is epidemic these days. Studies show that vacations regather crashed emotional resources, things like a sense of social support and mastery, that go down from burnout," explains Robinson. "But it takes two weeks of time off for the recovery process to occur. So you need real time off."

This means completely removing oneself from work, and that includes unplugging from the tech toys. Robinson said vacations raise a person's level of performance when they return to work. He said reaction times have been shown to increase by 30 to 40 percent.

"And, of course, vacations let you live your life as freely and fully as possible. They're the one time of year when we can do that," adds Robinson. "That's the whole point of the work, isn't it? If you skip your vacation, that living time is not coming back again."

Whether it's two weeks set in advance for travel abroad or scheduling one or two days vacation time around legal conventions, trial lawyer Bob Dawson of the Seattle-based firm Dawson Brown regularly pencils it in. His need for high adrenaline experiences like climbing big mountains,

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Bob Dawson and family

bungee jumping, sky diving, zip lining, trapeze and more has made it a priority. In fact, Dawson just returned in mid-June with his family from a trip to Germany, specifically to Munich, Dachau, Tuchersfeld, and to Neuschwanstein Castle.

"There is a lot to see in Munich. Dachau was a notorious Nazi concentration camp. Tuchersfeld is a town of 300 in rural Germany where my wife's grandmother was born," said Dawson. "And, my 15-year-old had to see Neuschwanstein Castle, the castle built by "Mad King Ludwig" that Walt Disney used to model the Disneyland castle on."

Dawson said he believes travel makes him and his family better world citizens and touring abroad provides perspective in a time when America is so polarized. He said travel allows a better understanding of history, an appreciation of art and music, and provides a wonderful shared experience with family. He enjoys travel so much, that on his iPhone, Dawson keeps a list of all the countries by continent and arranges them in order of interest to visit. "I block out time at least a year in advance to make sure I can go. I also look at the calendar each year, a year in advance, and look at all the holidays. On a three-day weekend I block out an additional day or two and then I have a four- to five-day 'weekend,' enough for a getaway or quick trip out of state," explained Dawson.

Dawson said he tries not to wait until he has time for a big trip, and said too many people will say they will go to Europe when they have three weeks available, but years fly by and they never do. He said anyone can go to Europe for a week and enjoy a great vacation. "Just fly somewhere, unpack once, and explore where you are and don't try to do three countries. Enjoy where you are and be in the moment and life in another country will unfold around you," Dawson said.

Work-life balance

Not taking enough vacation time is such a big problem, there's even a U.S./Canadian initiative called Take Back Your Time (www.timeday.org). The broad, nonpartisan coalition was organized to tackle the "epidemic of overwork, over-scheduling and time famine" that poses a risk to individuals' health and well-being, families, relationships, whole communities and the environment.

"It may be especially important for lawyers to vacation, considering that they generally work longer hours than people in most professions and often under stressful circumstances," said John De Graaf, executive director of Take Back Your Time.

De Graaf said he has several friends and colleagues that are trained attorneys who abandoned the profession altogether "because its relentless requirements for overwork left them no time for their own lives." He said this is a loss to the legal profession and added that not only is more vacation time required, but also shorter work opportunities.

"Shorter hours in general would be a good idea for attorneys both to reduce stress and burnout and to allow more room for young lawyers to enter the profession," said de Graaf. "I have certainly had high-level attorney friends tell me that their companies require them to take vacation time because they know it increases productivity. Attorneys need to be creative in their work and too much consecutive work dampens creativity."

Dr. Maynard Brusman is a San Francisco Bay Area Executive Coach & Consulting Psychologist and President of Working Resources. He specializes in providing consulting and coaching to law firms and attorneys. He said lawyers make such a major investment in their careers


Brusman

and have "earned the right to both career success and a happy personal life." He said planning regular vacation time could help achieve this balance.

"The legal profession is currently experiencing increasing numbers of lawyers who are dissatisfied with their careers and abandoning the practice of law for less stressful career alternatives," said Dr. Brusman. "Contributing factors include anxiety, depression, relationship issues, and questions relating to personal values and the meaning of life."

He said unmanaged stress only exacerbates these feelings. He cited a study by Johns Hopkins University that found out of 104 occupational groups, lawyers were the most likely to suffer from depression, more than three times more likely than average. Almost three quarters of lawyers report high levels of stress, resulting in damage to the physical health or emotional well-being of one-third of these attorneys, he said. Dr. Brusman explained that taking a vacation can help lawyers manage stress and recharge their batteries.

"In my work coaching lawyers, they think they can work non-stop, often sleep-deprived, without any negative consequences. Nothing could be farther from the truth," said Dr. Brusman. "In my opinion, lawyers need vacations as much if not more than other professions because of the unrelenting stress and pressure. Unfortunately, lawyers frequently resist going on vacation because of their work-driven and highly competitive mindset."

Make time to escape

Making the case for the many benefits of a vacation is easy, but getting lawyers to actually go is another story. Dr. Brusman said the lawyers he has coached often tell him they don't have time to take vacations due to demands from clients or high billable-hour requirements.

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"Many lawyers fear that if they do take time off, they'll be viewed as less motivated and focused than their colleagues or competition. Far too often, the result of not taking time off from work is seen in a high rate of burnout and depression among lawyers," said Brusman. "My years of coaching experience with lawyers, supports the view that retention, productivity and career satisfaction are positively affected when lawyers plan vacation time."

Dr. Brusman said taking a Friday and/or Monday off for a brief vacation works too. Making time to get away for a long weekend can go a long way in helping lawyers rejuvenate themselves. But that requires letting go of it all. "Staying away from the office, e-mail and shutting off your smart phone for a few days will help restore your energy and increase focus and clarity," said Dr. Brusman. "Taking a break can help clear your mind, but taking even a short vacation will help you relax, and help you look at cases with a new perspective and less stress."

Attorney Doug Saeltzer of San Francisco-based personal injury firm Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger tries to take a vacation every year. He believes making time for vacations makes him a better husband and father, which transfers over to how he functions at work. "I do think it is important to relax and recharge and focus on my family," Saeltzer said. "For me, a good stable home life not only makes me happy, it really allows me to focus on work. So, for me vacations help my practice by helping to keep things right at home."


Saeltzer

Saeltzer, his wife, and young kids recently took a vacation to Orange County. They stayed at a hotel and spent some time relaxing around the pool and visited with friends. "If I am going to be trying a difficult high stakes case for three weeks I can't afford to be wondering about problems at home," said Saeltzer. "Vacations are one way to keep away problems at home."

Dawson, the attorney who just returned from vacationing in Germany, said he tries to turn even work related trips into vacation time and often brings along his family. He attends legal conventions every year. One convention was held in Rome two years ago at an expensive hotel that was upwards of $750 a night. He said many people cut their trips short because of the hotel cost.

"I wanted an extra 10 days on top of the convention and didn't want to pay $10,000 just for a place to stay. So we rented a top floor apartment in a wonderful residential area that was a seven-minute walk to the hotel where the convention was," said Dawson. "I enjoyed those morning walks through old Rome and then attending the convention in a grand hotel that I did not have to pay for. That wonderful apartment, with two balconies and in a great location, was $190 per night."

When Dawson goes to his state's trial lawyer's convention each year, he adds family time to that convention too. In addition, he and his wife go on three or four-day "getaways" about two to three times a year. He and his youngest daughter annually go on out-of-state train trips to a special bookstore, stay at a hotel, and buy and read books for about three days. He and his family try to go on one or two family trips per year out of the country. "Next year is Italy and Indonesia. The year after that is Mali and probably somewhere in South America," said Dawson.

He also goes to Wyoming at least twice a year to attend training to become a better person and lawyer at the Gerry Spence Trial Lawyers College. He said that even though it is work, it feels like a vacation because they do a lot of personal work in addition to the legal skills, "plus it is in a beautiful location with mountains all around to hike in." He also teaches out of state two to three times a year, which he said "feels like a vacation to me."

Vacation: Just do it!

Scheduling time for a vacation can be done. It just takes a little bit of planning ahead. This includes letting clients know early on about vacation plans and who they can contact with urgent questions. Having a backup assisting attorney in place is a good idea.

"The best tip I can offer is that if you want to go on vacation for two weeks, then block out an additional week before and a week after the actual vacation time. Do it as many months in advance as you can," advises Dawson. "Tell your staff not to put any appointments in the week before you go unless it is an emergency and after you are gone not to put any appointments in the week after you are back unless it is an emergency. Then, you have a week to get your cases in great shape before you go, and a week to catch up when you get back. It makes leaving a busy practice possible."

An automatic e-mail message should also be set up as an alert stating you are out of town and unable to take messages, which includes contact information for the assisting attorney. Informing opposing parties and courts of the vacation time and that another attorney will step in to represent your clients is also helpful.

"We live in a work-obsessed culture where we live to work. It is important for leadership at law firms to create a positive environment where taking time off is recognized and encouraged as a way to promote a healthier and more productive workplace," said Dr. Brusman.

De Graaf said he has heard of many companies that now let attorneys work shortened or part-time hours. He said this practice is "very hopeful" particularly for female attorneys "who often balance extra family responsibilities with their work." However, he notes that, "our society still discriminates in this sense against women."

Dr. Brusman believes law office culture plays a crucial role and should encourage lawyers to schedule vacations. This means creating an office atmosphere where working while on vacation, such as returning voice mails and e-mails, participating in conference calls and so on is

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discouraged. And, he said lawyers on vacation should reinforce this policy by refraining from calling the office or checking their phone for messages and should trust that their colleagues are handling everything.

"Let go of the guilt over taking time off. Create a mindset that respects your personal life as much as your professional life," said Dr. Brusman.

Few would disagree that a vacation is directly linked to the success of the legal practice. A vacation can allow a lawyer to return to work reinvigorated, refocused and ready to provide legal services. Everybody benefits, the firm, the lawyer, and the client. So, what are you waiting for?

Dawson and his partner are currently discussing how to structure the remaining years of their law partnership so that they are enabled more time off. Dawson wants to be able to travel to more exotic locations like Mali and Indonesia. His partner wants to move his large sailboat to Mexico to be able to use it more months out of the year. "It takes a bit of effort to control your time and destiny," said Dawson. "But it's worth it."


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Anayat Durrani is a professional freelance journalist with a Master's degree in Journalism and International Relations. A versatile writer, her work has been featured in publications worldwide, including Cairo's Al-Ahram Weekly, California Lawyer Magazine, Caesar's Player *magazine and* 944 Magazine. *She is a regular contributor to* Plaintiff.

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