

A LINE ON LIFE

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Relaxing on Your Vacation *

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For both students and faculty at most schools, spring vacation is close at hand. Will you use the vacation to engage in interesting activities? Will you have pleasant memories to cherish when the vacation is over?

In our culture, vacations are viewed as chances to do what we want. In contrast, work is seen as necessary but not too pleasant. However, at the end of many vacations, we might find that we really did not enjoy ourselves. Even four decades ago, the American Association for the Advancement of Psychiatry indicated "*leisure is dangerous for most Americans.*"

From repeated studies over the last 15 years when people – from blue-collar workers to professionals – are working, they generally feel "*strong, creative and satisfied.*" On the other hand, when they can do whatever they desire in their free time, they typically feel "*weak, dull and dissatisfied.*"

By choice, only the rare person would want to work more. Most would choose more free time. Even so, this free time is increasingly spent engaged in commercially produced activities – movies, television and video games. When surveyed, most people indicate they feel drained and saddened after watching television for long periods of time.

**Within our capabilities,
we prefer activities that challenge us.**

When we can use our skills and potentials, humans are programmed biologically to be inspired by challenges. When we are forced to work – or we engage in leisure activities that are empty and meaningless – we lose the pleasure of overcoming these challenges.

An ongoing psychological study indicates that our attitudes toward work are developed at an early age. Even in sixth grade, children view work as undesirable and play as being cheerful and pleasant. On the other hand, they understand that they need to work to insure a good future, but play is not important in reaching future goals. These children enjoy activities that **combine both work and play** – activities that are fun while still preparing them for the future. These activities typically involve the development of trained skills – sports, music, art and various hobbies.

For many of us, as we grow older, work and play are placed into different categories. Adults are not expected to enjoy their work. At the same time, we have lost much of our ability to fill our leisure time with fulfilling activities.

Making the best use of our free time requires as much planning and effort as work does. In contrast to becoming a "*couch potato*," we can enrich our lives by actively involving ourselves in activities that require the development of some skills. Our self-esteem is improved by these challenging activities.

The same principles apply to vacations. Enjoyable vacations – relished in your memory – are rarely due to chance. If you first use your skills and experience for thoughtful planning, memorable vacations are more likely to occur.

With our Protestant Ethic – which glorifies work – some of us feel guilty about enjoying ourselves. What is wrong with being a couch potato or getting stinking drunk in your free time? These activities are not being

judged on any moral grounds, but they don't help to fulfill our lives. Current psychological information indicates that – regardless of education or income, and to a great extent, regardless of values and culture – **people do not enjoy wasting time**. (Although we do need to rest periodically, this is not what we are discussing.)

With spring vacation coming up – or with any free time – the choice is yours. Do you want to plan ahead for some challenging, exciting activity? Or would you rather give up and spend the rest of your life in front of the "boob-tube"?

* Adapted from Mihaly Csikszentmihali's "Relax? Relax and Do what?" *The New York Times*, August 12, 1993, Reprinted in *Themes of the Times*, Prentice Hall, 1993, page 6.