

WHAT DID YOU LEARN THIS SUMMER?

Benefits Reinforce Behavior.

Remember the ritual on your first day of school every fall when you had to write a report on How I Spent My Summer Vacation? You wrote about your trip to the beach, getting a new puppy or your visit to Aunt Martha's. And, if nothing exciting happened, you made stuff up. Later, as adults, we'd greet people after Labor Day with "How was your summer? What did you do?" It's a logical question and a good conversation starter, but I think there's a better question to ask.

We often shift gears in the summer, doing different activities and slowing down our daily pace and rhythms. Summers in my youth were spent in a variety of ways: at summer cottages, attending and later working at summer camps, the obligatory trek through Europe as a university student, and working at a hospital in San Francisco. In my adult years, I traveled, played land and water sports, read novels and biographies, visited friends and family and spent lots of time outdoors (In Canada, winter is long and summer is short, so I made the most of it.) It was a time to step out of "the dailyness of life" to kick back, to break out of my usual routine and to try new things. Most of my summers have been very enjoyable but they've also taught me a lot.

So the question to ask, as you settle into fall, might be "What did you learn this summer?" What did you do differently that worked out well and that you'd like to repeat next year or to continue throughout the year?

I'm hearing great stories and feedback from my patients as they report in after the summer:

- A workaholic professional went onto a summer schedule, taking a day or two off each week – and found she felt better and really enjoyed it. She said "I'm realizing the importance of frequent short breaks" – and plans to continue a variation of this throughout the year.
- A self-employed consultant used to call the office every day when he was on holidays. This year he took a nine-day family vacation and called in only once. The vacation was much more enjoyable and restful – "I forgot about work entirely". He plans to repeat this from now on when he goes away.
- A woman took sailing lessons and discovered the thrill of mastering a new skill and the pleasure of being out on the water. She's going to do it again next year.
- Several people left work early on Friday afternoons to play golf or to get a jump on the weekend – and found they enjoyed the new rhythm.

Another lesson might be how to do summer differently in the future.

I've constructed my summers in various configurations over the years. One summer I took a full month off – and found it was too long at one time. Another summer I took three-day weekends but no extended time off and found it didn't afford enough of a break. For a few summers we went to a cottage on weekends but I found all the driving to be a hassle. We've tried family trips in July and in August and prefer the latter because it's something to look forward to, late in the summer. Through it all, by trial and error, I've evolved a formula that works for me and my family.

What new habits and discoveries have you made? Perhaps you:

- Watched less television and got outside more.
- Spent more time with your kids, fishing or shooting hoops on the driveway.
- Got out your old guitar and realized how much you enjoy strumming.
- Picked up an old craft or started a new activity like gardening or photography.
- Did some volunteer work and enjoyed making a contribution and meeting new people.
- Dusted off your bike and rediscovered the pleasure of cycling.
- Hung around the dinner table after supper to just relax and talk instead of jumping up and getting busy again

In each case, you may have found an activity or change in routine that worked well and that you can do again and incorporate into your life. In other words, the benefits can reinforce the behavior. What's one thing you did this summer that you want to continue? (e.g. going for a walk at lunch time).

What's one thing you stopped doing and want to drop permanently from your routine? (e.g. checking e-mail at bedtime or on weekends)

A lot of people make New Year's resolutions on January 1st. I think of Labor Day as another chance to make a fresh start. Life gets back to normal, kids go back to school, work ramps up again and the usual pace of life returns. It's a logical transition time to establish new habits that enhance your life.

One of the challenges and opportunities of coming back from vacation is not to let the good feelings and rhythms melt upon your return. Even if you can maintain only one change or new habit, it will serve you well.

It's never too late to turn over a new leaf – and September is a great time to do that, while the perspectives from summer are still fresh in your mind. Capture one or two of the lessons you learned this summer and reshape your life this fall.

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