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Vacations don't keep people satisfied for long once they return home

By Marta Zaraska, Published: July 25

Do vacations make us happy for long? According to studies published in recent years, not really. Not only are the positive effects of holidays on our well-being weak, they also fade very fast. Once the traveling was over, researchers found, those who had gone away didn't feel any better than those who had stayed home.

As an avid traveler, I found it difficult to accept such news. Sipping a cocktail by a pool, I must be happier than when I slouch in front of a computer, right?

The answer, according to research conducted in the Netherlands, is that even though we might enjoy some happy moments during our fun-in-the-sun (or fun-on-the-slopes), these breaks are not always wonderful.

Jeroen Nawijn of NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands found a [holiday happiness curve](#): Our mood tends to be lowest through the first 10 percent of a holiday and quite high during the "core phase," which spans about 70 percent of the vacation time. Our spirits soar on the day before going home.

"The first few days of a holiday trip appear to be particularly unpleasant, even dangerous," says Nawijn. It is then that we are most likely to fall victim to travelers' diarrhea ("Montezuma's revenge," "Ganges gurgles," etc.) and even, for the most unlucky, heart problems.

Philip Pearce of James Cook University in Australia studied tourists visiting tropical islands along the Great Barrier Reef and discovered that their moods were particularly negative on the second and third days of their holidays, the time during which they also seemed to develop the most health problems. These ailments included skin rashes, tiredness, allergies, ear infections and asthma.

Yet it is not just a new climate or cultural differences that can make you feel bad; it is also the free time itself. Ad Vingerhoets, a quality-of-life expert at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, calls this a "[leisure sickness](#)." People with this condition develop symptoms of illness during weekends and vacations, even though they rarely feel bad at work, he says.

Vingerhoets believes leisure sickness — the inability to relax and adapt to the pace of life outside work — to be more prevalent in people living in big cities. Those affected suffer from headaches, muscular pains, nausea and flulike symptoms just when their free time begins, whether it's a weekend or holiday.

"I feel that there is a strong connection with workaholism. Men and women with responsible positions in management and much work pressure may suffer from this condition," he said.

Even if we do enjoy our holiday, the moment we return to our home sweet home, the good mood starts to evaporate. Two weeks later, almost all the benefits of a vacation are gone.

In the study of the Dutch holidaymakers, who were less tense and more energized during their trip, those benefits had all but vanished within the first week of everyday life. Nawijn believes that vacationers compare their day-to-day experience with the happiness they felt on holidays. "Such a comparison may lower vacationers' contentment with their normal lives," he says.

Others point at the demands of our jobs and all the work that piles up on our desks during the time spent away. After all, a mailbox full of e-mails and a long to-do list can dampen the highest of spirits.

So the cheerful holiday mood doesn't last long — I was ready to accept that. But what about a general sense of well-being? Would my life feel as full as it does now if I knew I would never see a palm-fringed swimming pool again?

To my surprise, experts say I would most likely be as satisfied with my life as a whole as I am now. Our judgments of life's quality are generally rather stable, and depend more on our personality than on what happens to us.

Yet there are ways to squeeze more happiness out of vacations. How? First, take more short trips instead of a few long ones: Research shows that additional days don't bring us additional happiness. Nawijn in his 2010 study concluded that two- to six-day vacations are the most beneficial to our well-being.

Second, go for active holidays: Research shows that exercise not only makes us healthy but also happy. A separate [2010 study](#) that appeared in the journal *Work and Stress* showed that people felt healthier, less tense and more energized during a winter sports holiday than throughout a typical day at work.

If you want to avoid a post-holiday mood crash, don't come back home on a Sunday. A study published in the *Journal of Leisure Research* shows that if we return on a Thursday or a Friday, we can insulate ourselves from the shock of job demands and prolong the holiday happiness boost. To those suffering from leisure sickness, Vingerhoets suggests a good workout before going on vacation to help the body unwind. "But in some cases even just a reflection that there is an imbalance between work and non-work in our lives might already suffice," he says.

Finally, enjoy the pre-travel planning phase. Nawijn, who [interviewed 1,530 vacationers](#), discovered that preparations for a trip elevated people's moods. That's a good thing, given the letdown of a holiday's first few days.

Zaraska is a Canadian freelance journalist and novelist who lives in France.

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