

Take the Day Off

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While we all take the occasional "sick" day, we often tend to favor our physical health over our mental health -- forgetting that the two are inextricably symbiotic. A cold or flu should not be the only reason to stay in bed all day and there are times when keeping your jammies on and watching a Battlestar Galactica marathon might help prevent an illness instead of helping you recover from one.

With the quarter flying by, you may already be feeling the effects of a college education workload -- I know I am. But I have a trick up my sleeve, one I hope will prove beneficial to you. It's called "The Mental Health Day."

What I'm advocating is slightly different from playing hooky -- where we opt to spend the day with a friend or a lover rather than going to work or attending class. More like a sick day -- which tends to physical illness -- a mental-health day both acknowledges mental stress while preventing physical manifestation of it.

To be clear, not all stress is bad. Good stress encourages us to complete tasks. It is what enables us to stay up all night tending to last-minute studying. Stress becomes negative when it is sustained -- as it often is in the life of a student.

"To talk about stress is simply to talk about the nature of living [and] of how well we cope with the daily demands placed upon us," wrote Thomas Hanna, director of the Novato Institute of Somatic Research and Training and author of Somatics. "How we re-

spond and adapt to these ongoing demands will determine how well our bodies stand up to the demands of living."

While we live with the demands of good and bad stress everyday, ignoring chronic stress can have serious effects on how well our bodies will stand the test of time. The mental health day provides relief from a sustained onslaught of stress -- it's a virtual vent that allows the body, as well as the mind, to replenish vital resources. In other words, one productive day of rest can save you several useless days in bed.

Taking a proactive response to combat chronic stress can effectively put a stop to a lifetime of health issues -- issues Martin L. Rossman, M.D., understands well. As a holistic physician and founder of the Academy for Guided Imagery, Rossman has long studied how psychological factors have physiological manifestations.

"If the struggle persists for too long, exhaustion ensues," he wrote of chronic stress in his book, *Guided Imagery for Self-Healing*, adding that once exhausted "you are no longer able to maintain a high level of resistance, and systems begin to break down [leaving you] increasingly vulnerable to illness."

Who hasn't been sick around midterms? Or right as finals end -- doomed to spend the entire break in bed?

A day without responsibility allows your body to replenish its exhausted resources.

"Regular relaxation interrupts the energy drain of chronic stress," writes Rossman. "It helps you conserve and build energy that your body can use for healing."

The goal here is to heal as you hurt, rather than letting damage work its way so deep that it becomes difficult (or even impossible) to reverse the negative effects.

This advice may sound banal or seem irrelevant to someone still in their teens (or even in their early 20s). But I've overheard

enough students complaining of headaches, stomachaches and sore throats while smoking cigarettes or eating pizza for breakfast to know that health isn't a top priority on campus. And if you think that the lifestyle choices you make at 20, 30 or even 40 are irrelevant to the quality of life you will have as you age, I can assure you they aren't. The mental health day is just one of many prudent steps you can take in preventative health care.

If you feel your stress cannot be managed by obvious everyday lifestyle choices such as diet, exercise, conscious communication and time taken to honor yourself via the mental health day, please consider visiting the Mental Health or Wellness clinics at the Hall Health Center on campus.

I sincerely hope that my advice encourages all of you to tend to the essential elements of your health -- your spirit, your mind and your body. The mental health day isn't about catching up on homework. It's about improving your quality of life. Trust me, for that it's OK to take a day off.