

Create the Downtime Habit Today to Kick-start Your Productivity!

By Annie Sisk

Busy or productive? Downtime or goofing off? It is all a matter of perspective.

As a young lawyer, you have a lot of work to do. Your boss expects plenty of face time at the office and for you to work long hours. But there is another aspect of work that is just as important to your professional success: *time off* work.

Call it downtime, me-time, meditation, play, or “vegging out.” Whatever you call it, and however you do it, it is essential—not only for your peace of mind, but also for your productivity level.

Regular downtime—even just ten or fifteen minutes a day—results in a fresher perspective, a greater sense of optimism, a balanced and calm mind, and a renewed “can-do” attitude. It also has physical benefits, including lowered blood pressure, reduction of physical stress, and decreased muscular tension. It creates an atmosphere of mindfulness, which in turn allows us to return to our work with a keener, more focused sensibility. And that enhances productivity in profound ways.

Why it is so hard to embrace the downtime routine

Lawyers can have a rough time allowing themselves to decompress. Chalk it up to the fabled eighty-hour workweeks expected of new associates or to something innate in the “lawyer psyche,” but I suspect it is a self-imposed. Many lawyers have a drive and work ethic that is admirable in theory but too often unworkable in practice. And with the profession’s insistence on the importance of billable hours and the “time is money!” refrain running through lawyers’ brains, it is easy to see why lawyers are afraid to take a break.

These internal and external pressures can result in a very busy—but unproductive—person. Your senior partner will not care that you routinely spend fourteen hours a day in the office if you do not produce.

How to create the downtime-for-productivity habit without pain

If you are anxious about claiming some time for yourself due to your many obligations, here are a few tips to make it a bit easier on you.

- **Set some ground rules with yourself and others** and make sure everyone is on board. (This is easier to do at home.) Phones should be quieted, the volume of the television lowered, and you should not be disturbed unless there is an emergency. This is your time, and it is sacrosanct.
- **Schedule your downtime just like any other appointment.** Penciling in your downtime or creating a digital reminder on your work calendar can make downtime seem more “real” so that you are more likely to take it seriously.
- **Start small and build from there.** Sometimes a ten-minute breather is all we need or can allow ourselves at first. Do not feel guilty for not allowing yourself more time; instead, be grateful for those ten minutes. Then start to explore extending your downtime incrementally if possible.
- **Take downtime at natural stopping points.** When you have finished working on a specific task, take a five to ten minute break before moving on to the next task. Close your office door, draw the blinds, turn off e-mail alerts, and switch your phones to silent. Try moving to a different chair in the office or sit on the floor.

What should you do during your downtime?

You can use your downtime for meditation, prayer, sitting still, daydreaming, journaling—whatever allows you to self-reflect and gives you a sense of renewal. Do not use the time to read or tackle anything on your self-improvement to-do list. This time is not about improving yourself; it is about taking the time to recognize that you are already fine just the way you are. If you need a nap desperately, then take one, but it is better to stay conscious and meditative.

What if you mess up?

If you have a particularly rough schedule one week and cannot quite fit in your downtime, do not use it as one more thing to stress over. Simply accept that you are doing the best you can, be gentle with yourself, and try to do better tomorrow.

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It seems counter-intuitive that spending time doing nothing will make you more productive. However, you will ultimately gain time if your mind is sharper. You will be happier and more productive and may even shave some time off your clients' bills (which will certainly make them happy). Downtime benefits are cumulative: the more you do it, the better your results. So let go of the guilt and the pressure, unplug, and enjoy your downtime. You will be a better lawyer—and a better person—for it.

An earlier version of this article was published at the Freelance Law Firm at www.freelancelawfirm.com/law-practice-management/why-down-time-is-such-a-great-productivity-booster/.

NEXT STEPS

[Lawyers, Anger and Anxiety: Dealing with the Stresses of the Legal Profession](#). 2010. PC # 1620441. ABA Book Publishing.

[The Creative Lawyer: A Practical Guide to Authentic Professional Satisfaction](#). 2007. PC # 1610160. ABA Book Publishing.

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