

## #63: Why Vacation is Important & How to Extend Vacation Rest



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

[Redefining Rest for Public Health Professionals Podcast with Marissa McKool, MPH](#)

## **#63: Why Vacation is Important & How to Extend Vacation Rest**

Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Hi everyone, welcome, I'm so glad you're here. I'm so glad you clicked on this episode and hit play. I want to do a little check-in. How are you doing? How are you feeling? wherever you are, whatever you're doing, check-in with yourself a little bit. What emotion are you feeling? And take a deep breath into that. Welcome everyone whose new. I'm so glad you're here. I want to before we get into the episode just share a support available for those of you who work in reproductive health. I know it's been a couple of weeks since Roe vs Wade has been overturned.

And there has been a lot happening both personally and emotionally for everyone. But also, for those of you who work in reproductive health in your jobs and in the field. Even though you've been working towards protecting Roe vs Wade and bodily autonomy and reproductive health care access far before this decision. I know this is a new layer, a new experience. There's more and different things happening. But now more than ever you need to prioritize rest in order to sustain the important work you do every single day whether it's research, or evaluation, or program planning, or clinical work.

In order to sustain that and be efficient and effective and continuing that work, to protect healthcare access and reproductive freedom. In order for you to contribute and the way you're doing that is so important and needed you need to prioritize rest. And that can mean a number of different things. You might need to process your emotions whether it's grief, or sadness, or fear, or anger. You might need to decide how to set boundaries for yourself and how to stick to them for what you need moving forward.

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You might need help figuring out what is rest to you and how to support yourself to get that. So, whatever it is I'm offering some free individual one-on-one sessions where I will help you do that. The last day of sessions, we only have one left, if you are on my email list or social media, you've already heard about this, and we had some last week. But I'm doing another day this Thursday July 14<sup>th</sup>. We'll leave a link in the show notes, and you can sign up for a one-on-one session if you work in reproductive health.

And we can talk through what you're going through, your challenges, how to set yourself up so you're supported, and you can prioritize rest during this very challenging time. So, make sure you go check that out. And if you're not in reproductive health but you have colleagues or friends who are, please send it to them so we can support everyone doing that important work.

So, with that let's shift gears a little bit and talk about vacation. Now, those of you who have been around a while know that I talk about vacation a lot. I really promote taking days off. I talk about vacations. I talk about using the time you have available to you to get rest and not work. I have several other episodes on this but today we're talking specifically about why vacation is important and how to extend vacation rest, both in the periods you're taking days off but also when you come back to work or come back home with your traveling vacation.

So, in the US, our society and some other countries and societies, particularly if the workplace culture is influenced heavily by American workplace culture and capitalism, I also experience this. But I'm just going to talk in the context of the US, our society and workplace has created this norm that if vacation is taken at all it's just one time a year and it's a one week long vacation.

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And we've kind of accepted this idea that all we need to sustain ourselves and our work, and we work 40 hours a week or more, that all we need once a year is a one week vacation or two weeks maybe. Once around the holidays and once in the summer. Yet on the flipside this is also why many people don't vacation at all. We have this norm of if you vacation you just need one week a year or two weeks a year.

But on the flipside because of that norm a lot of people don't do that, don't vacation because the idea of taking a whole week or two off feels very overwhelming or logistically challenging. And I talk about this in much more detail in the Why You Aren't Taking PTO episode. So, I'm not going to get into kind of that piece. If you're interested in that piece you can check that out when we talk through how some of that's not true and how to think about it differently so you can take your PTO.

But here I'm just explaining kind of socially how we come at vacation overall. And for some folks the idea of a one, two week vacation feels overwhelming because maybe the structures at our offices or the nature of our work make taking a week off difficult or more challenging. Or maybe because of childcare or even dog care, I've experienced that with a dog, taking a long vacation and needing someone to take care of your dog. And a child is a totally different experience and there's other factors there too.

Or because the idea that a week long vacation especially in the US context, we think of it as meaning you have to travel somewhere, or you have to spend a lot of money. And we also need to acknowledge that in the US paid leave is not a national policy or law. And many companies don't offer it. However, most of you listening work in public health. And I have found in most public health companies from government to non-profit, public to private do offer paid time off. And the amount definitely varies and there are inequities, that's for sure.

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But most of you listening who work in public health for an organization, particularly one in the US or US based, and I'm not talking necessarily about those of you who might own a public health consulting business. You might offer that as well but folks who are employees and staff, you probably have access to paid time off. And in other countries around the world paid time off for vacation is a national policy. And the average days both given and taken is really high, much higher than in the US.

And also, the frequency of vacation taken is higher. Rather than just one week long vacation a year, it might be a week long vacation plus three shorter vacations or a mix. Part of this might be because of access, part of it might be because of policy making it easier. But a lot of it is also the social norms, what's expected, what's normalized, what's common.

In the US, the percentage of unused paid time off days, the days that you do not use varies from leaving 30 to 50% of PTO days unused per year which could be depending on the allotment, six or even seven full days of paid time off unused. And here is the thing. Science has increasingly shown both the benefit of taking vacation and the detriment of not taking vacation. And when I say taking vacation, what I mean, to clarify is taking days off from work. Maybe it is traveling. Maybe it is going somewhere else.

Maybe it's going to a hotel in your city. Maybe it's just staying home. I think vacation can be any of those things or a combination. I don't think it just has to be you travel somewhere or leave the country. So, I just want to clarify that. But taking vacation or extended periods off from work, or traveling has shown to lower heart disease, steady heart rates, lower risk for heart attacks, reduced risk for dementia, reduced depressive symptoms and many other health effects.

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Now, does the access to or flexibility to take vacation from receiving PTO, to having disposable funds to travel differ person to person? Yes, of course. But I do not want you to believe that even if you can't afford a trip to Europe that doesn't mean you can't take vacation. I don't want you to believe that if you have young kids and don't have access to childcare that means you can't take a vacation. And vacation by the way is in which we're defining it which is taking days off of work whether it's a week or a couple of extra days, doing it a couple times a year.

Whether that is you're traveling, or staying home, or doing a staycation. And I do think we need to redefine what vacation is for us. Most of us in our minds, the word 'vacation' means it's a long trip where we travel somewhere else. And I'm not hating on that. I do that. Me and my partner have made kind of an agreement to each other, we'll do one week long trip. It doesn't have to be out of the country but somewhere else just the two of us every single year off work. So, I'm not hating on that at all.

But I don't think it should be limited to just that. What if we redefine it to it can be a series of short vacations like taking three extra days off three different times in the year? What if it doesn't mean traveling to another country but just to another city in your same state? What if it means doing vacation activities that are free or low cost? What if it means staying home but planning your days as if you were a tourist in your own city or visiting another city or a mix of all of those?

What creates the experience of vacation and vacation rest, the rest you experience on vacation isn't necessarily where you are, or the circumstances of the environment. It's what you decide to do. It's what you decide to spend your time on. It's how you decide to focus on your mind and energy. It's what you decide to let go of, what you decide to change.

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You can feel rested in another country, or you can feel stressed in another country. You can feel rested because you're enjoying learning a lot about somewhere new or you can feel stress because you don't understand anything and feel lost. You can feel rested not working but spending your days exploring the city you live in as if you're on vacation, or you can feel stressed spending those days exploring your city as if you're on vacation. You might feel rested because you're not thinking about work and trying new things.

Or you might feel stress because all you're thinking about is the traffic and how everything is taking a long time. We think what creates our restorative vacation rest is the environment. It's the housekeeping at the hotel, or being at the beach, or eating out all day, or going and doing a ton of activities, or just doing nothing at the pool. But what creates the restorative rest on vacation is your mind.

You can be on a beach in Mexico for a week just thinking about the work you have to do when you get back the whole time. And worrying about checking your emails and being upset you don't have good internet access. And feel just as stressed or even more stressed as if you're at home working. Or you can be in your home feeling rested, taking the days off work, baking new things, not setting a schedule for the day, not worrying about emails.

The important piece about vacation is taking time off from work and that's not just physically, that's mentally and emotionally. And doing that is not dependent on where you are. Now, that doesn't mean you wouldn't want to go travel, go somewhere new or even stay in a hotel, none of that. I go on so many trips. I love staying at hotels. I also love a staycation. I love road trips. I love flying places.



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I do all that stuff. And if you follow me on social media, you know that. But I do it while recognizing the reason I feel rested has nothing to do with those things. It has to do with my mental and emotional state, what I choose to focus on, what I choose to feel, how I choose to react to things. That's what creates the rest. That's what creates the vacation experience. And because of that it also means you do not have to take a week or two long vacation to get the experience of vacation rest. It also means you don't have to go somewhere fancy to experience vacation rest or the benefits of vacation.

And it also means you can experience more of the benefits of vacation and vacation rest. If we start to change how we view vacation and decide to take more of it, so not necessarily meaning taking one whole month off at a time, although if you want to do that, go for it. But maybe taking two extra days off four different times a year, in the fall, in the winter, and the spring, and the summer. You take Thursday, Friday off and you have a four day weekend, spreading out your days using more of them, not limiting them to being based on traveling or having to have a whole week off.

Or taking a whole week off but throughout the rest of the year taking some extra three day weekends. There's so many different ways you can do it. But when you expand your mind that way and think of vacation that way then you can experience more of the benefits because you know if I take a four day vacation and I'm not traveling somewhere I can still experience rest from that vacation. It's not dependent on where I am. It's not dependent on having to take a long vacation. And it opens up so many more opportunities of the benefits of vacation rest.

Now, I want you to think about this. I want you to think of a time you've gone on vacation and afterwards you felt really great, you felt really rested, a restorative level of rest. Now, listen, there are times where you after vacation you do not feel that way. The saying of you need a vacation from your vacation, I'm not talking about those times. And I do want to



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acknowledge the reason you feel that way isn't because of what happened on the vacation. It's because of what you were thinking the whole time that created the stress and overwhelm but that's a topic for another day.

I'm talking about the times you took days off, you took a week off, you did travel, whatever it was, and you felt really emotionally and mentally refilled. That feeling statistically tends to only last about three to four weeks or even less after your time off. So, if you only do that one time a year you only really get the benefits of that for that one time a year, that maybe one month or less. Versus if you took more vacations throughout the year and different types of vacations, you would get that benefit multiple times a year.

You'd get that vacation rest and that post vacation, emotional, mental rest not just one month a year but maybe up to four months a year or however many. And happiness level, your experience of feeling good, emotionally relaxed, mentally happy are highest the first few days of vacation typically. And from there it can level out or go down.

So, the benefits really seen from vacation in terms of consistent and stable rest, happiness at work, efficiency at work, enjoyment in your own life are actually higher when you take shorter and more frequent vacations several times a year rather than just once a year. Now, listen, I think the idea, the rest and recovery idea of 'refilling' on one vacation a year is kind of an outcome of toxic capitalistic lies we have been fed. And I use the word 'refill' sometimes because I think it resonates with people, especially folks who are burnt out.

So, acknowledge I do use that word, but I do think the idea that we just work ourselves as much as we possibly can and then once a year can get some reprieve is out of toxic capitalism. And when we believe that lie we continue to produce, produce, produce for others, for the system, for

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society while burning ourselves out. Even if you work in public health, which is work that aims to help people and make things better, because the truth is rest, including vacation, taking full days off from work is just like sleep. This is where I really could get on my soapbox.

As a society, yes, there is a little badge of honor for not sleeping very much. And I think there is a big period in people's lives and even in different times of life where we kind of use, I haven't slept as a badge of honor. That still happens. But I think where we are in society there's a lot more talk about accepting the need of sleep and promoting it. And people figuring out how to get sleep better for themselves.

And we're not doing that with vacation or taking full days off from work, but it is just like sleep, we need it, we need that frequently. It is required for our body to function properly and our minds. And it's needed for the physiological rest and the physiological functions both our brains and body do. And the lie that in order to vacation you need to do it for a long period of time and spend a lot of money is directly from toxic capitalism, white supremacy, and the patriarchy.

And this idea to say that some people deserve or can take rest and others cannot is not true. And I think when we believe vacation is only a long week long off or you have to travel out of the country or you have to spend a lot of money, that belief is promoting this idea that only some people can access rest or only some people deserve rest and others can't. And if you're in the category that can't, you have to hustle, hustle, hustle until you achieve something specific or vague and then you can, and all that's not true.

And listen, if you want, can do fun travels or expensive experiences, I am all for that. I love luxurious experiences to treat myself sometimes. I really love high end meals sometimes. I do that too, I'm not opposed to it. But I

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know that that is not why I feel rested. And I also know people who don't love that stuff or don't feel like they have the ability to afford that stuff, or access that stuff, do not need that experience to have rest, to have vacation rest. Restorative rest is not from the specific environment you're in, that's very, very important.

And listen, there are environments you might choose to put yourself in because it helps you make decisions to stay off your phone, or make decisions to be present, or make decisions to sleep in, the things that for you might be restful. For me being in nature, I love being in nature. It helps me disconnect. It helps me be present. But I also recognize that the reason I disconnect, the reason I am present is not necessarily because of nature because I could be out there on my phone being upset that there's no internet.

I could be out there stewing and being upset about something that happened at work and not get that rested experience. In nature I am choosing to be present, I am choosing to disconnect. But I still choose to do it in nature because I enjoy that environment so there is a distinction there. And you can totally decide, hey, these environments, they help me facilitate my own ability to make those decisions of what rest is for me and how I'm going to rest. That is great. I am all for that.

But recognize that the rest you're getting in those environments is an outcome of what you're choosing to think, what you're choosing to feel, the decisions you are choosing to make. Your rest on vacation no matter where you are is a result of the choices you are making while you're taking time off from work. It's not necessarily because you have daily housekeeping if you're at a hotel or you ate at restaurants every night, or you're in an exciting city, or you're laying at the beach, or you're camping.

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It's because of your decisions maybe to be present rather than be on your phone. To connect with those around you rather than be all in your head. To enjoy your nights instead of checking email all night, to experience what's in front of you instead of constantly listening to a podcast or news. Giving yourself permission to not do things rather than saying, "I haven't done enough." That is what creates your experience of rest, those decisions, how you're focusing your mind, what you're choosing to feel.

Which means you can experience this restorative rest anywhere. You can get the benefits of vacation rest anywhere doing anything. And if you want to do it in a staycation, if you want to do it camping, if you want to do it at the beach, if you want to do it traveling by all means do it. That's great. But just be honest with yourself about what is creating your experience of rest. And when you are honest with yourself and recognize what creates that experience of rest is your decision making, is your emotional focus.

Then that also means you can integrate these restorative choices into your everyday life even after your vacation is over. If you've recently come back from vacation, I know a lot of people are vacationing right now, I want you to sit down and write down all the reasons you think it was restful. This is such a great opportunity and those of you who are going on vacation soon you can do this too. Because when you come back from vacation and you are feeling restful, and listen, vacation's not going to be perfect. It's not going to be all sunshine and rainbows, it's going to be 50/50.

An episode on vacation brain can go onto details with that if you are in the midst of vacation or if you find yourself on vacation and you're like, "This is not restful." Listen to that. But if you're coming back from vacation and you're feeling a little bit of that restorative rest, that little bit of emotional reprieve, it's the best time to do this work. And I want you to sit down and write down all the reasons you think your time off was restful. So, I'm going

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to give you two examples. You might write it was restful because I didn't have to do laundry, I had housekeeping.

You might write, it was restful because I didn't have to cook, we were in an all-inclusive resort, all the food was provided. And then I want you to rewrite those reasons framed in a way that highlights how the decisions you made regarding those things is what created your rest meaning I felt rested because I chose not to do laundry. And that's true. You chose to pick a place where they washed the sheets for you. You could have chosen to stay in an Airbnb or maybe if you're staying there a long time you would need to wash the sheets, especially if you spilt something or whatnot.

You chose to not bring clothes that you would have to wash, you chose to bring enough clothes where you didn't need to do laundry. You could easily choose to bring a small amount of clothes and then find a laundromat or send it out for laundry service. Also around eating out, you chose not to cook. That was a choice, you chose to go somewhere that was all-inclusive that provided all the food, that is a choice you made. And there's a bunch of others. I want you to really sit down and brainstorm.

And then ask yourself if you want to continue making those decisions some of the time and integrate some of that into your everyday life. It doesn't mean all of it but some of it. And you totally can, and you can brainstorm how. So, I'm going to give you an example from my recent vacation. I did this when I got back from my vacation in Mexico. My vacation felt restful in Mexico, not because I was at a resort, or a pool, or I didn't have great internet. It was restful because I chose not to be on social media as much.

When I realized the internet wasn't great I was like, "Okay, I'm not fighting with this. I'm just not going to be on social media." I chose to eat meals connected with my partner, having conversation rather than just being in my head or thinking about work, or being on my phone. I chose to be

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outside without constantly listening to podcasts. I could have put a headphone in at the pool or at the beach and I didn't. I was present. So, when I got home I asked myself, how I could integrate some of that into my day-to-day life, or if I even wanted to.

There were some things that I did that I was like, I don't really want, that's a lot of effort, I don't really want to integrate that into my day-to-day life and that's totally fine. But there were some things I did. So now on some of the walks I already was doing, I already go on because I have a dog. I purposely don't bring my headphones or sometimes I've found myself just turning them off halfway through the walk and the last half of the walk I just don't listen to anything.

I have asked my partner several times, "Hey, can we eat a meal without TV or phones?" I have been logging on my social media more, one day on a weekend and I'm getting more of that rest integrated into my day-to-day life. Now, it's not about perfection, it's about progress. And it's not about being fixed, it's about being fluid. And also asking myself, how can I take more time off, take shorter breaks? This week I'm taking a half day off and we're spending the rest of the week, so about two days or two and a half days camping in Big Sur.

In August we're doing a weekend trip to Sonoma with some friends. Both of these trips are driving distance. Both of these trips I'm only taking one or two days off of work. In October I've already blocked off a whole week. I have no plans yet. I might just stay home and not work the whole week. I might take half the week and stay home, and the other half maybe do a day trip or go somewhere.

Once you start to reframe vacations, what they are, what they can be, why they create rest, it opens up so much more for you in terms of rest. It feels so much more empowering, and you get to start taking more direct control

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over making sure you get the restorative rest you need away from work both on your days off, on your vacation time and on your every day to day.

So alright, you all, I'm going to leave you with that. I want you to chew on that, put that on tumble dry in your brain, think about it. And go to take some vacation days, no matter if you're staying home, doing a staycation, going camping, going to the beach, traveling to another state, to another country. Whatever it may be, I want you to start right now, if you don't have time off planned in the near future, start thinking about it. When are you going to take that time off? How do you want to use it? How do you want to make decisions that will result in you getting vacation rest? Bye everyone.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to [mckoolcoaching.com](http://mckoolcoaching.com), that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.