

Parents & Stress a.k.a. 'can I go to Club Med, please?'

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Everyone experiences stress, but parents—especially full-time and single parents—get an extra dose. What do parents need most? A vacation. Of course! A couple weeks off, and we'll be good for another year, right? Not.

One problem with vacations, particularly when we have children, is that organizing them and recovering from them is often more stressful than regular life. Another problem is that the 'honeymoon' (feeling rested and relaxed) lasts about 36 hours after getting back. That means that we wait eleven and a half months for what amounts to two weeks and three days of relaxation. So, we just give up on stress relief, right? No.

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There is another alternative that the happy people already know: alleviate the stress all the time, instead of waiting for Club Med to invent a time machine so we can go away for two weeks between 6:10 and 6:15 on a

Monday evening. (You can see what kind of dreams I have for the future!)

The solution (as well as the prevention) for chronic stress is a new way of thinking of holiday time: micro-vacations. *Nanovacations.*

Nano-Vacations 'R' Us

What is a nano-vacation, or a micro-vacation for that matter?

Brief (shorter than ½ a day) respites, changes of pace, breaks and times off, right in the midst of the stress. The more stressful the day, the more of them you need, closer together, but also shorter rather than longer.

In ordinary life, for someone who is not stressed (and if I ever meet one, I'm writing a book about them), weekends and a two-week vacation are ample. In an intense life, where things like like money, marriage, extended families, and children generate moment-to-moment stress, where two weeks or even an afternoon off is simply not possible, a 30 second nano-vacation every twenty minutes all day is of far more help.

But What Is It?

A micro- (or nano-) vacation is a short, or very short, change of pace that offers an oasis of calm in the heart of a stressful time. Instead of waiting for a larger block of time that may never come free, using small stolen moments many times a day gives instant relief.

The possibilities are personal and to some extent each parent has to figure out what is or is not real relief and

discard the ideas that create more stress or just feel silly to do. That said, here are three dozen or so that I've encountered over the years...

Micro-Vacations

- ✓ Two-minute meditation, for the days you can safely take 2 minutes. 10 second meditations are the nano version
- ✓ Brew a cup of tea and drink it on the back stairs where no one will find you (immediately.)
- ✓ A mid-day shower to wash away the noise.
- ✓ Flip through a few pages of a comic strip collection or joke book. Humour, even old familiar humour, has a way of lightening everything up, even when it's not relevant.
- ✓ Read a single magazine article about a totally unrelated (to your current life) issue.
- ✓ Sketch the stuff left on the coffee table, or the view from a window, or a sleeping pet – anything, really, that happens to be in front of you.
- ✓ Get a headset for the portable phone, and talk with a friend while you're making dinner or doing dishes or tidying the living room or folding laundry.
- ✓ Play a quick game of cards or a simple board game with whoever is around.
- ✓ Look through a photo album.

- ✓ Jump on the exercise machine that is usually used for holding laundry, just for 3-5 minutes.
- ✓ Walk around the outside of the house, or the perimeter of the yard (if you can stand how the neighbours will look at you) once or five times.
- ✓ Sing an entire song a capella, or sing along with a recording—this is a particularly good way to get housework done while staying in a good mood.
- ✓ Paint your nails, or apply makeup and jewelry, just for a little lift.
- ✓ Look back over your calendar for the past few weeks or months to get a sense of how much you've accomplished recently.
- ✓ Set a timer and do absolutely nothing for 2 minutes, or 5 minutes, or even 10 if you have time.
- ✓ Log onto a game website and learn a new game, or play a level or two of Super Mario or some other silly console game.
- ✓ Write a poem, either free verse or conforming to a structure, like haiku or a sonnet.
- ✓ Complete a routine task (like making the bed or washing dishes) as slowly and quietly as possible.
- ✓ Attempt a challenging (or any) crossword puzzle or other pencil game.
- ✓ Write a short story about a life different from your own – someone who has no children or is a nomad or someone born extremely wealthy.
- ✓ Plot a short movie, and cast it imaginatively.
- ✓ Read aloud a speech from a play, or part of a movie script or a skit, dramatically.
- ✓ Train a pet to do a new trick.
- ✓ Play a piece of music on any instrument you have, even using the table as a drum.
- ✓ Draw on the bathroom mirror, or shower tiles, with shaving cream.
- ✓ Take three very deep breaths, emptying your lungs as much as possible and pausing for as long as you comfortably can before inhaling again.
- ✓ Stare out of the window for 30 seconds.
- ✓ Do 7 push ups.
- ✓ Listen to an entire song without doing anything—or dance to it.
- ✓ Write a short letter to a friend who lives close or far away.
- ✓ Read a book aloud, but only the top line of every page, with as much clarity and inflection as possible.
- ✓ Take all your clothes off (in privacy) just for a few minutes, or change into something totally different.
- ✓ Colour a single page of a colouring book.
- ✓ Eat a piece of fruit while fully concentrating on the experience of eating—the texture, scent, taste, temperature, sounds, etc.
- ✓ Turn off all the things in the whole house that make noise (remember to turn the important ones back on) and enjoy a few minutes of total silence.
- ✓ Fake a belly laugh for 30 seconds.
- ✓ Stand in the rain or snow or darkness and look up at the sky (catch raindrops or snowflakes on your tongue, if possible.)
- ✓ Paint your toe nails.
- ✓ Take out a camera and take a few candid or artistic shots of whatever is around.
- ✓ Hammer 10 nails into the nearest board.
- ✓ Stand on one foot for as long as possible. When you get good at this, try it with your eyes closed.
- ✓ Take a few pieces of paper and fold them into some original (or get some instructions and make some real) origami.
- ✓ Pick a handful of flowers, wild or cultivated, from your yard.

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