

## The Siesta Cure

*Rest is often the best – and most overlooked- way to heal ourselves.*

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*by Ann Japenga*

IF YOU'VE STUDIED THE STORIES PEOPLE TELL ABOUT THEIR SICKNESSES, you know that every struggle with illness must eventually descend to a miserable low point. My own came when I borrowed hand-me-down antiviral drugs from a deceased AIDS patient.

I had spent months chasing cures for a siege of Epstein-Barr virus, the bug that causes mono and chronic fatigue. Too sick to work and already facing a pile of medical bills, I couldn't afford the \$800 a month for the antiviral medication my doctor prescribed. That's when a friend offered to donate his late partner's remaining stash. That's when I knew I was at the bottom, and to make things worse, the blue pills made me feel even sicker. Once a story about illness has reached this nadir, the next step is for the patient to scrape herself off the floor, preferably via exotic herbs, innovative surgery, or long-distance prayer.

So what did I do? I curled up in a slice of sunlight in the backyard and lay there for six months.

I know, it doesn't sound very newsworthy. But given modern culture's bias in favor of purposeful striving, rest may be the most radical cure around. So radical, in fact, that it's overlooked by scientists and even many alternative healers. Plenty of researchers are studying what happens in the body and mind during meditation and REM sleep. But hardly anyone studies rest, the forgotten sibling of these trendier topics. Science doesn't even have a definition for it, says Clete Kushida, director of the Stanford Center for Human Sleep Research. "If you want to know what rest is," he tells me, "try Webster's." (For the record, the dictionary calls rest "peace, ease, and refreshment.")

The overall neglect of the topic is surprising because not so long ago repose was the prescription for almost every ailment. No one knows exactly why sleep or rest restores the body but, as any seasoned doctor will tell you, even today, many conditions improve naturally given time, the body's own healing powers, and rest.

Since the advent of antibiotics and high-tech medicine- surrender has been seen in such a passive, negative way," says Hart, who practices outside Philadelphia. "In military terms it means giving up. Losing."

Yet when Hart herself was once ill and beset with other problems, she realized the solution was just that: "Surrender, surrender, surrender. I re-created my whole relationship with my bed. I got a good mattress and made my bedroom a haven and a refuge."

In interviewing people about recovery from illness, Hart says, she found that many patients fight for months or years, then eventually put the struggle to rest. "Really, an enormous weight is lifted when you lay down the armor and the weapons," she says.

This may not be an issue if you're sick for only a few days. But for people facing chronic illnesses such as diabetes, arthritis, cancer, and heart disease-or any kind of lingering trouble, for that matter-the dilemma arises: When do I push and when do I yield?

Physician, acupuncturist, and chiropractor James Dillard has seen plenty of patients who push. They come into his office with five MRIs in hand, desperate to be cured. "Being sick and in pain makes people stressed out, frantic, and fretful," says Dillard, an assistant clinical professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and author of *The Chronic Pain Solution*. "Sometimes you need to continue the search, but very often you need to give that process a rest."

When people yield, good things can happen. Dillard had a patient with chronic shoulder pain that improved only when he got sick with something else-and was forced to rest. He's seen many couples who have tried every infertility treatment in the book. "When they finally decide to stop the chase," says Dillard, "kaboom, the body responds and she gets pregnant."

"There really is a time to just let the hell go," he concludes. Medicine, rest has not only fallen out of fashion, it's been vigorously discredited. "Bed Rest Is Not Beneficial!" warned the headlines after an Australian report looking at

39 studies published over a 30-year period concluded that lying around was no help in many illnesses. Other studies have reported that rest is not useful for treating low back pain and myocardial infarction, as once believed. I won't debate the empirical findings here, except to point out that these studies were looking at near-immobility and other long periods of inactivity prescribed for patients. If a doctor ordered me to play statue for six months, I'd feel worse, too.

BUT IT'S NOT JUST in conventional medical circles that rest has fallen out of favor. The recent proliferation of alternative treatments to every ailment also keep us busy. There are so many you ought to explore when you're sick: See a specialist, take up tai chi, find the right herbs, visit an acupuncturist, walk a labyrinth, do a cat stretch. Whatever you do, don't just lie there.

Even our language fuels the bias toward busyness.

Modern metaphors for illness involve battle, and no one in the midst of a war relaxes on the front lines. Psychotherapist Jane Hart observed this mind-set as she interviewed people for a forthcoming book on healing. "Sur-MY VIRUS DEBUTED innocently enough. I was driving to a conference from my home in Southern California and, halfway there, I didn't feel well enough to go on. So I turned the car around and headed home. Over the following weeks I felt fluish and lead-limbed, but assumed it was due to allergies or a passing bug.

But it became apparent it was something more. I had to quit my daily swims because I was shaking after 10 minutes in the water. I started turning down the freelance work I depended on. Eventually I was too sick to talk on the phone for more than a few minutes.

My lymph nodes puffed up and my liver swelled so much it hurt to sit upright. I lost 18 pounds and was tormented by viral shakes, as if an outboard motor was rattling my bones. A blood test showed high levels of antibodies to the Epstein-Barr virus, or EBV

EBV is common and, usually, benign. By adulthood, most of us have been exposed to it and suffer little for the encounter, except perhaps a teenage round of mono. But in susceptible hosts the virus hits hard and relentlessly. It can go underground and recur years later.

That's what happened to me. I'd had a long bout of mono 15 years earlier, and this time around the virus was 10 times worse. Months went by and I was still sick. Over time, my sickness affected not just me but also everyone around me. My partner had to take on all the housework

in addition to a busy job. I knew I had to get better.

I consulted an internist, an infectious disease doctor, and a holistic M.D. As I soon found, there is no drug that will wipe out the virus, but antivirals can sometimes suppress it. So I started scrambling for help in managing the symptoms and dealing with new manifestations (the EBV virus, like HIV, can attack various systems of the body). I also worked to boost my immune system in hopes my body itself would subdue the intruder. I visualized my white blood cells toting away the bad bugs. I took every vitamin and herb known to prop up immunity. I spent hours online visiting spooky sites about stealth to increase your blood pressure and heart rate, and ultimately, pump blood to your brain.

In addition, says physician Dillard, even a minor physical effort such as walking puts micro tears in your body's tissues. To repair the damaged cells, your body uses juice that, in cases like mine, might be put to better use. "You have to have down-time for the healing to occur," Dillard says.

When I fell into extended rest as a therapy, I also hit on a little-known principle of stress reduction: It takes a long time to really relax, according to Roger Cole, a Stanford-trained sleep scientist and Iyengar-certified yoga instructor. Many of us seek our rest in a few yoga poses or a meditation session. But the stress hormones that build up in our systems take a lot longer than 20 minutes to disperse. You may not have to sit still for six months, but you need time to really rest. "People are very quick to get excited," says Cole, "and very slow to relax."

ONE DAY. AFTER MONTHS of torpor, I just felt like getting up. Once again, it wasn't a conscious decision, and I wasn't following doctor's orders. And once again, Leo proved himself a dream neighbor. He invited me to come down and rehab in his pool, kept heated at a blissful 89 degrees.

The first day I only made it across the pool a couple of times before resuming my resting pose on the deck. But I could feel the weight of the virus lifting.

After a couple more months, Leo's pool felt too small and I hiked into the hills in time to witness spring's crop of Canterbury bells. My renewed health let me get on with my life.

I'm not saying rest made me well. Resting was simply the most logical thing to do under the circumstances. I'm also not saying rest will make you well. I would never tell anyone else to stop hunting for help. What I am saying is that rest should be restored as a prized color in our paint box of remedies and cures.

"When you hold still long enough, things fall into their natural order," says Cole. He offers the analogy of a forest: When a forest is left alone, the birds and bugs hum along in harmony. But when humans come in with pesticides and bulldozers, the balance is upset. It's the same with your body. "Sometimes what you have to do is just preserve the stillness."