When Rest Doesn’t Feel Restful

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You finally have nothing you have to do. This is what you’ve been waiting for all week. You make coffee, sit down on the couch, and decide you’re going to do absolutely nothing for a while.

About four minutes later, you notice the laundry. You could throw in one load. Then you remember you never responded to that email, and that’ll only take a minute. While you’re on your phone, you check your calendar for next week. Now you’re thinking about Monday.

So much for doing nothing.

For many of us, being physically still and actually experiencing rest are two very different things.

Why can it be so hard to stop?

Most of us have a lot competing for our attention. Work may end, but there are still errands, family responsibilities, school, appointments, housework, texts, emails, and all the little things that keep life moving. After spending most of the day responding to what needs to happen next, slowing down can feel strangely uncomfortable.

There may also be Requirements running quietly in the background. In Mind-Body Bridging® (MBB), Requirements are internal rules about how we, other people, or the world should be. Around productivity, they might sound like:

I should get more done.
I shouldn’t waste time.
I should be able to keep up.
I can relax when everything is finished.

That last one sounds reasonable until you realize everything is never finished.

There will probably always be another email, another load of laundry, another appointment to schedule, or something you could be doing. When our ability to rest depends on reaching a point where nothing needs our attention, we may be waiting a very long time.

When productivity becomes the Fixer

This is where Fixers show up in an interesting way. Fixers are things we do in an attempt to change an uncomfortable internal experience or get things back to how we think they should be.

Sometimes productivity itself becomes the Fixer.

You feel uncomfortable sitting still, so you check your email. You’re worried about Monday, so you start planning the week. You feel guilty about resting, so you clean something. For a moment, doing something may make you feel better because you’re responding to the discomfort.

The problem is that there’s always another thing to do.

If you finally stop, Depressors may join the conversation. Depressors are the negative storylines that pull us further into I-System activity. They might sound like:

I wasted the whole afternoon.
I’m lazy.
Why can’t I keep up?
Everyone else seems to manage their life better than I do.

Sometimes we bounce between Fixers and Depressors without realizing it. We feel uncomfortable, so we do more. We get exhausted, so we stop. Then we criticize ourselves for stopping, which creates more discomfort and sends us looking for another way to Fix it.

That’s a lot of work for a day when you were supposed to be resting.

What if you don’t respond to every thought?

The next time you catch yourself reaching for another task when you meant to take a break, try noticing what happens if you don’t immediately respond to the urge.

Is there a Requirement saying you should be productive? Is there a Fixer pulling you toward another task? Is there a Depressor telling you something about yourself because you’re sitting still?

Recognizing those patterns can begin to Defuse them. You don’t need to argue with the thought *I should be doing something*. You can notice that the thought is there without automatically treating it like an instruction.

This is also a good time to practice Coming to Your Senses. Feel the warmth of the coffee cup in your hands. Listen to whatever is happening around you. Notice the light coming through the window or the feeling of the couch underneath you. Bridging gives some of your attention back to the life that’s happening right now instead of everything your mind thinks should be happening next.

Rest doesn’t have to mean meditation, complete silence, or sitting perfectly still. It might be reading, cooking, walking the dog, watching TV, spending time outside, or being with someone you enjoy. The important part is noticing when your I-System has turned even your downtime into another thing you have to do correctly.

Your laundry will still be there. The email will still be there. Monday will definitely still show up.

But for the next few minutes, you don’t have to be there yet.

Keep practicing

Learning to recognize Fixers, Depressors, and I-System activity can help you notice what’s happening in everyday moments. You can practice these skills with us in a Building Resilience workshop or learn more about our free individual sessions.