NEWS LESSON

What Makes It So Hard to Enjoy Doing Nothing?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. When does taking a break start to feel like wasting time?
2. Would you enjoy a free afternoon more if it was planned?
3. Do you find it easier to rest alone or with other people?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**inactivity**	☐	A	to show that something is right or reasonable
2	**dimension**	☐	B	to do with thinking and understanding
3	**caution**	☐	C	one part or side of a larger subject
4	**cognitive**	☐	D	great care to avoid mistakes or danger
5	**institutions**	☐	E	making you want to do something
6	**radical**	☐	F	big, important organisations such as schools or hospitals
7	**justify**	☐	G	very different from what is usual, and strong
8	**motivating**	☐	H	a lack of movement or action

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A free afternoon raises a nagging question: should I be doing something useful? In a March 2026 Nature interview, Joseph Jebelli described how he once measured his worth through working hours.

1 The afternoon is free, but enjoying it is harder than expected. A thought keeps returning: should I be doing something useful? When even a walk or a quiet hour has to justify itself, taking a break can start to feel like failing at something.

2 In a March 2026 interview published by Nature, neuroscientist Joseph Jebelli reflected on measuring his worth through long working hours. He argued that periods of rest and mental wandering are not necessarily obstacles to effective thinking but can form part of it. That is an interview, not a study, but it challenges a culture that treats inactivity as a problem to be solved. Fitness trackers turn movement into targets, reading apps count completed books and career advice encourages constant professional development. These tools can be motivating, but their logic may also colonise activities that were once enjoyable precisely because they served no practical purpose.

3 There is a scientific dimension, although broad claims require caution. Recovery from demanding tasks matters, and stepping away from a problem can sometimes support fresh thinking. That does not establish that every nap increases creativity or that unstructured time produces identical benefits for everybody. Rest is influenced by sleep, stress, individual needs and the nature of the activity.

4 The argument also risks overlooking social realities. Telling an exhausted care worker or a single parent to prioritise downtime may sound absurd if their problem is insufficient control over their schedule. A culture of rest requires employers, families and public institutions to consider who actually has access to it. Perhaps the challenge is to defend time that produces no measurable result: an aimless conversation, a slow afternoon or a walk that leads absolutely nowhere in particular.

5 Even rest is sometimes defended only because it supposedly increases future productivity. That reasoning is persuasive to an employer, yet it leaves little room for experiences valuable simply because they are pleasurable. It is worth separating the instrumental benefits of recovery from the broader human need for freedom and enjoyment. A slow afternoon need not demonstrate improved cognitive performance to have been worthwhile. Perhaps the most radical response to productivity guilt is declining to measure everything in the first place.

6 Perhaps the deeper question is why leisure must be justified through improved performance at all. Rest may make us better workers, but its value does not depend solely on that outcome. The right to spend an hour doing nothing can be defended without turning it into yet another productivity technique.

Sources: Nature Careers. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that advice to rest more can be unrealistic for some people. T F NG
2. The writer treats Jebelli's interview as stronger evidence than a scientific study. T F NG
3. Jebelli became less productive after he changed his attitude to work. T F NG
4. The writer finds the productivity defence of rest convincing to employers but incomplete. T F NG
5. The writer is certain that stepping away from a problem improves creativity. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

absurd	colonise	obstacles	overlooking	relentless	supposedly	tangible	unstructured

1. If every pastime is tracked and scored, the logic of performance may _____ even our most private enjoyments.
2. Advising a night-shift nurse to 'take more time for herself' can sound _____ when her rota is set by someone else.
3. An argument that ignores workers' schedules risks _____ the practical barriers to rest.
4. The break was _____ for the sake of her health, though she spent it answering emails.
5. Poorly designed shift patterns are major _____ to genuine recovery.
6. Children benefit from _____ play, in which nobody sets the rules or the goals.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Her _____ to take a day off made her colleagues worry. (RELUCTANT)
2. The _____ of leisure has turned many hobbies into side businesses. (COMMERCIAL)
3. It would be _____ to claim that every nap boosts creativity. (RESPONSIBLE)
4. Critics find the argument _____ because it ignores who can afford time off. (CONVINCE)
5. Overwork often leads to _____ , even among people who enjoy their jobs. (EXHAUST)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Look at what follows each gap: a noun phrase, a full clause or a fragment. Some of these are formal and belong mainly in writing.

albeit **hence** **lest** **nonetheless** **notwithstanding** **thereby** **whereas**

1. The advice is useful, _____ only for those who control their own schedules.
2. Employers value rest as a means to higher output, _____ the human case for it is that it is enjoyable.
3. _____ the pressure to optimise leisure, many people still guard one unplanned afternoon.
4. The interview is anecdotal; _____ , it challenges a culture that treats inactivity as a problem.
5. Workers rarely control their time; _____ , rest remains a privilege.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Should rest have to make you more productive afterwards?
2. What would make a day feel worthwhile without achieving anything?
3. Which everyday pressure makes switching off hardest?

9 Role-play: an empty Sunday

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the friend with a plan

You've got a free Sunday and you hate wasting it. Suggest a busy plan, such as a long run, a museum visit and some study. Explain why you think the day should be useful.

Student B · the friend who wants to rest

You want to do nothing on Sunday. Say why you need a quiet day and what you'd like to do instead. Try to agree on a plan that works for both of you.

Useful phrases

I don't want to waste the whole day.
Honestly, I just want to switch off.
Shouldn't we do something useful?
Why does everything have to be a plan?
Could we do one thing and then relax?
That's fair, let's try it your way.

Afterwards, tell the class: what did you agree, and who gave way more?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 C · 3 D · 4 B · 5 F · 6 G · 7 A · 8 E

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 colonise · 2 absurd · 3 overlooking · 4 supposedly · 5 obstacles · 6 unstructured

6 Word forms

1 reluctance · 2 commercialisation · 3 irresponsible · 4 unconvincing · 5 exhaustion

7 Language focus

1 albeit · 2 whereas · 3 Notwithstanding · 4 nonetheless · 5 hence

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