How to Have a Restorative Holiday Break During a Pandemic

This can still be a wonderful time of year — if you resist the urge to bury yourself in the distractions of work.

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Despite the promise of a vaccine rollout in the months ahead, this holiday season is going to be different. With infection rates rising and some cities back in pandemic lockdown, many folks are frightened by the prospect of isolation during the winter break. Some are separated from family and friends. Others have loved ones in emergency work or on call. As the days get colder and darker, the thought of spending this break restricted and alone is upsetting.

It is no secret that remote research and online teaching have increased workloads over the past several months. Most faculty members need time off. Yet given the bleak
options for the holidays, you might think that busyness is the only way to distract yourself from loneliness and fear. Filling the quiet with a long list of unfinished research projects might seem like a better choice than staring at the walls of your work-from-home desk.

Those are normal fears, but it would be unwise to channel them into a frenzy of academic activity. Rather, there are ways to have a beneficial — even beautiful — holiday break in these difficult times.

While this is my first pandemic, I have spent many special occasions away from loved ones during long overseas assignments in tough places. The first time, I was dismayed at the prospect of being alone on a special holiday, amid harsh and frightening conditions. But that fear turned out to be a bogeyman. In fact, it was a lovely day — in a strange, life-changing way. Since then I have had many other holidays amid disaster conditions, each with its own unexpected sweetness and sublime moments.

As the end of semester nears, I assure you that you don’t need to drown yourself in academic projects to distract from the quiet and fear. If you approach this break with openness, you can find moments of real relief and joy, as well as new perspectives, to carry you through the rest of the winter months. Here’s how.

**Embrace the break.** Do not fill it with academic tasks or administrative duties. The fact is, after months of working in this pandemic pressure cooker, even the most mild-mannered professors are running out of patience. When your work bleeds all over your home life, and the job expectations change 100 times, it is a recipe for burnout. Once your nerves are frayed, it is easier to lose your temper, send a regrettable email, or shout at anti-maskers on your “mental health” walk. Taking time to genuinely rest and recharge will help you return to your lab and classroom as your best and sanest self.

Book several consecutive days for personal downtime this month. Be concrete about those dates, rather than waiting to see how things play out. When you have been driving 100 miles an hour for weeks and months, coming to a full stop can feel uncomfortable. If you try to wing it, you may feel lost and disoriented on the first day of the break, and that will send you scurrying back to your computer to work on a paper or review a grant application. Planning your break — just like you would a vacation — will help protect your downtime from the encroachment of academic work.
Even if your nervous energy wants to stay in overdrive, make the decision to hit the brakes. Do not plan to edit your book chapter. Do not even grade papers or peer-review articles. If you have committed to deadlines in early January, which would eat up the days you need for downtime, send an email with regrets that you will be late.

Unless you are literally working on a vaccine for the coronavirus, your tasks can wait a week or two. None of your projects are worth your sanity. Besides, nervous energy is like an all-sugar diet that is guaranteed to make you crash. Even from a productivity perspective, you will fare better by taking a hard break and coming back with a rested mind. If you happen to stumble upon a brilliant theory during your holidays, write it on a sticky note and trust that it will still be there when you’re back at your desk.

**Plan a digital detox.** Put your email on auto-reply. Delete social-media apps (temporarily, for the duration of your break) from your phone. That might seem scary because so much of our lives — personal and professional — are now online. However, a digital detox does not mean cutting out healthy virtual connections, such as Zoom gatherings with friends and family.

But social media are full of people who can make you feel bad. Some will show off pictures of big family dinners at the cottage, while you’re stuck in a downtown apartment alone. Others just spew rage, left and right. You don’t need any of that poison, and you should protect your precious downtime from negative time-wasters. Step back and evaluate how much digital connection is healthy for you, and then unplug the rest of it for the full duration of your break. You might be surprised at how easy and pleasant this is.

Once you have made all this room on your calendar, you might not know what to do with yourself. Not to worry. This year’s holidays will require a bit of extra planning and creativity, but having a plan will help you slow down your mind and body and achieve your “holiday mode.”

**Start planning now.** Let’s suppose that you are able to schedule five consecutive days off during this winter break. Well done! If you can take off a few more, do it. If you have a few less, we can work with that, too. But before we fill those days with art, music, and other creative activities, we need to earmark one of them as a “lazy day.” On that day, all that you do is read novels, play video games, or watch the director’s cut of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in your pajamas. Zero expectations. Maximum chill.
This should not, however, be your entire pandemic holiday plan. One lazy day is delightful. Five can start to feel like cabin fever. These days it is easy to slide into a multiday television binge, so set boundaries and make sure that you dedicate time to other fulfilling leisure activities. Draw comics, play guitar, bake every kind of cookie in your family recipe book. Your normal go-to joyful activities should be penciled in and prioritized.

It can also be helpful to leave your comfort zone for a little adventure. When I have been forced to shelter in place or restrict my movement in other disaster contexts, I found it particularly satisfying to pursue a “personal challenge” that gave me a feeling of control over my destiny. Here are some of my “challenge” ideas, which you can consider as you develop your own holiday adventure plan.

**A Physical Challenge**

Covid-19 has placed a lot of constraints on our personal mobility. Having spent months and years in places where my movement was restricted because of war or gender violence, I know how external pressures can affect our relationships to our bodies. One way to re-establish your sense of control: Complete a physical challenge. This holiday break is an excellent time to try something new, safely in line with your abilities and interests.

Of course, runners should run and yogis should do yoga. However, for this exercise, it can be helpful to choose a physical challenge that is outside of your comfort zone. For example, despite being a winter weenie, I bought a pair of snow pants and planned a full-day hike in a nearby park with some steep climbs. I also convinced another winter-phobic friend to join me, from a safe distance, in a “character building” outdoor adventure. While that is hardly Mount Everest, we plan to conquer at least three of the toughest hilly trails in the park, shout victory from the proverbial mountaintops, and then reward ourselves with cinnamon lattes.

Whatever your condition, there is a physical challenge out there that can work for you, whether that means meditating in a park every morning or training for a marathon. If your city has outdoor steps that make you want to be Rocky Balboa, now is the time to live that dream. If you have been secretly watching your neighbour do tai chi, strike up a conversation and ask how to join at a safe distance. If you have been stuck at your desk so long that you are in pain, give yourself the relief of a daily walk outdoors.
and a hot bath. Whatever safe physical activity you choose for your challenge, focus on feeling strong, in control, and happy to be in your body.

**A Service Challenge**

With lockdowns shuttering community centers and places of worship, many of the usual charitable opportunities will not be possible this holiday season. That can be upsetting — not only because of the impact on people who most need help, but also because volunteer service is important for people’s mental and emotional well-being. If you used to make the world’s best mashed potatoes for your community kitchen’s holiday luncheon, not doing that this year feels like a big loss. Even though you donate money to your favorite charity, you may feel a lack of connection and purpose that comes from face-to-face service.

Try to find other ways to help. Perhaps your community kitchen is packaging meals for frontline workers who are working over the holidays. Maybe your legal training can be useful to an organization serving the homeless. Or, with so many people out of work, many organizations need volunteers to edit résumés and mentor folks looking for jobs.

Everyone I know who has stayed happy during the pandemic has a service position of some sort, even those who have been working overtime, and even those who have been financially affected by the pandemic. If your normal volunteer service has been upended, this is a great time to explore a new way to make a contribution, not just over the holidays but through the whole winter. Your service challenge during the break can lay the groundwork for helping you stay connected and uplifted in the months ahead.

**A Connection Challenge**

All of us will be missing someone during these pandemic holidays, and some of us may be more isolated than others. When I started working abroad, the communication lines were very poor, and phone calls could cost up to $3 a minute. I was afraid of loneliness, so I started to send letters home in the mail. Weeks later, when I got one back, I was overjoyed. Those early years taught me that the harder we fight for a connection, the more powerful that connection becomes. The further the distance and the bigger the obstacles, the more potent is the expression of love.
If you doubt that, take a moment to watch some footage of soldiers opening Christmas packages from home. Military families, international staff members, and emergency workers know the burden of family separation, but also the importance of love that overcomes it. To love and connect under difficult and frightening circumstances is worth more than 1,000 frivolous holiday parties.

You may have already experienced such moments of sublime during this pandemic. Perhaps it was when you sang happy birthday on the lawn of your grandpa’s care facility as he waved through the window. Or when you spent hours teaching elders in your faith or cultural community how to host a virtual event.

These pandemic holidays are an opportunity for all of us to embrace a new connection challenge. We are lucky to have online platforms for virtual celebrations with family and friends. While we should enjoy these easy points of contact, we can also send cards or letters. If you’re missing family or friends who are far away, mailing a small care package can lift the spirits of both sender and receiver. If you are heartbroken that you cannot visit loved ones in your city, team up and coordinate a holiday drop-off of gifts or treats.

Your idea doesn’t have to be big, expensive, or fancy in order to be special and beautiful.

**Rejoice in the imperfection.** Trust that you can — and will — create a holiday that is restorative, uplifting, and fun, even under pandemic conditions. Let go of your perfectionist expectations, and let this year be delightfully different.

Even if you burn those cookies or complete only a quarter of your challenges, it will be a wonderful win. Any good-faith effort you make will pay dividends. And whatever combination of lazy days and personal challenges you choose, having a holiday plan will protect your time off from the encroachment of work. Remember, the only failed version of a holiday break is the one you didn’t take.

While so much of this pandemic has become “normal” to us, it is important to stay mindful about the fact that we are living in extraordinary times. We will never have a chance to see the world — and ourselves — from this vantage point again. When it passes, we will emerge transformed from this crucible. For us, as scholars and human
beings, this little break is an opportunity to reflect on who we want to be in that future world.

So let’s see what we can do to make these holidays merry. I wish you all a wonderful holiday season and a happy new year.

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