

The Mental Benefits of Vacationing Somewhere New

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Coming off the winter holidays, most of us start dreaming of, if not planning, our spring and summer getaways. It's tempting, of course, to default to the same vacation each year: your family's cabin, a familiar beach town, your favorite city, that resort the kids loved. We often choose to spend our hard-earned dollars for comfort, predictability, and relaxation, and there are benefits to doing so.

But as a psychologist, I believe that travel should routinely be used to achieve the opposite: to get out of your comfort zone, expose yourself to uncertainty, and eschew rest for exploration and learning. The result is personal growth — greater emotional agility, empathy, and creativity. A recent trip to Sri Lanka, with an unexpected stop in Thailand, led me to think more deeply about the positive impact of adventures that challenge us.

The first benefit is enhanced [emotional agility](#), or the ability to not react immediately to emotions, but to observe those that arise, carefully collect information to understand the possible causes, then intentionally decide how to manage them. [In a study of 485 United States adults](#), exposure to foreign travel was linked to a greater ability to direct attention and energy, which helps us function effectively in diverse situations and display appropriate verbal and nonverbal signals of emotion. Visiting more countries (breadth) or greater immersion into the local culture (depth) enhanced these effects, and they remained after the study subjects returned home. By spending time in unfamiliar towns, cities, or countries, you become tolerant and even accepting of your own discomfort and more confident in your ability to navigate ambiguous situations.

I felt this growth during my two weeks in Sri Lanka. Standing amid a slew of older, short men dressed in rainbow-colored robes and speaking Sinhalese, I'd never felt more foreign. I knew I wouldn't be able to navigate the narrow roads full of tuk-tuks, bicyclists, and pedestrians in a rental car, and the prospect of purchasing transport, food, clothes, or art without any indication of their price was daunting. But eventually I got my bearings. After a few days on the ground, I even got up the nerve to take a yoga class taught entirely in Sinhalese. I now know that any initial anxiety is just a reaction, one that will dissipate as I begin to operate in it.

Empathy also increases when your travels thrust you into new territory. In that same study of Americans, those who'd traveled abroad showed a greater ability to suspend judgment about a person until acquiring information beyond surface qualities (age, sex, race, or ethnicity). They were also more

adept at discerning whether another person's actions reflected deep-seated personality attributes or a variety of situational factors that could be influencing their behavior. [When researchers in China gave a survey to 197 adults](#) before and after traveling, they uncovered similar influences on the exertion of effort to attend to pronounced cultural differences in normalized values and behavioral patterns in everyday social interactions. People who traveled to more countries developed a greater tolerance and trust of strangers, which altered their attitudes toward not only strangers but also colleagues and friends back home. They became more appreciative of people with new knowledge, philosophies, and skills.

In Sri Lanka, I noticed an ivory Buddha statue in a glass encasement surrounded by gaudy, blinking neon lights on a city block — perhaps a mismatch to me, but not to the locals. Every few blocks, a police officer was stationed with an assault rifle or machine gun, which was initially intimidating, but then the officer would smile and engage in chit-chat, and I recognized that they were just men in uniforms doing their jobs. When I went to the gym for an elliptical machine workout, the three television sets hanging from the ceiling showed a Kabbadi match — what looked to me like a dozen people playing tag — and I realized how diverse the world of sport really is.

The third benefit of beyond-the-usual vacations is creativity. A [study of 46 Dutch workers](#) found that after going on an international holiday for two to three weeks, they were able to generate more and more-diverse ideas for alternative ways to use everyday objects, such as bricks, tires, spoons, and pencils. [Researchers in Singapore](#) have likewise found that greater exposure to other cultures through traveling, having international friendships, studying languages, and consuming music and food from other countries is linked to unconventional problem solving.

After my recent travel experience, I started to approach the hiring practices for my [Well-Being Laboratory](#) differently. I still ask the single best interview question that predicts future job performance: "How much do you know about our research group?" But now I also ask more-unusual questions, such as: "If you could relive any moment in your life, what would it be and why?" "What do people never ask you about your childhood that you wish they did?," and "What beliefs do you hold that are unusual?" I follow up by asking whether and how those experiences have influenced their thinking and behavior. This isn't just for fun. I want to dive deep into candidates' cultural experiences to determine whether they might offer a new vantage point that could increase our collective creativity and provide value. At the minimum, rich, meaningful interactions occur. At the maximum, our team gets stronger and wiser.

This post was inspired by an expedition that I was lucky enough to experience. But I believe that it's possible to achieve similar growth by traveling closer to home — to new states, cities, and even households, from urban to rural, north to south, east to west. As long as you're spending time in an unfamiliar environment, with people whose backgrounds and belief systems don't entirely match yours, you're succeeding at stretching yourself.

Far too many business and personal trips are designed to maximize comfort and minimize uncertainty. (Theme parks and cruise ships come to mind.) But holidays are a terrific self-development opportunity. What workplaces need now are agile people who are comfortable being uncomfortable, understand

others' perspectives, and are able to innovate rather than regurgitate what is already known. You might be out of the office, but that doesn't mean you should stop working on yourself.



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