

Holidays For Health's Sake

By Mel Borins, M.D.

Many people are attacked by a beneficial, welcome germ. Physicians can't culture it and no microscope can identify it. It's the "travelling bug." Once you get infected by it, you never want to stop travelling.

I've always wanted to open up a travel consultant service next to my medical practice to counsel people regarding travel for health. In this office, I would take a complete history, do a physical examination, appropriate diagnostic tests, and then, according to your situation, I would prescribe an appropriate vacation. I would take into consideration your age, state of health, financial capability, goals and needs. If you were out of shape, then going trekking in the mountains might soon get you down to your ideal weight, stimulate your cardiovascular system and tighten up your flabby muscles. If you were suffering from "burnout" or working too hard, then flopping down on an isolated island without television, telephones and external intrusions might help rekindle the fire. If you were feeling spiritually drained, then spending a few weeks in a yoga ashram, a Tibetan monastery or a Christian retreat may help you to revive your spiritual connection and put you back on a spiritual path.

Robert is an engineer who, for the past several years, has suffered with seborrheic dermatitis, an inflammatory skin disease affecting his scalp, nasolabial fold of his face and skin on his chin. This condition causes redness, itching and scaling. The only time in the past 10 years that he's been free of this condition was on a two week vacation in New Zealand, Australia and Fiji. While he was away he was disease free. When he returned to his home, his rash returned within three weeks. Although it could be because of climate, environmental or dietary changes, Robert feels the condition was stress related and being away on vacation was responsible for the elimination of the symptoms. Now he recognizes when the rash flares up that he is under a great deal of stress. The skin condition acts as a monitor, giving him a message about changes he must make.

When you are physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually in balance, you are healthy.

You feel good, your organ systems are functioning properly, and you are free of pain. Many times stress in your external environment can upset this balance and cause disease. The late Dr. Hans Selye documented that your body reacts with the "fight" or "flight" response.

Sometimes you don't "see the forest for the trees." You are under stress, you know your body is malfunctioning but you are so involved that you don't really see the causative factors. Even worse, sometimes you know what the stressful factors are but you are so overwhelmed that you just can't cope. You are in the midst of the battle but you can't seem to change your battle plan or retreat. Retreating is not always the best way of coping with stresses but sometimes it is necessary. Retreating helps you step back, mobilize your internal forces and see things from a different perspective.

Getting away can help you distance yourself from the stressful parts of your life. If your job has been overwhelming, or your relationships have been too demanding, or your lifestyle has not been healthful, then getting away can be a tremendous relief. It can allow you to develop new strategies to cope. Simply being out of your stressful environment can help in making you aware of just how crazy your life has been, and can make you more determined to make changes.

Over the years that I've been working as a family doctor, I have met many patients whose lives were transformed or changed by holidays. I've even witnessed improvements in the physical and emotional well-being of some patients who have been away. Very often a trip or vacation was a turning point in someone's life. The more I enquired about their trips, the more I became aware of transformations and changes taking place. I could often tell if a medical problem was of a serious organic nature because then it wouldn't usually disappear when someone was on vacation. If a problem did disappear when someone was away, then there was some likelihood that the sickness was stress-related and being away was enough to change the stresses and relieve the symptoms. Sometimes, as soon as the person came back to their own environment, their usual style of eating and exposure to their old stresses, their symptoms returned.

Barbra is a 27-year-old, blue-eyed, satin-skinned secretary. During her first

year of work she developed a painful, stiff neck. Her job involved sitting in one position, often bent over, and this put a strain on her neck. Her physician prescribed a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug which didn't help. She was sent to a physiotherapist, whom she saw for over a year, but with little relief. Barbra went to a chiropractor but he couldn't relieve the pain. Finally she and her husband went on a one-week vacation to Club Med. She felt really free and let loose. After swimming, playing tennis, dancing, sitting in the sun, and acting like a teenager again, she realized that her neck felt better. By the end of the week there was no more stiffness or pain. Now, years later, she is still relatively pain free and attributes her recovery to that one week vacation.

Svetlana is a 46-year-old Russian mother of two who I met in the Soviet Union in 1974. Since then Svetlana and I have communicated back and forth through letters. There had been a loosening of travel restrictions in 1988 and, for the first time in her life, Svetlana travelled outside the U.S.S.R. to West Germany. She wrote, "It was the first time I travelled without my children, and I was filled with some extraordinary feelings, inside forces, and good spirits. I walked along the streets smiling. I was full of goodwill toward everyone I saw. Usually I have bad headaches almost every day, but during the two weeks vacation I had no pain at all. I became calmer, and felt full of life and more myself. This transformed feeling lasted the whole year."

For some people, travelling is a way of life. Floriano is an ex-photographer artist who lives in a villa in Asolo at the foothills of the Alps, in the northern part of Italy. He stays in this small town from April to November, but every November when the leaves start to fall, the days become cooler and the luxurious garden begins to fade, Floriano becomes clinically depressed. He so identifies with the changes that are proceeding around him that his whole mood changes from one of life to death, and the only way he can avoid being hospitalized or treated for his depression is if he takes off each year and travels to a warmer climate where there are still plants growing, sun in the sky, and the opportunity to expose his whole body to the air.

Floriano, now 55 years old, big-bellied, his face scarred from plastic surgery, and talking in a rolling,

resonant tenor voice, half Italian, half Austrian accent, describes his need to travel. "I'd most likely be dead if not for travel. The trip to Rio de Janeiro is much cheaper for me than even a short stay in an insane asylum of which I am a veteran anyway. The incredible feeling of freedom to choose my season like a bird who crosses thousands of miles on the sheer strength of its wings, will-power and instinct has become a necessity for me. People say travelling opens one's eyes, but for me travelling gives me eyes. I wouldn't need eyes to live every day in the same environment, but by changing constantly the sites, the scenery, the atmosphere, it sharpened my eyes and all other senses. It makes me truly alive."

Floriano goes on to say, "Most people live as if the world is flat, and live their lives as though they are doomed to stay in the same spot. Travelling makes you realize that the world itself is travelling in the universe, that nothing is still and everything travels forever. The stars, the galaxies, the blood in our bodies are moving. To move is the most natural activity a human can do. Every year when my garden starts dying, the leaves start falling, the plants start shrivelling up, and I know I won't see them for another six months, I begin to die with it. Just like the leaves, my body and and soul start dying. When I feel the cold air changing, I become very depressed and I'm reminded of the time when I was working as an insurance agent in Cologne, Germany, where every morning I would pray that it would already be Friday night. Then one day I figured out that this was the greatest waste of the world. For two days I felt like living and for five days I felt as if I was cursed. As a consequence, I gave up my job and started travelling, and I've been travelling ever since. It keeps me out of mental hospitals, it prevents me from having to take drugs and see a psychiatrist, and the therapy for me is light and sunshine. It's also much cheaper to live in warm climates."

Next time you're trying to justify taking some time away, and you're really not sure if you could afford it, then take my medical advice. Book your trip now and you would be making an investment in your health. Holidays are just what this Doctor ordered.

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Trip Tips From CAA

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Floriano, now 55 years old, describes his need to travel in a rolling, resonant tenor voice: "I'd most likely be dead if not for travel. The trip to Rio de Janeiro is much cheaper for me than even a short stay in an insane asylum, of which I am a veteran anyway.

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