

THE LATEST

Why You Should Use Your Vacation Days Even If You Can't Travel

Hoarding your time off may not work out in your favor.

At 4:00 p.m. on a Friday in early April, [Brooklyn-based](#) social worker Tanya Hernandez reached out to her boss to ask for the following Monday off. "The first couple of weeks of working from home were a really big shock—it's been very overwhelming," she says. "I needed to take a day off to just breathe and work on my mental health. That afternoon was really a burnout moment." Instead of logging on Monday morning, she turned her work phone off and set to work cooking *Bon Appetit's* French onion beef noodle soup, [a recipe](#) that takes some three hours and a lot of care, and playing card games with her partner. "It ended up being so relaxing, and such a good way to take my mind off things," Hernandez says. She now has another two vacation days on the books for May.

It may seem counterintuitive—taking a day off when you have nowhere to go—but the experts we talked to say that we need time off from work now more than ever. "Even those who love their job need to detach from it in order to recover and recharge their batteries," says Tammy Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of South Florida. Not only has taking paid time off [been proven](#) to increase your happiness in your job and your overall productivity, it can also promote better mental and physical well-being.

That doesn't mean it's easy to ask. [Americans are already notorious](#) for not taking all of their vacation days, and a [2018 Project Time Off study](#) found that 52 percent of employees reported having unused vacation days. During this time, when many are working from home and the chance to plan a real vacation is off the table for a while, asking for a day off from your employer may make you feel uncomfortable, Allen says, but it's in both of your favor for you to take the time to disconnect. "I know a lot of people are concerned about the economy and they want to demonstrate that they're a team player," she says. "But I think a case can be made for taking a little bit of time off now, which will enable you to be more effective overall, and in the longer term."

Working from home adds an added layer of self-pressure, says Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management. "A lot of employees feel almost a sense of guilt right now, like, 'I've not earned a vacation because for the last six weeks I've been at home in my robe and my jammies'," says Taylor. "So they themselves have not equated this with work." But just because you're home doesn't mean you aren't working—in fact, both Allen and Taylor say you're probably working more, with added stressors like child care, new technology, and isolation. We tapped them for advice on how to spend your vacation days this year—even if you're just staying home.

Use your imagination

Do what you can to make your day off feel special—i.e. don't plop down [in front of Netflix](#) for the whole day. Allen says to be creative with your day, like planning themed activities. Her pick? A '20s-themed dinner with costumes, music, and takeout from a favorite restaurant to keep you entertained and out of your normal routine. "It gets to the idea of taking you away from work and everything that's going on and engaging in play," she says. Hernandez planned a beach day with her roommate last weekend, laying out towels in her living room, making beachy cocktails, and even bringing her plants into the room for a tropical vibe.

If you don't want to rummage through the costume box or lounge in your living room in a [bathing suit](#), Allen says there are other ways to engage your imagination, especially for travelers. "Travel is about creating memories, so use this time to go back and revisit your past travel memories," she says. Make a photo album for a past trip. Look through old travel journals—or even write new ones based on what you can remember. And it doesn't have to all be in the past either. She suggests using your day off to plan for future trips, whenever they may be, will also help you take a mental break from your day to day.

Don't hoard your PTO for later

One thing we at *Condé Nast Traveler* are hearing often is that people are looking to keep their vacation days until travel becomes an option again. But that may not work out in your favor, says Taylor, as you run the risk of not being able to take the large trips you're planning. "Scheduling a vacation isn't a guarantee," he says. "It's something that is subject to and limited by the company's needs for its talent. If we get back in the workplace in June or July, and everyone's trying to take vacation, employers are going to say no." So if you—and all of your co-workers—are hoping to jet the first chance you can, you will likely have to wait your turn, or split up your one vacation into a number of smaller ones.

Instead, go to your manager or HR representative with a number of options. Since your PTO isn't tied to a flight or cruise at the moment, be flexible about what day or days you take off, says Allen. "Specify that you want to take some time off, but make sure they know that the specific day can be negotiated with your supervisors," she says. "That way, the business needs are still met, as well as your own personal needs." Also, be sure to check your company's vacation policy. Hernandez's PTO policy is use-it-or-lose-it before the end of the fiscal year, which for her company is September. Since some countries are already [banning flights through September](#), it wouldn't make sense to hold on to them for a longer trip later. Your policy may come with a different set of rules and restrictions, so read up on how you can use them now and post-pandemic.

Set boundaries for breaks on work days, too

Both Allen and Taylor pointed to [research](#) from before the pandemic and stay-at-home orders were put into place that working from home leads to longer hours. "We're seeing an interesting phenomena where people are actually working more than they were when they were at work in the physical place, because we don't know when to stop," says Taylor. "There's no picking up the kids from daycare or commuting. You just keep going."

Both said to look to schedules mirrored after your workday in the office to provide some guidance. Don't open your computer when you wake up—wait until you would usually be in the office. Take a lunch break. Turn off your computer and mute notifications after work hours. And most importantly? Schedule that day off.

We're reporting on how COVID-19 impacts travel on a daily basis. [Find all of our coronavirus coverage and travel resources here.](#)

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