

Let's not get too ambitious about a `restful' holiday

By Ruth Ostrow

THE first time it happened I was a teenager. I was completing my last year of school and my parents took me away for a couple of weeks to the Gold Coast for a break before the final exams.

I felt fantastic the first day, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, but by the second day I began to experience a shooting pain in my head that made even looking around a chore. By day three it was really bad, with a throbbing in my temples. Despite taking pain-killers, the pain persisted and I found myself unable to do the things I really wanted to do like party, party and party.

I ended up lying on my back in a dark room. I thought it odd that through the worst pressures of my life, I never had a single sneeze, let alone a migraine, but the minute the pressure was off, it happened.

I was told by a local doctor that it is a very common phenomenon -- holiday sickness. The tension and illness we disallow ourselves all year suddenly rises to the surface. It's as if the moment we take off the emotional tourniquet, it erupts like a volcano. This coupled with the changes to diet, sleeping patterns and climate we often experience when we travel, as well as exposure to new germs, can be a sickly combination.

So too, on this last vacation did I surrender to the dreaded lurgy.

Before leaving, I had been working hard to fight off my spring allergies, boosting my immune system with vitamins and anything that I believed would help. I was triumphant and got on the plane feeling fantastic. Within a few days of vacation, the runny nose and sore throat I'd seemingly averted had struck with a vengeance.

But I wasn't the only one. Several friends who were away with me got some ailment or another or became accident prone: one got a stomach bug, another developed a bad cough, another a bad rash, someone else fell over in the rain, someone fell off a bike.

Apparently the incidence of accidents also increases on holiday due not only to the increased adventure aspect, but also to the fact that all year we struggle to be balanced, reliable, in focus. On holidays we drop our guards, we relax, and we tend to topple. There isn't one holiday I remember from childhood where someone didn't fall off something or tread on something.

Being under the weather or wounded was a positive thing for me in that it forced me to finally do the one thing I couldn't do for my health amidst all the pressure and deadlines of trying to get away. In my infirm state I slept more, had more massages, more fresh fruit, and more overall nurturing to aid the process of recovery.

And that's what holidays really are. A time for deep, organic recovery. All year we push ourselves so hard, party hard, live hard, parent and work so hard, that there is little time for a headache, a stubbed toe, a twisted wrist or a full blown sinus attack. Any sign of a sniffle, and we start taking antibiotics or do whatever we must to avoid the process of surrendering to the way we feel.

In the process our adrenal glands work overtime. It's like the phenomenon of athletes who don't know that they are injured until after the game is over. If they damage themselves on the field, nature's pain-killers and euphoria kicks in so they don't feel the sprained ankle or broken arm till the pressure is off. Same with our stressful, ambitious lives.

We just don't know how worn down we are and how much damage we've been doing to our bodies in order to maintain the status quo, until we finally stop.

Although it's a bummer to be ill on vacation, and being forced to sleep through the fun is not pleasant, I honestly believe that ``holiday sickness" can be a blessing in disguise, forcing our bodies to lie down -- to release and repair -- instead of darting about visiting this monument and that city or going to this exotic restaurant and that.

When we approach our holidays with the same ambition we show to our lives back home, we end up with the same exhaustion. Many people return from holidays tired. According to my GP there is no better cure for any ailment than rest, and that is ultimately what our bodies will make us do.

A huge percentage of our daily energy is burned up thinking, planning and by mental activity, let alone normal bodily processes like digestion and getting from one place to place. When we shut our bodies down, we give ourselves a chance to use precious life-force energy on deep recuperation.

So after developing a good relationship with a banana lounge and a book, I return a little sniffily but truly well-rested. Which is probably less the holiday I wanted and more the one I really needed.

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