Italians call it “dolce far niente,” which translates in English to “sweet doing nothing.” And in a culture that is chronically stressed, tired and overworked, science is suggesting that downtime might be just the remedy.

The personal payoff is easy to identify. How wouldn’t your brain and body benefit from going into autopilot occasionally? And there’s also an enormous organizational benefit to encouraging thinkers to power down. Downtime allows for an unconscious sorting through of the disparate elements of our experiences and mental lives; this kind of disconnecting from deliberate, conscious thought has been shown to precede and aid insight. By insight I mean the Aha! Moment—the figuring out the long-sought solution in the shower moment.

In fact, research suggests that the best way to solve a difficult problem is to first address it logically through analysis and information gathering and then distract ourselves from the problem by engaging in an activity that promotes unconscious thinking. What we might dismiss as reverie and distraction might actually be a very necessary precursor of insight in complex problem solving and decision-making.

Often when we think of downtime, we think of activities like hobbies or sports, but in this context, downtime refers to a very specific activity: namely inactivity or at least having no predefined goal. The key is that during downtime our minds wander.

**In Practice**

Next time you’re wrestling with a problem, try a downtime approach. Once you’ve defined the problem to solve and engaged in the necessary information gathering, take a walk. Let your mind wander. You can gently hold your problem in the back of your mind, but try to avoid settling your thoughts on a focal point. Breathe. Use your five senses to explore your surroundings. See what emerges.