

Optimal Leisure Lifestyle: What we need to know

Robert A. Stebbins, Professor Emeritus at the University of Calgary, Canada, tells us what an optimal leisure lifestyle consists of, including finding balance in everyday living

An optimal leisure lifestyle (OLL) consists of deeply fulfilling participation during free time in one or more substantial, absorbing activities known as serious leisure. They are complemented by judicious amounts of casual leisure or project-based leisure or both. People find an OLL by doing leisure activities that individually and in combination, help them realise their human potential (their talents and tastes), leading thereby to an enhanced quality of life and well-being. Nevertheless, the OLL is basically a leisure conception, though one that always has work and non-work obligations in the background as a comparative backdrop.

The dimensions of time, money, and available resources

In addition, the OLL is a contextual phenomenon, where a person's diverse work, leisure, and obligatory non-work activities are coordinated along, among others, the dimensions of time, money, and available resources. Though it is individual people who experience this lifestyle, it is inevitably embedded in several wider contexts influenced as it is by certain organisations, groups, networks, social arrangements, and cultural patterns. Some of the latter may also have deep roots in history.

Moreover, such structural and cultural phenomena can, depending on circumstances, constrain or facilitate the pursuit of these activities. A key issue for many people is finding an agreeable lifestyle, a highly personal goal to be sure. Nevertheless, the quest for this state entails in the most general sense finding the most acceptable balance possible among the component activities that comprise an OLL. Yet, for all this talk about large-scale context, the effort and perseverance needed to find it stand out as critical micro processes here. The idea of the OLL really does span all contextual levels.

Finding balance in lifestyle

What does lifestyle balance mean, when applied to everyday living? In common sense, it seems to refer to "spending more time with family," or more broadly, having more leisure time as in "getting a life," gaining some measure of freedom from unpleasant obligations expressed as escaping the "rat race," and other adaptive strategies. In the leisure sciences, however, the answer to this question is much subtler: people typically find balance in the domains of work, leisure, and non-work obligation by crafting a lifestyle that encompasses these three and is thereby endowed with a substantial appeal of its own.

Everyone who is working has some kind of lifestyle bridging these domains. But it is also true that many people have activities in their lifestyles they would sooner be free of? How, then, to generate an appealing, balanced lifestyle spanning the three domains? Achieving this leads to Aristotle's idea of the "good life," (1) often reached when people abandon certain irritations in their present lifestyle.

In broadest terms, finding an appealing lifestyle hinges on discretionary time commitment. More particularly it hinges, in part, on committing more hours to the activities one likes most while subtracting hours from those one likes less or flatly dislikes. Understandably, this kind of balancing is easiest to accomplish in the domain of leisure, whereby definition people stay away from unappealing activities.

Even here, however, some activities are more difficult than others to abandon on a whim. So, the young male can, at the last moment, tell his friends that the weekend "pub crawl" no longer excites him and that, from thereon, they may continue their escapades without him. But the actress, having grown tired of community theatre as performed in her city, can only comfortably announce that, next season, she will be unavailable for roles. She cannot, without great social cost, quit midway through preparation for an upcoming play in terms of her role in it, for to do so would leave many associates in a lurch and spoil immensely their serious leisure. In these examples, such meso-level ties to other sets of people who act to constrain the individual's behaviour.

Redeploying commitments

So, an appealing, balanced lifestyle may be reached, in part, by tinkering with one's pattern of leisure activities, spending more time in some while cutting back time spent in others. But, if someone caught in a poorly balanced lifestyle has little free time, then a solution to this problem must be found by redeploying commitments in the other two domains. In one sense, anyway, decisions about which activities to commit less time to in these areas of life are more subtle and difficult than in the domain of leisure. For the first two domains are loaded with obligations that may, at least at first glance, appear absolutely fixed – the constraints of the meso and macro contexts loom large at this point.

Thus, people enjoying an optimal leisure lifestyle are usually conscious of other appealing casual, serious, and project-based leisure activities, but nonetheless they are sufficiently satisfied with their present set to resist abandoning them or adding others. Still, this might well change in the future, as an activity loses its appeal, Homo Otiosus (leisure man) loses his ability to engage in it, or new activities gain priority. From what I have observed in my own research, people with OLLs seem to sense that, at a given point in time, if they try to do too much, they will force a hectic routine on themselves, risk diluting their leisure, and thereby become unable to participate as fully as they would like in what they are passionate about.

The role of leisure education

Leisure education plays an outsized role here. Lacking instruction or reading on the nature and types of serious, casual, and project-based leisure, most people are unlikely to find the information they need to choose the activities that could make up their OLL. Fortunately, formal instruction in this area is increasingly common, much of it being offered these days through lifestyle courses in continuing education programs or private counselling agencies, while various books now cover in detail this route to the world of leisure. As Henry David Thoreau put it: “The laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day.” (2)

Reference

(1) <https://reasonandmeaning.com/2013/12/19/aristotle-on-the-good-and-meaningful-life/>

(2) <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1211455-the-laboring-man-has-not-leisure-for-a-true-integrity>

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