

New study reveals how much free time you may need to be happier

Feeling overwhelmed by your to-do list can certainly make you unhappy, but new research suggests that more free time might not be the magic elixir many of us dream it could be.

In a new study released last week, researchers analyzed data from two large-scale surveys about how Americans spend their time. Together, the surveys included more than 35,000 respondents.

The researchers found that people with more free time generally had higher levels of subjective well-being — but only up to a point.

People who had up to two hours of free time a day generally reported they felt better than those who'd had less time. But people who had five or more hours of free time a day generally said they felt worse.

So ultimately the free-time "sweet spot" might be two to three hours per day, the findings suggest.

"While too little time is bad, having more time is not always better," said Marissa Sharif, an assistant professor of marketing at The Wharton School and lead author of the paper, in a press release.

Of course, most people know instinctively that being too busy can cause stress. But the new study is not the first to question whether more free time will actually make people as happy as they believe it will. Experts note, for example, that some adults struggle with the "retirement blues," which can be due to a lack of stimulation and structure, among other things.

Part of finding this seemingly elusive "sweet spot" has to do with how people spend the extra time they have, the researchers behind the new study argue.

They conducted several smaller online experiments. In one they asked participants to imagine having 3½ to seven free hours per day. They were asked to imagine spending that time doing "productive" things (like exercising) or to imagine doing "unproductive" activities (like watching TV).

Study participants believed their well-being would suffer if they had a lot of free time during the day — but only if they used it unproductively. Though that experiment was hypothetical, which is one limitation of the new research, it's certainly in line with other research showing that being in a state of "flow" can be good for people's mental health.

In other words, how people use their free time matters, Sharif said.

Of course, what feels "productive" is up to you. If watching two hours of "Real Housewives" in your free time increases your happiness, you should do that. The point of all of this is self-care, not shame.

And even more traditionally productive or purposeful activities can be easy and fun. Engaging in a bit of low-key cardio, like walking, can help burn stress. Free-time activities like knitting, reading, cooking or gaming are also known to put people in a state of flow.

"In cases when people do find themselves with excessive amounts of discretionary time, such as retirement or having left a job," Sharif said, "our results suggest these individuals would benefit from spending their newfound time with purpose."

新研究：空闲时间太多不一定更幸福

被一大堆待办事项淹没自然会让人不开心，但是新研究发现，更多空闲时间可能也不是很多人梦想中的万能灵药。

**elixir** [iˈlɪksər]: n. 灵丹妙药；炼金药；长生不老药

在上周发布的一项新研究中，研究人员分析了关于美国人如何支配时间的两项大型调查数据。这两项调查一共涵盖了逾 3.5 万人。

研究人员发现，空闲时间更多的人一般主观幸福感更强，但也是有限度的。

从受访者的报告来看，每天有长达两小时空闲时间的人通常比那些空闲时间很少的人感觉更幸福。但是每天空闲时间超过五小时的人却感觉更糟。

研究结果表明，“最理想的”空闲时间长度应该是每天两到三小时。

研究报告的首席作者、沃顿商学院市场营销学助理教授玛丽萨·谢里夫在一份新闻稿中写道：“尽管空闲时间太少不好，但是空闲时间太多也不总是好事。”

当然，大多数人凭直觉都知道，太忙会有压力。但是在这项新研究之前，也曾有研究质疑过更多的空闲时间是否真的能让人们如他们所想的那样开心。专家举例称，有些人退休后被忧郁情绪困扰，一部分原因可能就是缺乏刺激和无所事事。

这项新研究认为，看似难以捉摸的“最佳空闲时间长度”与人们如何度过空闲时间有一定关联。

研究人员开展了几项小型的在线实验。在其中一项实验中，他们让参与者想象自己每天拥有 3 个半到 7 小时的空闲时间。他们还让参与者想象自己用这些时间做“有成效”的事情（比如锻炼）或想象自己做“没成效”的事情（比如看电视）。

参与者认为，如果他们用空闲时间来做没有成效的事情，那么空闲时间太多反而会不开心。尽管这一实验基于假想（这也是新研究的一个局限性），但这无疑印证了其他研究的发现，“活动”状态有利于人的心理健康。

谢里夫称，换言之，人们利用空闲时间的方式很重要。

当然，什么事情做起来感觉“有成效”取决于你自己。如果在空闲时间看俩小时的《比弗利娇妻》能让你更快乐，你就去看。做有成效的事只是为了关爱自己，而不是因为怕丢脸。

即使是传统眼光看来有成效或有意义的活动也可以是容易和有趣的。有节制地做一些有氧运动，比如步行，能有助于释放压力。织毛衣、阅读、烹饪或玩游戏，在空闲时间做这类活动也能让人们处于活动状态。

谢里夫表示：“如果有一天人们发现自己的空闲时间太多，比如退休或离职了，我们的研究结果显示，人们将得益于有目的地支配自己新获得的空闲时间。”