

Restoring Balance: Shabbat's Influence on Stress Reduction

By: Prisylla Mutchnik

It's simple to find ourselves drowning in stress as the unrelenting pace of modern life pushes us through endless loops of deadlines, notifications, and constant communication. Imagine a world in which the continuous demands of work and the constant hum of technological devices are replaced with tranquility—a sanctuary that is known as Shabbat. This *halacha* extends beyond a religious commandment; it serves as a hiatus for the mind, body, and soul offering a temporary escape from our perpetual busy lives. Through exploring the physiological implications of observing Shabbat, we begin to understand how this simple *mitzvah* can bring many profound benefits to our overall health.

Despite the initial perception of Shabbat as demanding and constrictive, its ability to promote calm and relaxation might not be immediately apparent. One might assume that adhering to its observance would induce greater stress due to the long list of prohibited activities, which can impede regular daily routines such as eating, transportation, and communication. However, contrary to appearances, this is not the case. The prohibited activities serve as a protective barrier against external stressors that trigger our bodies' stress response.

Stress in America

Stress, a natural part of being human, has a negative impact on our health. Two of the most commonly reported mental health issues are stress and anxiety, and they interact with one another [1]. In its yearly report on the condition of stress in the

United States, the American Psychological Association (2020) defined the problem as a “national mental health crisis”. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) described anxiety as the “disease of stress” [2]. Americans self-report stress as their top concern for their overall health and well-being, citing a variety of issues, including money, relationships, employment, crime, violence, and concern for the future, as major sources of worry [3].

Many Americans reported that technology has enhanced their lives, and over half of adult Americans claimed they could not fathom living without their smartphones. In addition, a great deal of research has documented the detrimental effects of technology use on both mental and physical health. The impact of stress on the health and well-being of American adults was studied by the American Psychological Association's Stress in America™ survey. It revealed that 99% of adults own one or more electronic devices, including televisions. According to survey results, over 80% of Americans are dependent on their devices on a daily basis (86% indicated they check their social media, emails, and texts frequently or constantly) [4].

Their persistent reliance on and commitment to technology was linked to increased levels of stress. Less than one-fifth of Americans (18%) reported that using technology was a very or somewhat major source of stress. Furthermore, 20% of Americans claimed that they were most stressed when technology malfunctioned. Stress levels were higher for people who used technology constantly than for people who used it less

frequently. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represents "a great deal of stress," those who checked their electronics regularly reported an average overall stress level of 5.3. The average reported stress level for non-constant users was 4.4. Employed Americans reported an overall stress level of 6.0 when they continuously checked their work email on non-workdays [4].

Implications of Technological Devices

Concerns over the short- and long-term health risks of radiofrequency radiation exposure have been raised by wireless communication devices such as mobile phones and other handheld phones that use frequencies. Oxidative stress is a biochemical state resulting from an imbalance between reactive oxygen species and antioxidant defenses. Some research showed that oxidative stress resulted from the usage of mobile phones, with oxidant damage to DNA induced by radiofrequency exposure. Numerous processes in the body, including altered heart and brain functions, circadian rhythms, healing, and hormone balance, can be negatively impacted by this kind of stress [5].

Reducing Stress

When dealing with stress, it is often suggested that rest is one of the many ways to help reduce stress and anxiety. Setting aside time for rest can be challenging, though, especially as our regular schedules provide limited opportunity for it. Stress has become a dreaded companion in our hyper-connected world, infiltrating all facets of our lives. According to the American Psychological Association, 76% of adults in

America reported that they experience stress on a regular basis, emphasizing this widespread problem [6].

The concept of Shabbat originated from the Bible, when G-d ceased from work on the Seventh Day of Creation, declaring it holy (Genesis 2:1-3). The central commandment of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-7) is to observe Shabbat. It also serves as a reminder of the freedom that was obtained when G-d freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. To observe Shabbat - *shamor*, in Hebrew - is to let go of all efforts to exert control. The outcome is that you have the opportunity to be present in the immediate world surrounding you. Liberated from your devices, this designated time provides relief from the relentless flow of information coming from every corner of the world, the continuous influx of opinions, updates, and details about other people's lives. Observing Shabbat means truly being present and appreciating the world that was given to us.

Furthermore, according to Rambam, remembering Shabbat serves as a constant reminder of the existence of a Creator. It is considered a *mitzvah*, a religious duty, to remember Shabbat each day to prevent forgetting or confusing it with any other day. By consistently recalling Shabbat, we remain ever-aware of the act of Creation and acknowledge the presence of a Creator in the world. This principle forms the central foundation of belief in God [7].

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, in *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, highlighted the profound significance of Shabbat, asserting that its spiritual power transcends all mundane concerns as it represents the ultimate the

spiritual goal of Creation. According to Rabbi Dessler, a person's connection to Shabbat should be so profound that even if deeply engrossed in important matters upon its arrival, they should feel no desire to dwell on worldly affairs once Shabbat begins. In the face of Shabbat's sacredness, everything else pales in comparison. All efforts throughout the week, he suggests, are merely preparatory for the spiritual climax that is Shabbat. Every facet of Shabbat should distinctly differ from the routine of the week. This encompasses one's engagement, personal needs, and adherence to the laws and customs of Shabbat [7].

Many studies have attempted to find a correlation between this religious custom and positive health benefits. A study examined the perceived benefits of Shabbat observance among Orthodox Jews in the UK and the USA. Thirteen orthodox Jews, seven men and six women, were selected for a purposive sample in New York, USA (n = 4) and London, UK (n = 9). To evaluate the psychological and mental effects of Shabbat, interviews were set up and participants were asked questions. The participants explained that observing Shabbat (which involves refraining from work, handling money, using a cell phone, computer, or transportation, among other prohibited activities) offered not only rest and relaxation but also a strong sense of freedom, improved spirituality, and the chance to reflect on life values. Most people also reported feeling happier than they did on a weekday [8].

Another study at Liberty University explored the effectiveness of a

psychoeducational Shabbat intervention. This quantitative study investigated the effects of weekly Sabbath keeping for mental health testing anxiety, stress, and psychological well-being, using a single-subject multiple baseline research design. A psychoeducational Sabbath-keeping intervention with numerous assessment points during the study was adopted for the eighteen participating subjects. Three cohorts (A, B, or C) were randomly assigned to participants, with the start times of each cohort's intervention varying. At the beginning of the study, baseline measurements were taken for each of the four scales that measure the cognitive and physical characteristics of stress, anxiety, and psychological well-being in participants. For the purpose of secondary personality analysis and its influence on research outcomes, a fifth measure was employed at baseline. At week eight, compared to week one, participants from all three cohorts had overall decreased scores for stress and anxiety. The study's findings suggested a possible link between observing Shabbat and benefits for wellbeing, stress management, and anxiety. Participants were also of varying religions, reducing the bias of Jewish associations with keeping Shabbat. Methods of preventing and treating a range of symptoms associated with psychological discomfort are needed, as the number of adult Americans reporting high levels of stress and anxiety is on the rise. There were encouraging signs in this study that maintaining a regular Shabbat practice could have a beneficial impact on one's mental health [9].

In essence, my journey into observing Shabbat has been a transformative experience, marked by commitment, learning, and profound insights. As I settled into its rhythm, the meaning and significance of Shabbat shifted fundamentally for me. Learning the intricacies of preparing food, mastering the art of hosting, and actively cultivating community to ensure Shabbat is shared and celebrated with others has been instrumental in deepening my connection to this sacred day. The restrictions imposed during Shabbat serve as a protective barrier, separating the ordinary from the sanctified, allowing me to exist fully in the present moment, untethered from the distractions of the outside world. It is when I am able to let go of my striving that I remember Shabbat - zachor. Embracing the opportunity to pause, reflect, and engage in activities that nurture the soul—whether it's prayer, meals, or cherished time with loved ones—has brought immense joy and fulfillment. In times of stress, the arrival of Shabbat has become a welcomed sanctuary, offering comfort and a necessary break from the stresses of daily life. Through the observance of Shabbat, I have discovered the enduring value of our rituals and commandments, their significance gradually revealed over time. This sacred union between the Jewish people and the seventh day provides a reliable foundation, a sheltering presence that strengthens and sustains, week after week, year after year.

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