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The Pauses That Refresh Us

By Abigail Trafford
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To nap or to shop? Neither? Both? Those are questions for many older men and women. It turns out that 40 percent of people 65 and older say they take a daily nap -- and a similar percentage goes shopping every day, according to a recent [survey by the Pew Research Center](#).

Which is healthier? Better for the country? In the Bush years of expansion, shopping was a patriotic duty. In the Obama era of restraint, napping can be a patriotic way to avoid credit-card debt.

Napping and shopping are often stereotyped as being narcissistic and indulgent. But both, it seems, have been getting a medical makeover.

Instead of a sign of sloth, napping can be viewed as a pain-free form of regenerative exercise. The nap allows the body to gain strength to get through the afternoon slump and make the most of the rest of the day.

The nap may even improve mental performance and mood. At the Laboratory of Human Chronobiology at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, scientists did a small study of normal sleepers 55 to 85 years old and found evidence that those who took a nap did better on arithmetic, reaction-time and other tests than those who slogged through the afternoon without a little doze. The benefits of the "smart nap" lasted to the following day. Researchers point out that people older than 60 tend to sleep two hours less a night than younger men and women. So the nap would seem to be a healthful supplement for anyone in the AARP generation.

Besides, the high and mighty have always napped: Napoleon Bonaparte, Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein. For those who still have a desk in executive suites, the 20-minute "power nap" reigns as a symbol of success, a caffeine-free alternative to a cup of coffee.

Overall, about one-third of adults in the United States are nappers, according to a Pew follow-up analysis of 1,488 adults that was released last week. Those surveyed were asked if they had taken a nap in the previous 24 hours (an indication of daily activity), Pew researchers note. The big nappers in the report are those 80 and older, with more than half getting a little midday shut-eye. And among adults of all ages, African Americans are more likely to nap than whites or Hispanics.

There are obvious downsides to excessive napping: Staying in bed for long periods is associated with depression, sleep disorders and other medical conditions. The healthful nap, researchers point out, is between 15 and 30 minutes. It's a pause that refreshes.

Meanwhile, 40 percent of older people go shopping daily, according to the Pew report. It's not clear how

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many people both shop and nap, but there is probably some overlap.

The health benefits of shopping are intuitive. You get exercise by walking to the village square, or you drive to a mall and walk through acres of boutiques and department stores. There's mental stimulus in comparing prices in closeout sales.

But the super health bonus of shopping is social: You meet people. A new book -- "Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter . . . But Really Do" (W.W. Norton) -- explores the importance of the ordinary, limited, seemingly inconsequential relationships with people we meet every day in the grocery store, at the post office, at the mall or in the workplace. They are not friends, but they are essential connections.

"They are as vital to our well-being, growth, and day-to-day existence as family and close friends," write the authors, Melinda Blau and Karen L. Fingerma. Certain stores are warm, friendly places, a safe environment in which to complain about Congress or discuss a marital problem. The pharmacist, the hairdresser, the salesman at Home Depot become familiar faces; 20 minutes go by in conversation.

Research shows that social engagement (involvement with others) is a key predictor of health and well-being as people get older. Your intimate circle of family and friends is the first line of emotional defense. But "consequential strangers" also play a significant role. They are close by and always accessible: All you have to do is go out and . . . shop.

Shopping, like napping, can be good for your health, with older folks setting the pace for younger generations. The Pew survey finds that the most frequent shoppers in the population are those age 50 to 69. And after age 50, men out-shop women!

It would make a nice cartoon in the gender wars. While she takes a nap, he does the shopping. Something to look forward to in the golden years.

Comments: mytime@washpost.com.

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