

The Paradox of Idleness

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Would Sisyphus have been happier just sitting in a jail cell, twiddling his thumbs? After all, the punishment Zeus meted out to him was nothing more than make-work: rolling that boulder up the hill again and again and again, without purpose or sense of accomplishment. It couldn't have been very satisfying. What if Zeus had softened, and granted him a reprieve—and eternal idleness?

An interesting new study suggests that the mythical prisoner would not have liked it in the least. Indeed he would have longed for his days of rock pushing. Make-work may be pointless and demeaning, but at least it's work; it's an activity. And people prefer activity—even when they're forced into it—to sitting around with nothing to do.

That's the conclusion of University of Chicago psychologist Christopher Hsee, who has been exploring idleness in the laboratory. In one experiment, for example, he had volunteers complete part one of a two-part task. They had to wait a short time before beginning part two, and Hsee gave them two options: They could drop off their work nearby and then wait, or they could drop it at a distant location that required a short stroll. They would receive a piece of milk chocolate, regardless of which option they chose.

Most people chose to stay put. They really had no incentive to walk, so they sat and waited. But here's the interesting part: If Hsee offered different incentives—a milk chocolate nearby and a dark chocolate if they strolled—most of the volunteers took a walk. Which chocolate was where didn't matter; they switched them around. Hsee was simply offering them the flimsiest of reasons to opt for activity over idleness—and they grabbed it. What's more, those who strolled during the down-time reported being much happier afterward than those who sat around.

This is paradoxical. People choose idleness if activity seems pointless, yet they're less happy when they do sit around. And it's not that people don't know this in advance. They do anticipate that being active will be more satisfying, but they apparently are swayed by wanting to make a reasonable choice—not an emotional one. They would feel foolish if they walked just to walk.

Hsee ran another version of this experiment, but this time he eliminated choice. That is, some volunteers were ordered to walk to the faraway location and back, while others were told to sit and wait. The results? [As reported on-line this week](#) in the journal *Psychological Science*, those who walked—even though they were forced to do so—were happier than those who sat waiting.

So people don't always choose what's best for them. No shock there. But why this confusion over business and idleness? Hsee believes it is rooted in human evolution. Idleness made a great deal of sense for our ancient ancestors, because conserving energy was crucial to survival. We no longer have the same survival demands, so we're left with a lot of excess energy—which we like to spend in activity, business. Yet that idleness bias still lingers way down deep. Hence the mixed feelings.

Idleness is not always a bad thing. And being busy isn't always productive, and indeed can be unsavory. Remember that Sisyphus was a real bad apple—scheming, deceitful, murderous. We wouldn't want him hanging around with lots of time on his hands. That's what Zeus concluded—and he found something to keep him occupied.

Excerpts from “We’re Only Human” appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and *Scientific American Mind*. Wray Herbert’s new book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind’s Hard-Wired Habits*, [will be published in September by Crown](#).