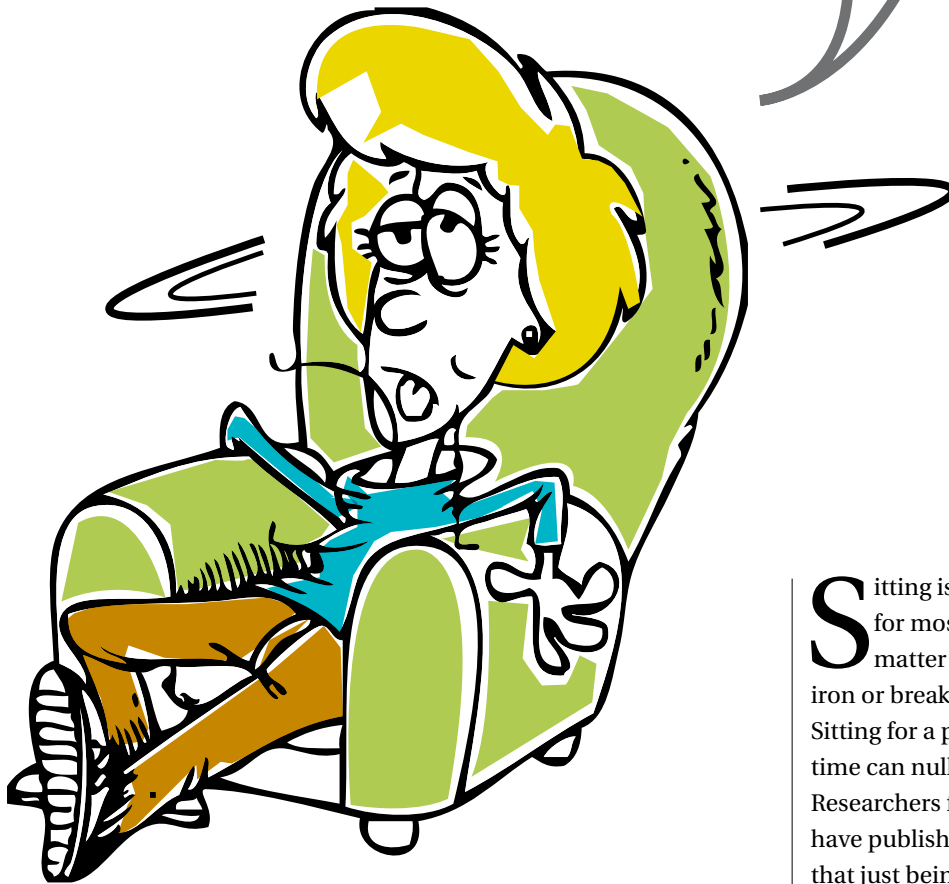


IT'S TIME YOU TOOK A 'HEALTHY' BREAK!



In this digital age, our lifestyles have become mostly sedentary. But by adopting a few best practices and IT tools, professionals can avoid the health hazards linked to working on computers. Read on...

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The author has been writing software for a living and has been a free and open source software enthusiast for quite a few years now. He has successfully overcome the beginnings of an RSI attack and some back aches, using tools such as Workrave.

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Sitting is the new health hazard for most professionals. It doesn't matter if you pump heavy iron or break sweat on a treadmill. Sitting for a prolonged period of time can nullify all that gym activity. Researchers from around the world have published results that indicate that just being active for an hour in the day isn't keeping us healthy.

A recent report in the Lancet (<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/Obesity-on-the-rise-in-India-says-Lancet/710062>) talks about the growing obesity levels among Indians (and, indeed, across other developing nations). It recommends taking immediate steps to reverse the rising obesity trend. It's not just the unhealthy diet that's contributing to

Prolonged hours of being seated at a desk is the leading cause of diseases. Thankfully for us, we can use technology to beat these technology-induced ills.

this increase, it's also the lifestyle we now lead.

People in desk jobs are used to sitting in front of the computer all day long. But our bodies weren't built for this kind of a routine. Our ancestors were on the move—all the time. We haven't yet adapted to a sedentary lifestyle and that's causing us problems—back aches, increasing waist lines and gradual knee pain. Prolonged hours of being seated at a desk is the leading cause of diseases. If you Google the words 'sitting health' and launch a search to read up on the research done in the field, you will be surprised and worried by the gloomy conclusions of the researchers.

The gifts of the digital age! RSI (Repeated Stress Injury) incidents are on the rise as well. The wrists can take being contorted in the unnatural QWERTY position for a while—but then they start complaining. The hands continuously resting unnaturally on keyboards and handling mice, has resulted in harming the wrists, in the long term.

Staring straight into monitors or television sets for hours on end invite eyesight problems. There's very little shifting of focus that takes place, causing myopia. We sometimes get so engrossed in the virtual world that many people do not even realise that they're not blinking—leading to dry eyes, and subsequently, eye irritation.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the symptoms start showing up only much

A few user-level best IT practices

- Maintain a good posture: keep a straight back
- The Dvorak layout for keyboards causes much less strain on the fingers for touch-typists. One can use it on a QWERTY keyboard as well since it's a software setting. The Dvorak layout is an alternative arrangement of keys on the keyboard. QWERTY was designed to type efficiently on a typewriter. Dvorak is designed to be used for a computer, where one doesn't have to depress each key to get the letter to be displayed on the screen. It's designed for touch-typing and ensures all the fingers are exercised equally (according to research).
- Take frequent short and long breaks
- Keep taking your eyes off the monitor every short break and try focusing on various objects
- Remember to blink your eyes
- Take your hands off the keyboard and mouse often and stretch them
- Stretch various joints: wrists, shoulders, fingers, elbows
- Just getting up and standing is better than sitting for long periods
- Walk around to get the blood circulation going

for us, we can use technology to beat these technology-induced ills.

IT tools that can help

Let's explore two free and open source software programs, namely Workrave (<http://www.workrave.org>) and RSIBreak (<http://www.rsibreak.org>), which may help keep today's professionals agile and physically fit. Both have a similar aim, i.e., prompting you to take breaks. There are a few implementation and feature differences between both these programs, but for the most part, both are great at what they do.

Both programs can be downloaded and installed on your Windows or Linux computers for free.

Workrave: The software has three timers: one for a micro break, one for a rest break and one for the daily limit. By default, the micro break is scheduled every three minutes for a duration of 30 seconds. The rest break is scheduled every 10 minutes for a duration of 45 seconds. The daily limit is set to a working time of eight hours.



after the problems have started. But it's never too late to correct your posture and ensure some good health in the future.

Experts suggest taking your eyes off the monitor every once in a while, and shifting our focus on to distant objects. Getting up once every few minutes, to take a brief walk is also recommended. This may sound daunting. Who's to monitor how many minutes have passed since the last break? How is one to remember when the next break should be taken? Thankfully

All these settings are configurable. Each timer can also be turned off.

A nifty feature of Workrave, which RSIBreak lacks, is the exercises that are recommended at each rest break. 'Ms. Workrave', a character that guides you in performing some simple stretches, is a nice touch. Included in the program are eye, neck and finger exercises, besides a few stretches. At the break, you are also recommended to get up from your desk and walk away from the computer.

Another nifty feature that Workrave offers is support for one



Workrave recommends exercises at each rest break

user and multiple computers. For example, if you have a laptop and a workstation, install Workrave on both. You will be surprised to see that both the Workrave applications start communicating with each other, if both systems are networked. So, when working on your laptop, you'll still get alerted about the breaks that you'd configured on your desktop, and vice versa. The program synchronises the timers across both machines, so that you don't get annoyed by extra breaks. This also ensures the daily usage limit is not exceeded in spite of working on multiple computers. Very useful indeed!

Workrave has audio as well as visual cues to make the user take a break. When the notification dialogue box appears, alerting the user that a break is imminent in the next 20 seconds, it displays a happy face when the user stops working. If, however, the activity continues, a sad face is shown! This gives it a nice human touch—taking breaks might result in breaking of a train of thought, but it's also going to improve your health. If the activity isn't stopped in time, the break gets automatically postponed.

Investing a few minutes daily to improve your muscle activity and blood flow is going to help you in the long run.

By default, Workrave comes with a three-minute interval between micro breaks, which pass very quickly. Someone with a really bad condition of RSI or back ache may require to take micro breaks more frequently. But if your problem is not so acute, you can up the micro break timer to five minutes while keeping the rest break timer to one hour.

Workrave lets users skip or postpone a break. How long a break can be postponed for is configurable as well, and there are different default settings for the type of break you want to be prompted for. One can also take a rest break while prompted for a micro break.

The timers can be suspended as well—for example, when doing a presentation, by inhibiting the break prompts.

RSIBreak: This software has two timers, one for a short break and the other for a long break, similar to Workrave's micro break and rest



break, respectively. There are a few minor differences in the way breaks are handled by the two programs. One can configure RSIBreak to block the entire screen and show a picture, or have a pop-up dialogue box to remind you to take a break. The break can be skipped, or you can lock the screen by pressing a button and taking a longer break. Other than a few minor differences and the absence of the exercises, other features in the RSIBreak program are similar to Workrave.

So, should you take these breaks?

It's really easy to take the micro breaks. 30 seconds of just staring away from the monitor, out of the window, or standing up and loosening a few muscles – that isn't difficult to do at all. And that is unlikely to break any train of thought. If you are really, really engrossed in something, you can just hit the 'skip' or 'postpone' button, especially when you are reading something important. When writing, just continue writing and that will automatically postpone the break.

The rest break, on the other hand, can get in the way at times. A five-minute break—a break to perform the default three exercises that are suggested and the walk around the office, however, can break your concentration. So, if you are not ready to take these breaks, you can postpone them. You can take the rest break by accessing the menu or by waiting for the rest break prompt to appear once again (which comes right after the postponement timer goes off, which is at a default of three minutes). The rest break is a good way to gather your thoughts and go back

Statistics

Both the programs offer some statistics on their usage: Workrave has the number of breaks taken, number of breaks skipped, number of breaks postponed and the number of break prompts presented. It also maintains statistics related to your activity: the number of



keystrokes per day, the number of mouse clicks and the distance the mouse pointer traveled per day.

RSIBreak, on the other hand, has statistics for the total activity time, total idle time, total short breaks taken, number of skipped short breaks (both, user-

skipped as well as those missed due to the computer being idle), and similar stats for the long break.



Screenshot that shows how RSIBreak can be configured for setting breaks

says: “For the first couple of days, I found the breaks to be an annoyance – I don’t like being disturbed when I’m in the middle of something, to the extent that I permanently disable all sorts of notifications, be it new mail arrivals, instant messages, etc. So pestering me to take a break every now and then isn’t really the way to earn my approval. But I bore with the annoyance keeping in mind the benefits. And I’m glad I did. I’m now not irritated by the break prompts. In fact, I have now started expecting them. The back ache that had developed last month is all gone now.”

Investing a few minutes daily to improve your muscle activity and blood flow is going to help you in the long run. We have software solutions to help us lead a healthier life. Let’s now just be kind and respectful to ourselves. Give yourself a break – literally! ■

“For the first couple of days, I found the breaks to be an annoyance... but now I'm not irritated by the break prompts. In fact, I have now started expecting them. The back ache that had developed last month is all gone now.”

Sachin Gupta, a chartered accountant running his own firm in New Delhi

to work, refreshed. These breaks may not necessarily be a distraction, but rather, an opportunity to recoup and re-set your focus.

The micro break is a great time to sip some water, look around the work place, or fill a water bottle. The rest break can be used to wash your face, read some news articles off a newspaper, make a phone call, clear the mind of distractions and focus on the problem at hand, or to chat with a colleague.

Sharing his experience with the tool, Sachin Gupta, a chartered accountant running his own firm in New Delhi,

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