The Rejuvenating Power of Rest
by Matthew Edlund, M.D.

Rest is the original transformative technology. Through rest we rebuild, rewire and renew ourselves - literally.

The process is fast. The skin on your face is replaced in two weeks. Gut lining cells take two days. And that’s complete replacement.

Partial rebuilding is even faster. A recent article in the New York Times looked at autophagy, how cells internally recycle. Heart cells may last 50 years, but their subcellular innards are functionally replaced in three days. Those proteins pumping away may last thirty or 60 minutes before they’re dumped, cut up and made into something else. In the ways that matter you’re getting a new heart in three days - a process that takes place during rest.

So why does rest get so little respect? Why do people resist getting enough sleep? Is it because a Calvinist culture thinks rest is laziness? Or is it that we don’t really know what rest does?

When I ask people what rest is, they say sleep or sitting in front of a television set - passive rest. They have no idea that rest can and should be active, goal directed and conscious, rebuilding your body and your mind as you require. There’s physical rest, mental rest, social rest, and spiritual rest, all of which can provide pleasure and joy throughout the day and night.

And for passive rest, there’s the magic of sleep.

Sleep as Music

Humans are profoundly rhythmic. It’s the main way we communicate, through both language and music. It’s also a major way our cells understand each other. DNA’s codiscoverer Francis Crick thought human consciousness began when brain cells fired together in unison, 40 times a second.

Sleep is a large part of life’s music, but because we generally don’t recall what we do in sleep, we don’t think much happens. Plenty happens. If we did remember them, we might consider the different phases of sleep as whole new sets of consciousness.

In light sleep, the boundaries between consciousness and rest blur. Many an airline pilot or train driver falls asleep and never knows it, until there’s an accident of the kind that happened to Arianna. In deep sleep, we redo the acts and motions of the day, replaying our brain circuitry with these reenactments. In REM sleep, we lose temperature control, in that way becoming like infants while our brains soar with the creativity and power of
dreams.

In sleep, we grow new brain cells. In sleep we lay down and rewire memories. No sleep, no new brain cells.

And our reworked brains are literally different when we wake up, sort of like those science fiction stories where people awaken each day a whole new person. Every night we have rewired, rebuilt, reset, reconstructed, and redone our brains.

The process is fully musical. It starts and stops to the rhythm of our 24 hour cycles, which also help control the ups and downs of our days. We’re not machines. Our computers and cars don’t care if it’s 4 p.m. or 4 a.m. - we do. And our alertness and pleasure, our capacities and worries, cycle throughout those 24 hours.

Because it’s as the Romans said, time rules life. Rest is the invisible part of our time, the part that rebuilds and remakes us every day.