

The Hidden Joy of Waiting In Line by Carolyn Gregoire

Americans spend an estimated 37 billion hours waiting in line each year, much to our individual and collective distaste. Few things inspire as much universal frustration and ire as long queues and lengthy wait times -- many of us even struggle to wait for a sluggish web browser to load.

In fact, according to computer scientist Ramesh Sitaraman, Internet users may be a particularly impatient bunch. His research has found that we're willing to be patient, on average, for two seconds while waiting for an online video to load.

"After five seconds, the abandonment rate is 25 percent," Sitaraman told the Boston Globe. "When you get to 10 seconds, half are gone."

We want it all, and we want it now -- which is why we've created apps to zap as much wait-time as humanly possible from mundane daily tasks like food delivery, transportation and paying bills (and even arenas of greater import, like dating). We devour articles with time-saving "life hacks" to shave 30 seconds here and five minutes there off of the day's drudgery.

So why do we hate waiting so much? According to M.I.T. operations researcher and line expert Richard Larson, occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time, so when we're standing in a long line or in a doctor's office waiting room, the time does feel as if it's dragging on. Waiting can provoke impatience, stress and anxiety, and in turn, anxiety also makes waits seem longer.

"The dominant cost of waiting is an emotional one: stress, boredom, that nagging sensation that one's life is slipping away," Alex Stone wrote in the New York Times in 2012.

But while waiting in line may be, to some extent, innately annoying, there's no question that our lifestyles of constant busyness, multitasking, and information overload have made it even more difficult for us to tolerate idle time. And of course, mobile devices and wifi have made it possible to avoid idle time almost altogether. We've become accustomed to instant gratification, and any less-than-stimulating situation invites us to immediately whip out our phones in order to keep our brains occupied. This need for instant gratification and loss of patience is indeed a negative side effect of hyperconnectivity, according to Pew Center research.

Most of us would like to have more peace and stillness in our lives, and yet we don't make use of life's many daily opportunities to just be still and practice patience. No

opportunity is better than when we're waiting -- when we so often whip out our phones and busy ourselves with texts, emails, Candy Crush, Spotify or Twitter. But what if we welcomed these idle, luxuriously long in-between moments as opportunities to simply wait?

In Japanese, there is a concept known as *ma*, which refers to a gap, pause or negative space between things. The term is generally used in the context of the zen aesthetic, but it's also a useful construct when it comes to how we think of spending our time. We can use life's inevitable waiting periods as moments of *ma* -- ways to create still points in our constantly turning worlds.

Next time you find yourself waiting in line, try making your wait a little more mindful, and see how it makes you feel. Once the twitch of your hand reaching down for your phone has stopped, you might actually enjoy a moment of relaxation.

Here are nine things to do while you're waiting that don't involve mindlessly checking your phone:

- Smile at a stranger
- Practice a "sights and sounds" meditation, clearing your thoughts and simply directing your full awareness the visual and auditory stimuli in your present environment.
- Let someone who's in a rush cut in front of you.
- Make a mental list of things you're grateful for.
- Take some deep breaths.
- Silently repeat a mantra for inner piece.
- Daydream.
- Send a kind thought to someone you love.
- Read a book