



Rhode Island Behavioral Health Training

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Seasonal Rhythms of Rest

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Today's world is often fueled by productivity culture and the idea that rest is something we must "earn." A look at nature's cyclical rhythms tells us that this is not true: rest is needed, and rest is natural. Looking at various forms of nature's pauses and renewals helps us see that rest is not a failure or an interruption. Instead, it is a natural, biological, and emotional necessity. In the natural world, rest takes on many forms depending on the seasons and the lifeforms experiencing them. We can learn a great deal about the world and ourselves if we allow ourselves and our rest to similarly adapt. Here are four seasonal forms of rest we can reflect on for our lives.

Hibernation: Extended Winter Rest

As we transition from winter to spring, it is easy to reflect on winter's traditional form of rest in nature: hibernation. Hibernation is a prolonged dormant state experienced by plants and animals during cold periods or times of resource scarcity. For many creatures, hibernation is protective and, beyond rest, offers an essential period of recovery. Rather than rushing ourselves through our winter seasons, we can allow ourselves time to experience deeper recovery through rest as we preserve our personal and environmental resources.

Aestivation: Heat-Based Rest

Aestivation is a form of rest marked by dormancy in times of extreme heat or dryness. Just as many warm-blooded creatures experience hibernation in times of extreme cold or food scarcity, many cold-blooded creatures experience aestivation in times of extreme heat, drought, and the lack of water. Similarly, while many people associate an additional need, or even “permission,” for rest with winter, we see through nature that some people may experience the need for extended rest in summer. Creatures that engage in aestivation may experience overstimulation or crisis. Aestivation reminds us that sometimes rest is less about experiencing fatigue and more about shielding ourselves from the world’s intensity.

Brumation: Slow, Quiet Winter Rest

While hibernation is a state of deep dormancy experienced mostly by warm-blooded animals, brumation is a state of dormancy experienced by reptiles and amphibians to survive cold. Unlike the deep sleep of hibernation, animals experiencing brumation remain partially aware and engage in occasional activity. As humans, we can remind ourselves that it is okay to experience periods where we may not be fully “on” but still gently engaging with life. We can give ourselves permission to slow down and function at a slower pace without feeling dysfunctional. Embracing a slower, quieter period in our lives—in winter or any season—can help us avoid burnout and improve our overall wellness.

Torpor – Short-Term, Daily Rest

While some forms of rest are associated with particular seasons, torpor is uniquely capable of being experienced on a daily basis. Hummingbirds offer an example of daily torpor; due to their high metabolisms, they reduce their heart rates and body temperatures every night. Other animals that experience daily torpor include cactus mice, koalas, and sloths. Compared to human behavioral health, we often experience moments when we need to briefly withdraw, allow ourselves extra quiet, or give ourselves permission for reduced outputs to sustain us. Torpor allows us to see short pauses in our days not as avoidance, but as regulation and time to heal.

Of course, it is important to recognize that while humans have rhythms similar to what we see in nature, they are in practice much different than the forms of rest outlined above. What these natural forms of rest help us remember is that rest is natural and important for us to survive and thrive.

As we honor seasonal rest and the patterns we see in our own lives, we can use the examples of nature to guide us toward renewal, recovery, and healing. We can ask ourselves what kind of rest our bodies or minds need right now. From torpor, we can learn to take short breaks, enjoy quiet moments, and step away from the things that overstimulate our minds, bodies, and emotions. From hibernation, we can learn to take time off, reduce commitments, and prioritize our recovery. From aestivation, we can learn to set boundaries, limit our exposure to stressors, and recognize when we are at risk of overload and burnout. From brumation, we can learn to do less at a gentler pace and let go of the pressure to perform. Putting them all together, we remember that different seasons of life call for different kinds of care. As we remember this, we can also learn to give ourselves and each other permission and grace to rest.