

# How being alone may be the key to rest

By Claudia Hammond BBC Radio 4



Thinkstock

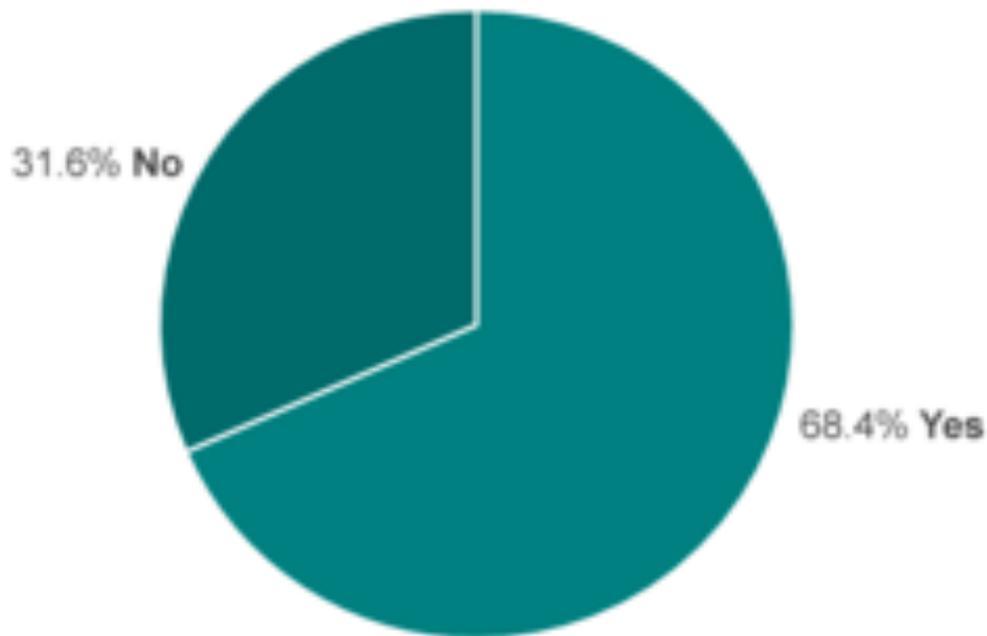
**How much rest do we think we need, who is getting the most, and what are the most restful activities? The results of the world's largest survey on rest indicate that to feel truly rested, a lot of us want to be alone.**

Last November an online survey called The Rest Test was launched to investigate what rest means to different people, how they like to rest and whether there is a link between rest and well-being. The results are now in and the analysis has begun.

Rest sounds easy to define, but turns out to be far from straightforward. Does it refer to a rested mind or a rested body? Actually, it depends. For some, the mind can't rest unless the body is at rest. For others it is the opposite. It is the tiring out of the body through vigorous exercise that allows the mind to rest - 16% of people said they find exercise restful.

Altogether, 18,000 people from 134 countries made time to take part in what was quite a lengthy survey devised by Hubbub - an international group of academics, artists, poets, and mental health experts - showing perhaps what a pressing issue rest is in the modern world.

Would you like more rest?



Source: The Rest Test, Hubbub at the Wellcome Collection



Just over two-thirds of respondents said they would like more rest. Almost a third thought they needed more rest than the average person, while 10% thought they needed less than average.

One question asked people how much they had rested the previous day, leaving them free to define rest in any way they wanted to. The average was three hours and six minutes.

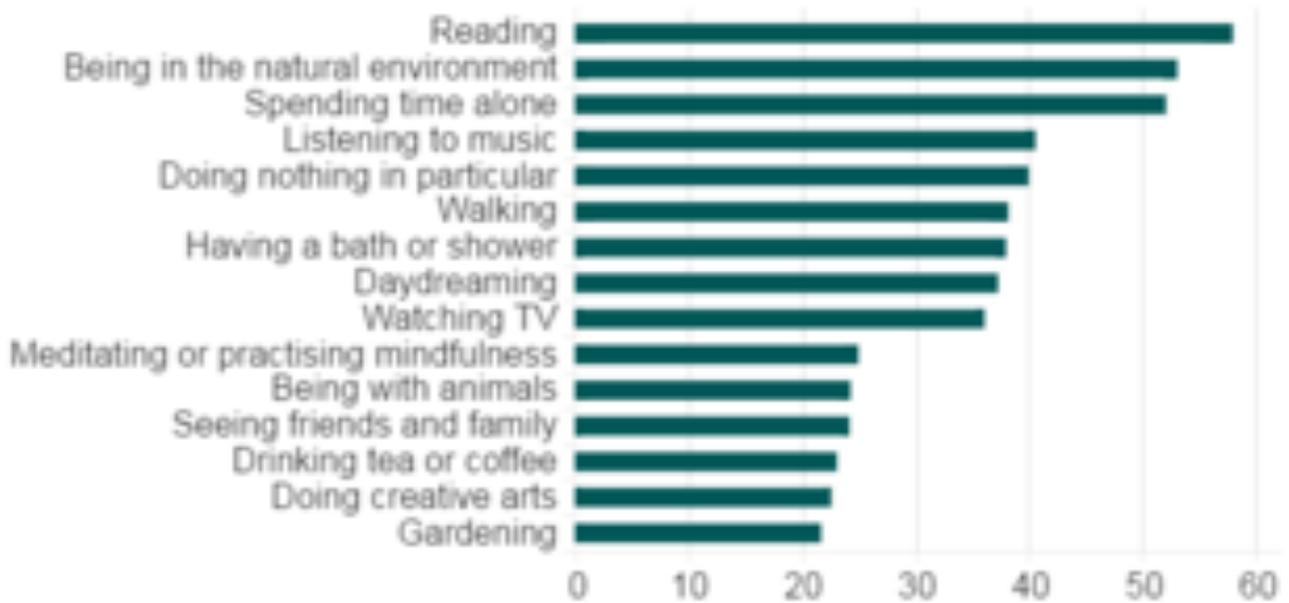
Another gave people a long list of activities, asking them to rank the three most restful - and the results were unexpected.

Reading came out as the clear winner, followed by being in the natural environment, being on your own, listening to music and doing nothing in particular.

What is striking is that all these are activities often done alone.

## Top restful activities

■ % of people choosing each activity as one of three choices



Source: The Rest Test, Hubbub at the Wellcome Collection



Could it be that what we really want, in order to rest, is respite from other people?

Seeing friends and family, chatting or drinking socially all come much lower down the list. This doesn't mean that the respondents don't like socialising, but that they don't consider it to be particularly restful.

Interestingly, this applies both in the case of extroverts - sometimes defined as people who gain energy from being around others - and introverts, who find other people draining. Extroverts do place chatting and socialising a little higher up the chart, but still they are beaten by solitary activities.

We need to remember, of course, that choosing to be alone is very different from enforced loneliness.

## The Rest Test



Thinkstock

- The Rest Test is a collaboration between BBC Radio 4 and the Wellcome Collection's researchers in residence, [Hubbub](#)
- Hubbub is an international collective led by Durham University, comprising scientists, artists, poets, humanities researchers, mental health experts and social scientists - among them the BBC's Claudia Hammond, presenter of [All in the Mind](#)
- Some 18,000 people from 134 countries took the survey - they were self-selecting, not randomly chosen
- The biggest survey of rest before this was a fraction of the size, based on data from little more than 1,000 people.

The reason people want to be alone might be explained by the answers people gave when they were asked what is going on in their minds while they do different activities.

"People said that when they were on their own mostly they were focused on how they were feeling, so on their body or their emotions," says Ben Alderson-Day, a psychologist from the University of Durham, who co-

wrote the survey.

The idea that when people are alone they are mentally talking to themselves is only partly true, it seems.

"People said they were only talking to themselves in their head 30% of the time," says Alderson-Day.

Men were more likely to say they get less rest than the average person - but actually reported getting 10 minutes more rest than women, on average, the day before taking the survey

"There is a hint that when you're on your own, as well as switching off from other people, you get the chance to switch off from your own inner monologue as well."

But just because we're on our own doing nothing, that doesn't mean the brain is resting. Neuroscientists used to think that the brain was less active whenever we stopped concentrating on a task, but late in the 20th Century studies using brain scanners threw up some curious findings and they realised they had got it wrong.

When we are at rest, supposedly doing nothing, our minds have a tendency to wander and [our brains are in fact busier when we're not concentrating on a task](#), than when we are.

These days it's common to hear the complaint that rest is hard to find. So what if we don't have enough time to do these restful activities? Does it matter?

Possibly.

**Find out more**



Getty Images

- You can hear more on the results in [The Anatomy of Rest](#) on BBC Radio 4 - [listen online here](#)
- [The 10 most restful activities](#)
- A free exhibition, [Rest & its discontents](#), will be held at Mile End Art Pavilion in London from 30 September to 30 October
- Hubbub's other work on rest, [The Restless Compendium](#), is free to download from 27 September

In the Rest Test people who had fewer hours of rest the previous day score lower on a well-being scale.

In fact people who don't feel in need of more rest have well-being scores twice as high as those who feel they need more rest. This suggests that the perception of rest matters, as well as the reality. If we don't feel rested, our well-being is lower.

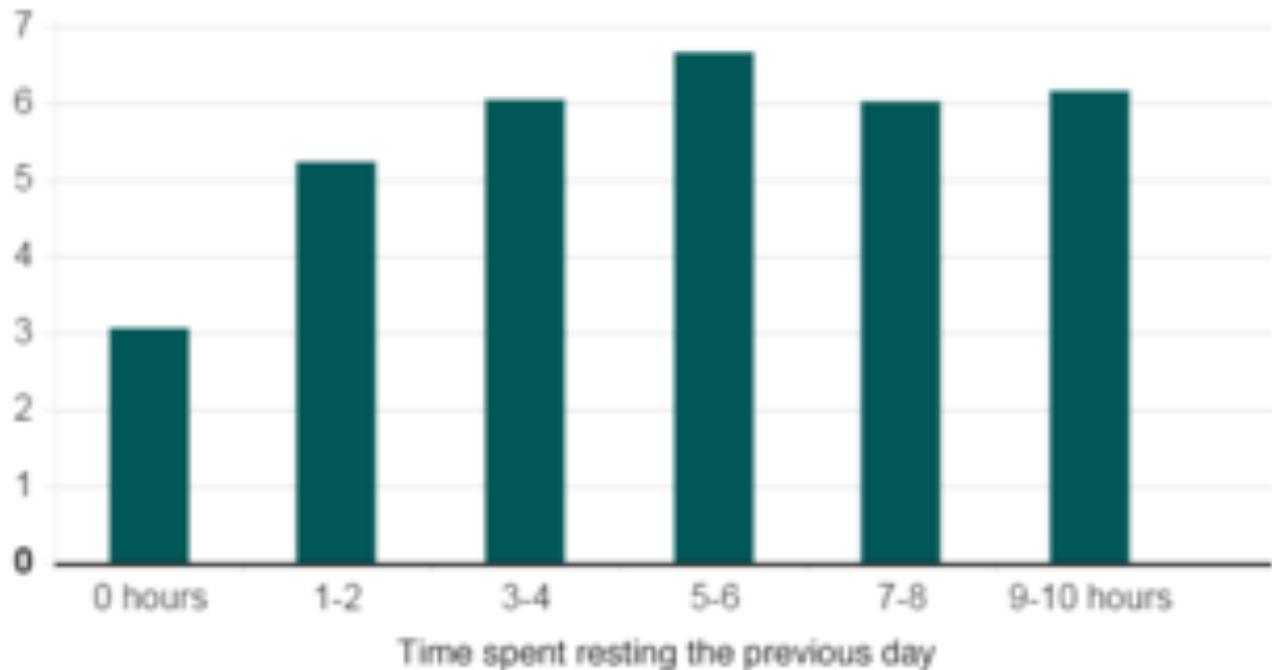
People with the highest well-being scores rested on average for between five and six hours the previous day. If they had more rest than this, their scores began to dip slightly. Might this suggest that enforced rest - if you are unemployed, perhaps, or unwell - does not have the same impact on

well-being? Perhaps five to six hours is an optimum amount of time to rest.

## Is there an ideal amount of rest?

How rest affects people's well-being

Well-being score



Source: The Rest Test, Hubbub at the Wellcome Collection



Of course, large as this survey is, it gives us a snapshot in time. So we can't be certain that the rest or lack of it had an impact on the well-being scores. Is it possible that, instead, high well-being scores make us feel rested? The relationship between rest and well-being is striking, though.

It was notable that when asked which words they associated with rest, almost 9% of people chose "guilty" or even "stress-inducing". Yes, rest seems to make some people worry about the things they aren't doing.

Prof Felicity Callard of Durham University, director of Hubbub, says: "We really need to challenge the assumption that if you take more rest, you are more lazy. The fact that people who are more rested seem to have better well-being is an endorsement for the need for the rest."



Getty Images

Younger people are more likely to relax by listening to music

So who gets the most rest? Based on how many hours people told us they rested for in the previous 24 hours, the least rested group were likely to be younger, working traditional full-time hours or doing shift work that includes nights. They were also more likely to have higher incomes or to be carers, while the most rested group were more likely to be older, with lower incomes, unemployed, retired or working split shifts - where people work for several hours, then have free time and go back much later in the day or evening.

Men were more likely to say they get less rest than the average person - but actually reported getting 10 minutes more rest than women, on average, the day before taking the survey.

## What does rest look like to you?



Getty Images

We'd like to see your photographs of how you rest, from kicking back in an armchair to something more energetic. What works for you?

Send your pictures to [yourpics@bbc.co.uk](mailto:yourpics@bbc.co.uk) or [upload them via this link](#)

Please add the word **Rest** in the subject line of your message.

Once again, perceptions of rest could come into it. Busyness has become a badge of honour in today's society. To be busy is to be wanted and valued. When someone asks us how we are and we answer, "Busy, so busy," how much is our answer to do with status? Are people with high incomes more likely to want to claim to be busy? Or is it that they have jobs where new technology means that the boundaries between work and rest become ever more blurred, leaving them with the feeling that they can't fully switch off?

The answer to another question might shed light on this. People were asked to what extent they believe rest is the opposite of work. The majority of those employed full-time answered that rest was the opposite of work, but people who were self-employed or volunteering were less likely to think it was. Does control over your work affect whether it can ever be seen as restful, even if you're lucky enough to enjoy your work?

A full analysis of the data will be published within the next year. It's already clear that it holds lessons for doctors. Callard points out that when doctors prescribe rest, not every patient will interpret the word in the same way.

"There's a desire clinically to be more precise about what you are prescribing when you prescribe rest. But you need to find out what that particular individual finds restful. Simply telling some people to go and do nothing is likely to provoke anxiety rather than restfulness."

Many people, it seems, would like to have more time to rest but perhaps it's not the total hours resting or working that we need to consider, but the rhythms of our work, rest and time, with and without others.

To truly feel rest do we need time alone without fear of interruption, when we can be alone with our thoughts? From the Rest Test, it would appear so.

**More from the Magazine**



University of Chicago Library

It's only recently that sleeping and doing very little - the ways human beings have always rested - have come to be seen as an insufficient response to life's difficulties.

[The man who invented relaxation](#)

*Join the conversation - find us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Snapchat](#) and [Twitter](#).*