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niksen

‘Stop
being so
busy.’

– NY Times

Embracing The Dutch Art
of Doing Nothing

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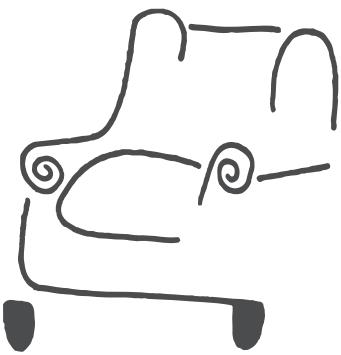
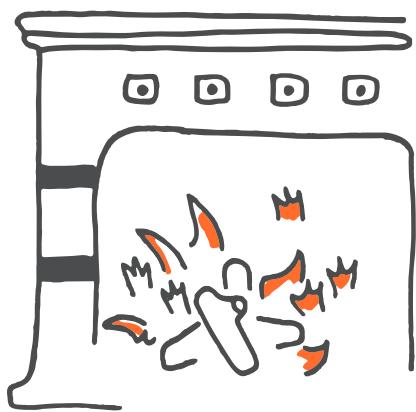
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INTRODUCTION

Oh No, Not Another Wellness Trend!

I'm on my couch, pondering a typical day in my life. Each morning I am awakened – right on time – by the sound of joyfully chirping birds. Before I get out of bed, I whisper a mantra to the Universe, something inspiring, like “blessed be this miraculous morning,” or “the world is your oyster.” I make myself a healthy breakfast and go about my day, smiling to myself and feeling upbeat.

I am the perfect mother, a wonderful wife, the personification of calm. My house, of course, is sparkling clean. I always say the right thing when my children are upset, I never yell, I’m never impatient. My children do their chores without complaining, and remain calm and collected throughout the day.

I breeze through the day while my house organizes itself around me, all by itself. I go to bed feeling I have changed the world in ways big and small.

My life wasn’t always like this. There was a time when I was constantly tired. I thought I couldn’t do it all and I felt like a failure. I was sure I just couldn’t win. But now,

I'm stronger and more confident than ever. I take whatever comes my way in my stride, never even breaking a sweat. These days, people admire me and look to me for life advice and inspiration.

"How do you do it, Olga?" they ask me. I consider answering that I'm a natural. I wake up perfect every day and I just can't help it! But the truth is that I have full control over my destiny and have become the best person I can be thanks to an amazing little secret I discovered. "What secret," you ask? *Niksen*, or the Dutch art of doing nothing.

NOT YOUR USUAL WELLNESS GURU

Did you believe that? No? Good.

The only truth to that story was the sound of chirping birds in the morning, and that's because my dear husband – after years of watching regular alarm clocks shock me into the day – took pity on me and bought an alarm clock that sounds like birds singing. And while it's definitely an improvement over what could have been a fire siren, my mornings are still traumatic. I have three children who I need to get out of bed and off to school by 8 a.m., preferably fed and dressed. By the time the school bus arrives, my sanity is usually hanging by a thread. But that's just the beginning; while my children are at school, I rarely find even a moment for myself.

Between my children, home, work, my husband – who works long hours – and the rest of my family and friends, I try to remember the last time I actually did absolutely nothing. And fail miserably.

I used to be so good at it. When I was little, I would sit on my bed or in my father's favorite armchair and stare at the patterns in the rug, or out of a window, thinking of abso-

lutely nothing. Sometimes, my parents would ask me what I was doing and send me off to do chores or homework, but I had ample time to daydream. And it felt so good.

But now? As a mother of three, a wife, a writer, and business owner, I always feel hurried and pressed for time. Sometimes it seems like I'm writing with one hand, caring for my children with the other, cooking dinner with my left leg, and cleaning the house with my right.

Of course I'm aware that I have chosen this. I wanted this life. But acknowledging this doesn't make it easier. I, like so many others I know, am just ... so ... busy.

The last time I sat on my couch and simply did nothing was when I actually collapsed onto it. It was the end of the school year and I was exhausted, sleep-deprived, and unable to function. The only thing I felt capable of doing was lying on the couch and staring into space, which is how my husband found me when he got home from work.

It didn't occur to me at the time that collapsing like this was the only socially acceptable way to do nothing. "The attraction of illness lies in its capacity to redeem one of the greatest vices of our society: not doing anything," write management professors Carl Cederström and André Spicer in *The Wellness Syndrome*.

WHAT WAS GOING ON?

Something was happening and I didn't like it at all. I was very tired and feeling overwhelmed, but I had no idea what to do about it. In my years of writing about parenting I noticed how stress was a huge factor in so many people's lives and that many people were feeling as overwhelmed as I was. But it took a little article in an unknown magazine to make me realize that this was symptomatic of a much bigger

problem that didn't only affect parents.

Two years ago reporter Gebke Verhoeven published an article called *Niksen is the New Mindfulness* in the Dutch magazine *gezondNU*. I loved the idea and remember thinking: "Cool, finally someone is telling me it's OK to do nothing. Now this is a wellness trend I can get behind."

But immediately after that I wondered: How am I supposed to do nothing? Whenever I allow myself to sit down my house starts talking to me. "Do me, do me, do me," whispers laundry in a totally unsexy way. Did I remind the children to do their homework, asks conscience? And when I look around, I see books on the floor and dirty dishes on the kitchen counter. I know there is no food in the house, and I have zero idea what I am going to make for dinner. How can I just sit on the couch when I feel compelled to get up and take care of the house and everyone who lives in it (except for myself, that is)? New tasks constantly materialize as if out of thin air. If I want to sit down, one of my children is bound to get sick or there's an appointment I need to make, or something else I am suddenly reminded I have to do. How on earth am I supposed to find time for this niksen?

Yet after reading that article, a curiosity started to grow in me. What was this thing the Dutch called niksen? And why couldn't I do it just a little more? I started to research niksen extensively and discovered that simply doing nothing can be enormously beneficial, especially for those of us who, like me, feel overwhelmed by our responsibilities. Doing nothing, or niksen, really is worth doing.

My curiosity and research resulted in a few articles. Then in May 2019 *The New York Times* published my story *The Case for Doing Nothing*. A few days later, it went viral and was re-tweeted, shared, and emailed close to 150,000 times. By July, niksen was everywhere. It became very clear that I had hit a nerve.

The whole world wanted to know about niksen, and I had media from around the globe sending me emails and interview requests. Literary agents and publishers were asking to represent me. I was ready to dismiss it as much ado about nothing (literally) but there was something about it that seemed to appeal to people everywhere.

As I began to collect and analyze the response that niksen was getting, I realized that people were fed up with wellness trends telling them they weren't doing enough and should work harder at improving themselves. This is actually one of the reasons people relate to the concept. It's the easiest kind of wellness you could possibly imagine.

But another thing struck me: we simply don't know how to do it. Though not doing anything – or doing nothing – may sound simple, it is actually everything but that. In fact, if I had a penny for every time someone asked me how to do more niks I would probably be a millionaire by now. I realized that most of us need help learning how to stop being so busy. I have written this book hoping I can shed some light on how to do nothing, and so that people everywhere realize it's OK to sit on the couch and do a little niks.

BUSY PEOPLE, EVERYWHERE

The truth is that we're busy and we're stressed. We feel overwhelmed by the business of our daily lives and this makes us feel out of breath, rushed, and anxious. Desperate for a solution, we look for answers everywhere, even beyond of the borders of our own country, hoping the next book or article will help us feel calmer and more able to live up to our expectations, obligations, and duties.

According to a Gallup poll in 2019, of 150,000 people around the world, Americans are particularly stressed out.

CHAPTER 1

What Is Niksen?

I'm sitting on my wonderfully comfortable brown couch. There is a mug of hot, steaming tea in my hands and I have my fingers interlaced around it, feeling the warmth. The mug is my favorite one, hand-painted in floral patterns and other nature-inspired elements in green, brown, and shades of blue. The white Kindle that my husband got me last Christmas is probably lying next to me. In fact, I'm sure this is the case because I can't bear to part with my books for too long.

Cuddled into the couch, I'm feeling comfortable. My legs are bent under me and I'm leaning over one end of the couch with my left arm. Sometimes, when my husband sees me folded up like this he asks, "So, are you Olga-ing around?" This position feels so natural for me that my husband named it after me.

Often when I'm seated like this, I'll be reading my book or editing an article I've printed. In both cases, it's pretty obvious what I'm doing: I'm either reading or working. Now, consider the following three scenarios.

1. I'm on my couch in the same position I've just described but I'm thinking about an article I want to pitch to an editor.
2. I'm still cuddled up on the couch but in my head, I'm going through my day, planning dinner, mentally checking if the children have everything they need, or worrying about them.
3. And finally, I'm on the couch. I'm looking at my rug when my gaze moves toward the garden and I notice the roses are still blooming despite the cold weather. My husband has put on some music and I'm listening to the singer's voice and the beat of the drums.

Which of these would you describe as *niksen*? Even if you don't yet know what *niksen* is, I am sure you'll immediately recognize which of these three situations is an example of doing nothing.

NIKSEN: BUT HOW DO YOU EAT THAT?

When I studied German at the University of Warsaw, I could have taken classes in Dutch. But this would have meant another year of school and I had a boyfriend waiting for me in Germany. I was sure I would never need it so I passed on that class. And yet here I am, having to learn this language anyway. Serves me right.

Some say Dutch is difficult, and that especially the pronunciation can be tricky. When I started learning the language, I went to the butcher and asked for 500g of minced meat. Or so I thought, because to my surprise, I arrived home with a tiny plastic bag filled with just a little bit of meat. Apparently, the way I said *vijf* (or five) sounded like *twee* (two). Go figure. I was too tired to go back for more and

luckily, I had lentils in my pantry. The result: almost-vegetarian meatballs. I'm nothing if not creative.

Besides difficult, Dutch is also a fun, quirky language. “I would compare Dutch to a painting that uses a very wide palette of colors,” says Marjan Simons who happens to be my Dutch teacher.

I’m particularly fond of the diminutives such as *hondje*, *huisje*, or *boompje*, which mean little dog, little house, or little tree, respectively. You just add *-je*, and the word becomes little. “We’re the tallest people in the world, but our country is small. And everything we like becomes diminutive,” says Simons.

I also love how you can turn everything into a verb. Playing tennis? No, *tennissen*! Paying with a debit card? No, *pinnen*! Having a drink (a *borrel*) and a plate of snacks with a group of friends? No, *borrelen*! Think of a word or expression, then turn it into a verb by adding *-en*. Doing nothing? No, *niksen*! It’s brilliant, really. In my native Polish when faced with something new, we say “and how do you eat that?” So how do we eat *niksen*?

DO THE DUTCH DO NIKS?

In Dutch “niks” means nothing, and it’s just a small step from *niks* (which is a noun) to *niksen* (which is a verb). So *niksen* literally means nothing-ing. Marjan Simons offered an alternative explanation: *niksen* comes from *niks doen* (to do nothing) which is then abbreviated to *niksen*.

As I researched *niksen*, I learned other Dutch words with similar meanings, such as *lanterfanten*. On her website Book-Couch.nl, Dutch writer, editor, and entrepreneur Elise de Bres explains that *lanterfanten* is like *niksen* in that “you can just do as you please and there is no aim in whatever you do.”

Another synonym is *luieren* (you just try and pronounce all those vowels! I've been here for ten years and still can't manage). In fact, the title of the Dutch edition of this book is *Niksen: De Dutch art of luieren*. At first, I thought this word meant being lazy since *lui* is lazy, but it also means "hanging out." *Encyclo.nl*, a Dutch online dictionary, defines it as "to consciously do nothing or not very much."

As a writer, linguist and translator, I know that language is a window into a culture. How is it possible, I wonder, that in a nation gifted with so many wonderful words for doing nothing, there are people who won't acknowledge that *niksen* is something they engage in from time to time, even if they are unaware of it?

Japanese writer Naoko Yamamoto (who has been living in the Netherlands for the last 15 years) certainly agrees that the Dutch are very good *nikseneers*. "They can spend all day doing nothing on vacation, be it camping, lying around on the beach, sitting in the park, or simply staying at home. And on a sunny day lots of people sit around drinking beer or coffee on a terrace, just hanging around," she writes to me in an email.

The Japanese, Yamamoto claims, are not great at *niksen* at all, but the idea does sound familiar to them. "Japanese people actually know that we have to have rest so the concept of *niksen* is not very new, but showing them the way Dutch people *niksen* could be very inspiring to them," she says.

Is it possible that the Dutch themselves do not realize how much they already *niks* around? Sometimes it takes an outsider to see the truth.

Niks on this:

1. What steps can you take to introduce niksen into your own life?
 2. Which areas of your life discussed in this chapter need more niksening up?
 3. When do you think you should speed up or slow down?
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