

We've all heard of *hygge*, the Danish “coziness” trend that's gone gangbusters over the past few years. Other Northern European countries have their own culturally distinct concepts to help people embrace wintertime, such as *lagom*, the Swedish philosophy of moderation. Really, there's no shortage of European lifestyle philosophies to stencil on motivational Etsy signs. But the only one that's won me over comes from the Netherlands, where I live. It's called *niksen*. And, as I learned while leafing through a wellness magazine at the grocery store, it's being touted as the new, better mindfulness.

*Niksen* means doing nothing or, more specifically, “doing something without a purpose, like staring out the window, hanging out, or listening to music,” explained Carolien Hamming, a coach at CRS Centrum, an organization devoted to fighting stress and burnout. Hamming told me she regularly suggests *niksen* to worn-down clients.

Compared to Americans, Dutch people may seem relaxed and content, but the reality is more complicated. Instances of *burnout*, stress-related diseases, and anxiety are on the rise in the Netherlands. And even though the Dutch don't work long hours, they're far from idle. Whatever the reason — their Protestant work ethic, their need to stay on guard and watch out for *impending floods*, or something else — the Dutch feel

pressured to fill their free time with productive and goal-oriented activities. When they're not working, they're out cycling, jogging, or meeting friends. And none of these qualify as *niksen*, because even leisure constitutes *something* with a purpose.

The cultural bias against doing nothing comes across heavily in the Dutch language. The popular proverb "*niksen is niks*," for instance, means "doing nothing is good for nothing." And another popular Dutch saying, "*doe gewoon normaal*," translates to "just be normal." In practice, this is a suggestion to stay busy, but not too busy; to rest, but not too much. Above all, it means don't be lazy. Be productive. Contribute.

This anti-nothing mentality is ingrained during childhood. "Dutch children don't learn to *niksen*," said Hamming. "They are told always to be useful and work hard."

By the time Dutch children grow up, then, the idea of doing nothing can seem inconceivable. And that's a shame. Maybe the next time I see my kids sitting around for no apparent reason, instead of telling them to find something to do, I'll ask them, "*Lekker nixen?*" which translates, more or less, to "are you *deliciously* doing nothing?"

*Hygge* and *niksen*, it's worth pointing out, are distinct concepts. The Dutch aren't a *hygge*-averse people; they have their own version of it,

called *gezelligheid*, which involves going outside, basking in the sun, and spending time with loved ones. An event, place, or person can be *gezellig*. But *gezelligheid*, Hamming explained, “is something you do with purpose (and with other people), and it requires energy and attention.”

To me, *hygge* seems comfy, but also extremely time-consuming: You have to light candles, shop for blankets and loungewear, and include other people in your cozy existence. I’m happy enjoying my own company. So, given my introverted, quiet nature, I’m more drawn to *niksen*.

*Niksen* is also being promoted as a twist on mindfulness, a practice that’s supposed to make us happier, healthier, and more resilient, and for which there seems to be an endless supply of praise. But the central tenet of mindfulness — staying in the moment — strikes me as a daunting task. I’m just not sure every moment is worth being present for. But, as I see it, moments of nothing are almost always worthwhile. It’s during these moments, for instance, that I come up with my best story ideas.

I don’t think my thorough enjoyment of life’s pauses makes me lazy, though. I’m a mother of three with my own business. I devote a lot of time to my children. I cook every day. I can, and frequently do, write for hours on end. In fact, many of my days are filled to the brim with

errands, activities, and chores. And maybe that's the reason there's nothing I enjoy more than doing nothing — I don't have enough opportunities to tune out.

Originally from Poland, I moved to the Netherlands eight years ago when my German husband found a job in The Hague. I haven't embraced every aspect of Dutch culture with ease. One thing I've struggled with, for instance, is the Dutch tendency to be extremely direct. Many times, I've been shocked by strangers' blunt comments or unwillingness to offer me help unless I specifically ask for it.

At the same time, I've come to accept, and even love, all sorts of things about my new home: My definition of good weather has shifted from "sunshine" to merely "no rain." I've reached a point where the sight of a canal puts me at ease. I've absorbed the live-and-let-live attitude that once felt so foreign to me. And now I have *niksen*, which may be my favorite Dutch discovery of all.

I know I will take a moment today to do nothing *deliciously*; I hope you'll join me.