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Shirkers in a Shrinking Economy

This is the age of the 24-hour supermarket, seven-day-a-week shopping mall, and year-round tulip. The traditional definitions of time bankers' hours, the seasonal harvest, the dentist's golf day have yielded to the modern demands of work and technology. In an economy that defines cutbacks as corporate success, nearly everyone who can works year-round, even professors, who teach summer school. No one except the members of Congress and psychiatrists takes a month's vacation anymore.

Earlier this week, psychiatrists, who administer to upscale New Yorkers, took off, and tomorrow Congress is scheduled to recess for a month-long "district work period." While the solons return to their hometowns, the shrinks abandon theirs, leaving an entire group of articulate New Yorkers - tense, educated and not as happy as they think they should be - on their own.

New York is the center of gravity for psychiatry and psychoanalysis. After 11 months of listening to patients obsess about their careers, their mothers, their sex lives and their current and former spouses, the cream of the mental health profession escapes to Cape Cod, leaving only an answering machine to link them to the anxieties they are tired of hearing about. Going away in August is the psychiatrist's safety valve: The witch doctors of mental health run away from this city, putting their faith in the healing powers of the sand and surf of Wellfleet and Truro. They avoid the Hamptons, since that's where their patients go, and the Catskills, because that's where their parents went; the Jersey shore doesn't have fresh basil, and Litchfield County isn't cerebral enough.

So Cape Cod it is, where psychiatrists do what they can't do during the rest of the year: talk, complain and gossip without fear that their words will induce a breakdown, a divorce or an eating binge. A month on Cape Cod is just enough time for doctors to get in touch with their own families' tensions, to learn how to raise rates without causing anguish, and to debate whether the Clinton health plan will cover the Woody Allen approach of cradle-to-grave sessions five times a week.

Sitting and listening is not easy, even when you're paid to do it. The most taciturn analyst needs a break. But psychiatry, a cottage industry not covered by the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, is clearly in restraint of trade when all its private practitioners close down during August. Before air-conditioning, time off in the summer made sense. Most patients - no matter how confused - knew that a suntan was as good for the ego as any analytic insight. With the best patients out of town in August - on the beach or in Europe shrinks naturally took off as well.

But things have changed. Not since Eisenhower has a president dared to devote a month to improving his golf swing. With the rise of the two-earner household, few husbands and wives can take a month off at the same time. And the risk of corporate cutbacks and the prospect of a retroactive income tax hike have made it impossible to relax, especially on a long vacation. (Admittedly, we save a bundle in August -without the members of Congress or psychiatrists at work.) So New Yorkers are being forced to live by their wits - without their shrinks - and without a long vacation to distract them.

It's entirely possible that some therapists would like to work during August, since a few hours of treatment would cover a new pair of back-to-school Doc Marten's for their kids. Though psychiatrists are probably loath to violate the golden rule of the profession - "Thou Shalt Not Treat Patients in August" - anyone who breaks rank can point out that these days, no other industry in this town closes down for more than a few days each year.

The boundaries between seasons have been eliminated in fashion, sports and entertainment. Isn't it about time that the mental health profession adopted the real-world calendar, too?

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