In a nonstop world, Samantha Murray Greenway asks if doing absolutely nothing is our most radical – and necessary – biological need.

PHOTO: SUZANNE DAY

Every week, a room fills with people showing up for a class solely dedicated to rest. It begins with the kind of care you might not have received since childhood; the offer of comfort by way of bolsters constructed like adult-style pillow forts, arranged uniquely to help your body find its own restful shape; the placing and tweaking of weighted cushions to support any areas of laxity; the draping, wrapping and tucking of blankets and muslins to help dampen any kind of peripheral noise or draft or light. It's kindly and strategically done to enable each individual to get that bit more comfortable before the class settles, together, into 80 minutes of repose in the quiet, gently-lit space.

This is Karla Brodie's restorative yoga class. She has been running it for 26 years. Now it feels perhaps more necessary than ever before. A mix of professionals, students and creatives of all ages arrive at the Contemporary Yoga Centre in Auckland – maybe as a result of a doctor's referral to help alleviate anxiety, insomnia, tension headaches, or simply in search of a break. Over the years the student profile has not changed much, but the world has. A culture that increasingly equates value with effort, combined with our current need to be plugged in, 24/7, makes Brodie's take on restorative yoga (that might involve only one position of rest for the duration) feel quietly subversive.

"Restorative yoga is radical because it's saying 'less, slow, calm, quiet'," says Brodie. "As a society, we don't often value those qualities."

Her classes are informed by decades of experience; teaching a somatics approach to yoga, running teacher training modules and workplace wellness programmes, working with various bodies of mixed ability. Her methods are inclusive; she has not only taught Tibetan Buddhist monks in Nepal for years, but runs classes for people living with chronic illness and long-term health conditions in Remuera.

At her restorative yoga sessions, however, people learn how to rest. "It's quite hard to do nothing," says Brodie. "The more one has a regular practice of rest, the more one can deeply rest. It is accumulative." And while some students might drift off into sleep during class, that's not necessarily the goal.

There are many good reasons to value the rest that can be had outside of sleep. From a psychological and a physiological perspective, the evidence is clear: "Rest isn't indulgence, it's infrastructure," says Dr Denise Quinlan, co-founder and director of NZ Institute of Wellbeing & Resilience.

"It's what underpins our ability to have energy, to be able to focus and to actually look after our health. It's fundamental."

Rest performs an entirely different function to sleep. "Sleep forms and maintains our pathways that create memories," explains Dr Sarah Schonberger, head of research at the Neurological Foundation. "So, whatever happens during the day, we actually remember it the next day because it's been embedded while we sleep ... It's also very linked to our ability to be emotionally regulated,"

Rest, however, is governed by a different process. "The autonomic nervous system that is involved with both stress and rest deals with the rest outside of sleep," explains Schonberger. "Think of it as the nervous system in our body that controls everything that's automatic, like breathing and heart rate, blood pressure, digestion – all the things that are going on that we don't necessarily have control over. This autonomic nervous system has two sides of it: sympathetic and parasympathetic."

The sympathetic nervous system raises blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate and releases a stress hormone called cortisol. "It prepares us to either defend ourselves or get out of a situation that's dangerous," says Schonberger. "In today's society, we find ourselves in that fight or flight mode a lot of the time when we don't need to be, just due to stress."

Aspects of modern life encourage us to be constantly in touch or 'on'; from the technology that allows us remote access to work around the clock, to mobile phones that continually feed us global news. On top of general daily challenges, this functions as another variety of stress.

"Most of us at times in our lives have difficult things going on that we can't necessarily change," says Schonberger. "Rest is a very important way of being able to cope with them. If we're giving the brain a rest from doing things externally, it's still very active but it's able to do some other important processes that help our brains work efficiently to make good decisions, to have good cognition and also emotional regulation."

Which is why we all need rest. Not just to feel rested, but to keep the whole body in equilibrium. "There are a lot of processes going on in our bodies all the time that are autonomic or automatic that we can't control, but we can actually improve them by consciously activating the parasympathetic, rest and digest mode," explains Schonberger. "It's actually about relaxing our bodies so that we get rid of the cortisol hormone and allow our bodies to work properly, because it's doing a lot of things when we rest. Our digestion is very, very important, because whatever nutrients we're getting in our diet, the way they get into our body and up to our brain is by how well our digestion is working.

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"The benefits of rest can actually increase the effects of medications for things like psychiatric conditions ... Rest can actually change our physiology and can be therapeutic. Reducing the levels of cortisol, improving our blood pressure and heart rate and breathing and digestion, all those things have a big impact on how the brain is working. It's all very interconnected."

We often hear about the importance of exercise and diet, but not so much about the value of taking rest. "When did we stop looking after ourselves?" asks Quinlan. "We have spent the last 40 years in this hideous drive for efficiency that has been global: how can we get people to go faster and do more with less? It's really pervasive and really pernicious." The best antidote? Rest.

"Some people need active rest, like gardening, playing music, dancing, cooking. Having something you do that you can develop a sense of competence at, something you choose to do that absorbs you is a two-way thing: you're doing something that you get to feel good about and when you're absorbed in something else you're not thinking about work."

There's also value in autonomy. "You get to choose how you spend your free time. For some people, it's really hard to do that."

Rest is another way to protect not only our health, but our attention. "Attention is a scarce, precious resource," says Quinlan. "It underpins your ability to analyse things, to research, to write a story, to pay really good attention at home when someone is telling you something, to read a room, or read a person when something's not right. All of that takes your focused attention and yet we work and live in a way that fragments our attention." Learning not just how to work but how to recover afterwards is key.

Which brings us back to restful, restorative yoga. Putting boundaries of space and time around rest can be beneficial, as can resting in the company of others.

"As human beings, we feel truly safe when we're connected. If we are not, there's always a scanning for threat. If you are in a room where you are connected, and there is a human being looking after you, you're safe. You can really relax. You can really rest." YW