

## Overdoing and Overtaxing

By Karel Murray

Have you ever just stopped in the middle of a busy place and study what is going on around you? I recently viewed a film of an event that occurred in Time Square, orchestrated by a group of 20 or so “performers”. In the midst of a frenzied crowd, these individuals, on cue, simply stopped - locked in position and appeared to stop breathing, as if suddenly flash frozen in place. For all intent and purposes, time ceased right along with them.

The startled then puzzled stares of the bustling crowd bounced ineffectively off the human sculptures. In retrospect, watching this “calm” in the middle of the storm liberated me. I began to understand that I have been living my life in a hyperventilating mode...so much to do in such a minuscule period of time.

That’s when I understood that the way we utilize time is extremely different than how earlier generations experienced it. If your parents were anything like mine, they rarely worked on those precious weekends or after dinner. That time was reserved for playing cards, enjoying a good book, golfing or anything else which they considered fun. Relaxing meant down time.

In today’s environment of high speed everything, waiting for anything is an annoyance. There are things to do, people to see and places to go. And all of this squeezed into the precious hours of a single day...

Slap the alarm clock, roll out of bed, shower, brush teeth, get dressed, take off the shirt and fix the button, get dressed, fix and eat breakfast, grab the paper and the car keys, race out the door, back out of the driveway, surge back into the garage, rush into the house and snatch the cell phone off the counter, mutter insane comments to yourself as you back once again down the driveway, look over to make sure the garage door closes and then realize you forgot to let the dogs out for a final bathroom break before they are locked in the house for 8 hours. A snarl of frustration erupts from your throat and you realize...

Something has to give.

My niece, Michael Brook and her husband, Jeff live in Salamanca, Spain. Experiencing a culture that treasures life as a gift, her world embraces time for creativity, conversation, and companionship. No tightened shoulders, migraine headaches, or shallow breathing invades their daily existence. They have learned to work hard when they have to and embrace moments of relaxation when they are offered. Somehow they have stumbled upon one of the biggest crisis our generation faces... overdoing.

A “doer” has a mission to which they are passionately committed and are considered risk takers. However, within all of this activity, burnout looms because these individuals fail to manage their personal time or refill their energy tank when it runs on empty. As a result, a sense of helplessness and loss of control creates a burnout situation that can result in feelings of anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, and possibly substance abuse.

I wonder if it feels anything like PMS? My husband says the jury is out on that one.

As human beings, it's healthy to have a certain level of stress, but taking a much needed break for a few minutes or hours is strongly recommended. It's critical to keep a positive focus and sense of humor when dealing with rough situations. Sometimes an abrupt laugh changes perspective and allows us a moment to breathe deeply.

Every morning for the last 32 years, my husband, an advocate of vigorous regular exercise and nutrition, jogs three miles a day, greeting the dawn at 5:00 AM. This actually causes stress for me as I ponder his sanity. The thought of exercise triggers my need for chocolate and a movie. I've learned to recognize the signs of tension and deal with them effectively. Once, after a horrible day at work, I dragged my husband to see the film "Misery" with Kathy Bates and James Cann. Watching the sheer horror of what this man endured from his "greatest fan", I actually walked out of the movie feeling much better. At least someone else had a worse day than me.

I know, it's uncharitable, but it worked. My frame of reference realigned itself and everything was right with the world.

Physicians and mental health experts will tell you how important it is to recognize your own signs of stress and heed the warning that your body may be giving you.

- Nervous tic  
Is that the bug or the jumping sensation that occurs under the eye?
- Muscular aches  
Should I be concerned when my knees hurt after sitting on the couch for three hours?
- Desire to cry  
Have they looked at what it cost to fill my gas tank?
- Frustration  
Are people annoying you by telling you "You don't look so good lately?"

It's time for us to recognize that only we can address and adjust our level of stress and how it impacts us emotionally and physically. The first step is to recognize the importance of effective time management. We all have the same twenty four hour day...If that is true, why do some people seem to accomplish so much more in that period of time than we do?

It's hard not to hate an efficient person when they broadcast that they enjoy eight blissful hours of sleep at night as well partake of personal time to enjoy their family and indulge in personal hobbies. Everything runs in their lives like clockwork. It's about systems and it's time to explore how to set those in motion so we can avoid the stress burnout syndrome.

The first areas to explore are the tasks and situations that waste time during your day. Peter Drucker, a master of time management, states anything that prevents an individual from achieving a goal, task, or an assignment in the most efficient manner must be considered as a time waster. A few of those would include:

*Attempting too many tasks at once* – such as eating, typing a thesis, watching Desperate Housewives, petting the cat, and responding to emails – all at the same time.

Underestimating how long it will take to complete a task – we have a theory in our house... a football minute is actually 20 minutes long, a computer minute is 30 minutes long, and “just a minute” could be up to one hour.

*Procrastinating what we don't like* – for me, I think he is referring to not joining an “official” weight loss program.

*Can't say “NO” to unrealistic demands* – such as not volunteering to coordinate a family reunion.

*Crisis management* – I believe this category would include the time my 8 year old son dropped his pants to display to me the six stitches in his groin where he impaled himself when he slipped while balancing on a metal traffic barrier. The physicians informed my husband that we were lucky to still be in a position to be grandparents.

Typically, time management issues arise due to the lack of objectives, priorities & deadlines. To achieve a less stressful personal and professional environment can be done relatively simply if we are selective about what qualifies as a priority in our lives. Some questions to contemplate from “Getting Things Done: The ABC's of Time Management, by E.C. Bliss might help you to sort out your issues with time...

1. Do you have a clear mind of what to accomplish at work during the coming week?
2. Do you set priorities according to importance, not urgency?
3. Do you make constructive use of commuting time?
4. Have you taken steps to prevent unneeded information and publications from reaching your desk and intruding on your time?
5. Do you keep in mind the dollar value of your time?

With that in mind, here are a few suggestions to help you redirect your energies so that you and your mind can enjoy a respite from an overly stressful life.

### **Clear off your desk**

I don't just mean shove everything off and finally dust underneath the piles of paper; I'm referring to systems where you handle paperwork no more than two times. Review each item on your desk and either:

- File it for later

I keep three file folders going at all times:

Fun

Education

To Do

I file correspondence, magazine articles, and anything else that may require my attention in one of the three files only after putting the day's date in the upper right corner. Then, while waiting in line, or eating a meal by myself, I extract something from whatever file I'm in the mood for. If I haven't read or addressed or implemented an item in 90 days, it is tossed. I have a computer version of this process as well, scanning articles when possible for viewing while on the road.

- Address it immediately  
Write the thank you note, send the email, or make the phone call.
- Pitch it  
If it is something that you probably won't be utilizing or needing, just toss it. Often those credit card offers come up again. Tear out magazine articles and recycle the remainder of the magazine. Why have all that bulk on the desk when you will probably only read one or two things. Better yet, consider getting your magazines on-line and pull them up on your Blackberry or iPhone.

### **Attempting too much at once**

Sometimes we don't even realize that we are in hyper drive. Learn to sit back, look critically at the work you have to do and then:

- Determine whether you have complete, accurate information and all necessary materials before beginning a project or embarking on a mission
- Make decisions decisively. Most daily issues don't require a lot of thought. When a decision can critically impact your quality of life, then discuss the pros and cons with a reliable resource, gather the necessary details and make an informed decision. Procrastination of critical life items is not wise and only increases your level of stress because you can't stop thinking about the decision you have to make.
- Become mentally flexible and learn to roll with the changes that can occur in your plans at last minute. When you want to shriek at an interruption, don't. You never know whether the solution to your crisis just walked into the room.
- Bundle similar tasks and assign blocks of time to do them. For example, I return calls three times a day: 8:00 AM, Noon, and 5:00 PM. This schedule fits in well with my speaking schedule. Use voice mail wisely.
- Remember that just because you are busy, doesn't mean that you are achieving the results you want. Address those issues that have a significant impact on your day and work steadily to complete the task until finished. You will not only sit back and rejoice in the completed project, but also find a "burden" has lifted from your brain.
- Many people have great difficulty in terminating conversations and/or visits with others, so that when they leave, frustration sets in because you have been distracted from the task at hand. Instead of asking "How are you today?" learn to say "How may I help you today?" You will be amazed at how easy it is to get directly to the issue at hand and spend less time in idle chit chat.
- Not everything is a crisis and shouldn't be handled that way. I figure if there is a physical threat (such as a tornado bearing down on the office or a child poised to burn little fingers on a hot stove top) or a mental threat (a Vulcan mindmeld), then a situation should be evaluated for its overall impact upon your career and/or family. My mother cautioned me to consider the following: If you won't remember this issue in ten years, why are you worrying about it?" Still makes sense today. If you continue to

switch your priorities due to fire fighting, I only foresee continued frustration and tension due to the lack of completing what is truly important and necessary.

- If you have a huge project to complete, learn to break it down into logical components and handle one aspect at a time. By working with smaller tasks in a steady, logical manner, it's amazing how well a larger project comes together.
- Frequently people tell me they have trouble sleeping at night because of all the details and ideas that flies through their minds when they are settled into bed. Time management experts indicate that "work" should be shut down at least 3 hours prior to retiring for the evening. Get in the habit of preparing a daily "to do" list in order of priority of what you must do, should do, and need to do. Once you "train" your brain to do this "data download", it's amazing how peaceful your sleep will become.
- Learn to honor and treasure blocks of time for creative work and difficult projects. Get over the concern that a closed door to your subordinates means you are a bad manager. You should let everyone know you are available for true emergencies, but coach your associates as to what qualifies to that standard. It's amazing how others will discover what can wait and what needs to be addressed immediately.
- Ask yourself, "What is the best use of my time right now?"

Stress and time management is a state of mind. Its understanding that we are worth our commitment to healthy living and believing we have earned a few moments of the peace and quiet we so richly deserve.

My dog, Jordan, is my "stress" monitor. She instinctually knows when to creep up to my desk and suddenly slam the bridge of her nose underneath my right elbow, making my hand slide off the computer mouse. I'm always startled when she does this but can't help grinning when I look she that she has taken the crouched play stance with her paws stretched forward and is looking at me under those bushy Airedale eyebrows..."Time to play" is written all over her face. Her compact body quivers in the sheer delight of the anticipated chase.

And she is right every time. If you ever walk in by our house and hear laughing squeals reverberating through the closed windows, you know I'm getting my priorities straight!

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