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Carol Kleiman

## Reroute your career before breaking something

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From 1995 to 1998, when Mary Lou Quinlan was CEO of a major advertising agency, she used to dream about breaking a leg. Today Quinlan, 51, is founder and CEO of Just Ask a Woman, a New York-based marketing consulting firm--and she's not a masochist.

She simply used to fantasize about a way to get a break from the "cutthroat" ad world and her demanding job.

"My work schedule had gotten out of control and I didn't have a life," said Quinlan, who supervised a staff of 400 people and earned in the six figures. "I was working 15-hour days and traveling a lot--I even took off my heels and ran barefoot through an airport to make a flight--and I was overwhelmed. I was a human FedEx package.

"Dreaming of breaking a leg was really my way of trying to think of something temporary that I could survive and that would give me a few weeks away from work. After 23 years, I was exhausted."

She's not alone. "According to my research, almost seven in 10 people who make \$40,000 or more a year fantasize about taking at least several months off, and one in five 35-to-40-year-olds fantasize about it daily," said Quinlan, who has an MBA and who also has worked in public relations. She quotes these numbers in her new book, "Time Off for Good

Behavior: How Hardworking Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives" (Broadway Books, \$23.95).

In 1998, Quinlan, who is married to Joe Quinlan, an independent television news producer, asked for five weeks off to focus on herself.

"I combined my vacation and time due me, so it was paid leave," she said. "I fully expected to return to work."

The weeks of time she claimed for herself were better than healing from a broken leg: "I lived my life for the first time," said Quinlan, "I took walks in my neighborhood, I met friends for lunch, I took salsa lessons, I kept a journal--and the big thing was that I was relaxed and thought about my life for the first time. Did I have a life? No, I worked."

She soon realized she wanted to do research and create strategies for companies that wanted to build their business with female customers. She also wanted to write and give talks and be in control of her life.

"I went back to work and quit the first day," Quinlan said. "I couldn't go back to that life after I once had seen the other side of the fence. It opened my eyes to what life can be."

Fortunately, the agency's holding company liked her idea and provided funding for Just Ask a Woman, which she started in 1999 and bought in 2002. The marketing firm has three employees and, she says, "is very profitable." She works normal hours and has reduced her travel.

Because she at first remained under the aegis of her employer, leaving her job was not a financial hardship. But she does have advice for others who must take a break before they break.

"Don't do it just on the spur of the moment," the executive advised.

"Plan ahead. Figure out how much time you'll need. Make a financial plan, an escape hatch to tide you over in case your leave is unpaid. Get support from friends and family who might pitch in on child care, if you need it, and give you space and time to get a rest for the first time in your life."

Then, negotiate with your boss for what you need, she adds. "Suggest how work might be covered in your absence. Discuss your plans to return to work--and assure them you will. If you're really miserable you should just quit. Don't lie."

And use your time off wisely, as she did. "Reflect," Quinlan said.

"Start to draw some boundaries at work so that you have time for yourself, too." She suggests reducing stress by working out a new schedule.

"Don't break a leg when you're at that serious breaking point," Quinlan said. "Do something about your situation. It's scary to take the risk of a leave of absence, but the alternative is worse."

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Carol Kleiman's columns also appear in Monday's and Thursday's Business sections. Hear her on WBBM-AM 780 at 6:21 p.m. and 10:22 p.m. Mondays and 11:20 a.m. Saturdays. Watch her "Career Coach" segments on CLTV. E-mail [ckleiman@tribune.com](mailto:ckleiman@tribune.com).