



The time-off prescription

woman in my book, Monique, spent a week alone on a beach for her fortieth birthday and decided to leave her job to focus on her bed & breakfast dream business. Jane saved for four years so she could take a year off when her daughter went to preschool. I think the decision is relative to how much you're hurting, how much you're dreaming and how much you can afford."

In your book, you talk about the *a-ha!* moments that lead to taking time off. What are those?

"They are when the reality of your life slaps you in the face. A particularly critical one occurred for me after my dad's stroke in 1997. I left his bedside to fly to a half-hour client meeting. I remember sitting in the airport, and feeling that this just wasn't me. I didn't feel proud of myself. But just because you have these moments doesn't mean you respond right away. There is a tendency to shelve them for awhile and keep pushing on."

Burnout is another reason to take a break. What are the signs?

"For a couple of years, I was a charter member of the 2 A.M. wake-up group. I just thought I had a lot on my mind, but I have learned that sleeplessness is a real sign. So are personality changes. I am naturally upbeat. But I became impatient, short with people. Also, doing less of what you enjoy, like socializing or exercising."

What finally made you realize that you needed to leave your job?

"An accumulation of moments showed how much I had changed. My

husband, Joe, and I were at this idyllic seaside inn and I was on a cell-phone rant to the office. He finally said, 'Do you see what you are becoming?' But the thing that specifically led me to take time off was just a friend asking me if I'd ever thought about it. I hadn't. It wasn't like quitting. I could still go back. That seemed so right."

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It must be tough to go cold turkey—to not constantly check voice mail and e-mail for once.

"Some of the women I interviewed really struggled with the down time—I know I snuck in a couple of listens to my voice mail the first few days—but having some things scheduled kept that urge in check. The goal is to slow down, and try not to replace meetings with closet cleaning. For comfort, set up about three planned things a week. I took dancing lessons. Other than that, draw a line through the rest of your week. Do things that force you to relax. In the end, all the women noticed that the constant need to connect fades."

You came out of your leave inspired to start your own business. Should everyone expect such dramatic results?

"Not at all. I realized that I wanted to do my own thing, but it took longer to figure out what that meant. There are women in the book who are still wondering what their passion is. The

thing that I think is universal is the perspective. Even those who are still seeking what to do with the rest of their life have a better grip on what is important."

You are very busy with your new firm. It might appear that your life is much the same as it was.

"But it is so different. Because it is what I love, as opposed to what I have to do. I hated the unending, administrative, meeting-focused runaround of corporate life. I am often teased that I replaced one over-the-top agenda with another. But

this book is about women who, like most women, are naturally eager to do and to work. The difference is that, after time off, they are more centered, which makes their lives more livable—and the 'doing' more fulfilling. I am still extremely busy. And yes, part of me will always want to get the A. But I've learned to draw some lines."

How can women afford time off?

"Does your company offer a sabbatical? Any flex time? A family-crisis policy? How much vacation do you have left? Say you have two weeks left this year—that's a start. For most women, it takes nearly that long to let go and ask questions like, 'Am I doing what makes me happy?' Can you go in and negotiate for a third or fourth week? Think about what you would be willing to concede. Would you be willing to go half-salary? It is about asking for what we want, as opposed to thinking the company will never say yes and waiting until you're fried. What do you wish for? If you don't even think about it, you will never get it." **M**

Would a sabbatical work for you?
 Visit www.more.com/stopout for tips
 and helpful worksheets.