

When work consumes life

Take a break to get fresh perspective on next step

By Michelle Archer
Special for USA TODAY

Mary Lou Quinlan suspected she was on the verge of burnout when getting hit by a car sounded like a good way to get some time off work.

But when she was in a car accident, Quinlan, a self-described "Type A good girl," was shouting at her assistant on a cellphone while strapped to a gurney — and returned to work the next day.

It was that sort of focus and determination that had allowed Quinlan to overwork her way up to the CEO job at a national advertising agency. But three years later, in 1998, something had to give. She went to her boss and asked for a break.

"In hindsight," Quinlan writes in her book, *Time Off for Good Behavior*, "I realize I should have been worried about the consequences of asking for time off. What if I lost my big job and everything that went with it? Worse, what if I fell off everyone's Rolodex? ... I had nothing to lose, really, but my exhaustion."

She unwound for five weeks — losing weight, gaining energy, becoming "softer and easier." She also discovered she wanted to start her own marketing company that focused on listening to women. Now, with five years of work/life balance under her belt, Quinlan shares her story, along with vignettes from 37 other women whose work lives were consuming their lives. Among them:

- Camille, president of a public relations firm, spent five months with her family in Rome.

- Isa, former senior customer service executive in Silicon Valley, became the owner of a dance studio.

- Ann, a business publication editor, longed for time off but abandoned her plan for money and career goals.

- Kerry, a fast climber in public relations who saw the World Trade Center collapse and questioned her future, launched a new company around removable silicone breast enhancers called Take Outs.

What may set Quinlan's book apart is not so much

the "before" picture of the stressed-out woman or how various women spent their time off, but rather what happens after. New habits should be formed, she advises, to avoid plunging back into the same sort of situation that triggered burnout. Learning to say "no" more often is one, as is avoiding the saboteurs who want the old "Type A good girl" back.

Quinlan believes Corporate America is at least partly responsible for workaholic stress. As an antidote, she highlights companies that offer innovative programs to give time back to their employees. Among them:

- **Wells Fargo.** Up to 30% of its employees work on flexible schedules, and the company lets workers apply for unpaid leave of up to two years.

- **Intel.** Telecommuting and compressed workweeks are offered, and employees take an eight-week sabbatical after working seven years.

- **American Express.** Employees with 10 years of service can apply for a paid sabbatical of up to six months to do community service.

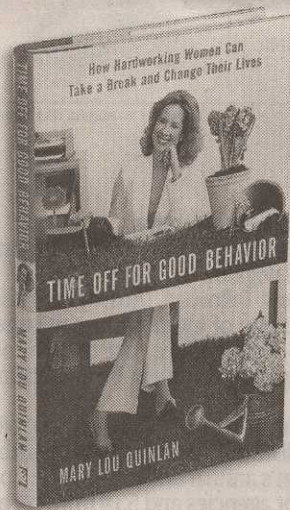
Most of Quinlan's book seems aimed at women in the upper echelons of the working world. Repeated references to "Type A good girls" become grating, especially absent the acknowledgment that workaholics are not the only ones who can burn out. But while advocating the benefits of time off for everyone, she prudently

writes: "Quitting is a solution I'd never recommend to women who are the sole support of their families, or are barely making it paycheck to paycheck."

Instead, she advises that women see how much unused vacation they can take at once and investigate company leave policies before abandoning the idea of a timeout. She says that many managers have asked her why women don't negotiate options before they quit.

Money certainly is a pressing concern for anyone — CEO or below — considering kissing their job goodbye. Quinlan spends a chapter skimming the subject before summing up with a worksheet to calculate cash flow and suggesting a consultation with a financial planner. One woman profiled went on leave without pay but said, "You'd be surprised how little (money) you really need when you have time to do your own ironing, watch your own dog, do your own grocery shopping and not eat fast food five nights a week."

Clearly, this is not the book to turn to for the nitty-gritty on how to afford a break. But it certainly sheds light on the benefits for women in getting a little distance from their jobs to rediscover or re-evaluate what's important.



Time Off for Good Behavior: How Hardworking Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives

By Mary Lou Quinlan
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Find excerpts online



Read excerpts of *You're in Charge: Now What?* and *Time Off for Good Behavior* at money.usa.com