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ON THE WEB

## Executive Life; To Conquer Burnout, Think Smaller

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IT was the defining moment of Mary Lou Quinlan's career: While in a taxi on her way to work two years ago, Ms. Quinlan, then chief executive of the N. W. Ayer ad agency in Manhattan, fantasized about breaking all her limbs in a traffic accident -- or at least a leg or two. "I thought to myself, 'Maybe if I jump in front of this cab, I can go the hospital and finally get some peace and quiet,'" she said.

That dark thought jolted her out of the rat race. "After 20 years of manic working," she said, "I realized I had hit total burnout."

She received permission for a five-week sabbatical, and for the first time in two decades, she said, she felt like a human being again.

"For once, I was able to wake up and drink my morning coffee after the sun had already risen, instead of before," she said. "I began living life the way normal people do."

When the five weeks were up, she resigned from the agency, which had 500 employees, to start her own company, Just Ask a Woman, a low-key marketing company in Manhattan with a staff of a dozen. She says she has never looked back.

Ms. Quinlan is somewhat of a trend setter, career experts say. In the recently rocky economy, burnout among managers has been rising -- so much so that many have quit jobs without the slightest clue as to what they will do next.

A study by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the outplacement firm in Chicago, showed that more than 470 chief executives of major companies left their jobs in the first half of 2001, up 22 percent from a year earlier. Though poor performance can never be ruled out, many of the chiefs cited stress and burnout as reasons for their departures.

"The pressure managers feel to perform is higher than it's ever been," said William C. Byham, chief executive of Development Dimensions International, a human resources consulting firm in Pittsburgh. "It used to be that you'd have a couple of years to make mistakes before you were really under the gun. Now, you're under immediate pressure to show results."

George Ludwig remembers fretting that his days were numbered. As a national sales manager at Johnson & Johnson from 1992 to January of last year, he led a team of 35 people that specialized in advanced sterilization products. "There was enormous pressure for us to be successful," he said.

As the economy softened, Mr. Ludwig said, his fear that his team would not meet its sales goals kept him awake at night. Instead of waiting to be dismissed, he quit his job and became a motivational speaker and consultant. Based in Cary, Ill., he now advises managers from Fortune 500 companies on avoiding burnout by developing a social life outside work, creating outlets to unload pressure and, in some cases, pursuing less stressful careers.

David N. Rosen also escaped from the rat race. As the technical team leader of the technology consulting division at Oracle, he had been working for a year and a half on a project that required him to fly every week from Los Angeles to Portland, Ore.

Working through the night at the client's office early last year, he witnessed the emotional meltdown of a colleague at 2 a.m. The project was not going well, and the client had complained to Oracle's top management. The two men had a talk, and the colleague "basically had a nervous breakdown," Mr. Rosen said.

"He sank into the wall and began crying and saying he couldn't take it anymore," Mr. Rosen said. "All that was running through my mind was, 'This could be me soon.' "

Within days, Mr. Rosen persuaded his companion, Stacy Van Heusen, to leave her management position at an ad agency in Los Angeles and go with him to Italy. They spent five months drinking red wine, trolling farmers' markets and discussing their next career moves. They recently moved back to the Los Angeles area, set up a television production company, Stubs the Cat Productions, and have vowed never to return to work as executives at large companies.

"We were both washed up in our late 20's," said Ms. Van Heusen, 28, who worked 100-hour weeks creating campaigns for Levi Strauss. "We knew something had to change."

Taking a breather can help managers put their careers in perspective. Joseph R. Weintraub, an organizational psychologist and management professor at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., recommends that executives on the verge of burnout take a few weeks off before making any drastic moves. "Don't do anything intellectual," he said. "Relax, get some exercise and try to see things in a new light."

He also urged managers to do some soul-searching to make sure that the stress is not self-inflicted.

Such an exercise in introspection paid off for Nan Napier, president of Tres Mariposas, a clothing store in El Paso. She was thinking of dropping her 23-year career because of stress, but she examined her management style. "I realized nobody but me was making me work as hard as I was," she said, acknowledging that she often became bogged down in problems that one of her 25 employees could have handled easily.

Now Ms. Napier has taken a step back. "If there's a minor problem, I just walk out the door, gritting my teeth and hoping someone will fix it by the end of the day," she said. The tactic has given her more time at home with her two teenagers.

MANAGERS who change to more tranquil careers should be wary of falling back into old ways. Ms. Quinlan, the ad executive, realized that her inability to say no had also hurt her. "Now I say no a lot, and I have a lot more energy, which I use to garden instead of sitting in some meeting," she said.

Mr. Rosen and Ms. Van Heusen now force themselves to do yoga several mornings a week and to take weekends off.

"It took us a lot of personal upheaval to get where we are," he said. "We're not about to go back to being the maniacs we used to be."

Photo: "After 20 years of manic working, I realized I had hit total burnout," said Mary Lou Quinlan, who quit as chief of a big advertising agency. (Angel Franco/The New York Times)