

REDBOOK

February 01, 2000

5 Ways to give yourself a break

Want more time to yourself? Steal It! A reformed overachiever tells how.

BY MARY LOU QUINLAN

It's practically Groundhog Day, and by now you may be wondering what ever happened to those New Year's resolutions. Again. Because once again, you probably vowed to do More this year: Exercise more, read more, be with the kids more. More, more, more. The only "less" on your list was probably "eat less," which really means "diet more." But here's a radical idea: "Less" will make you a whole lot happier. You heard me: less, less, less.

I'm a recent convert to the cult of Less. I lived the life of More for early 25 working years-more promotions, more rewards, more responsibility-until finally, at age 40, I was named president and then CEO of one of the country's largest advertising agencies. It seemed that more had really paid off. What wasn't so apparent was that I had no life. My over-agendaed schedule had turned weekends into extensions of the workweek and made workouts a thing of the past. I had less time for family, less time for friends, and worst of all, no time for me. And that's what started me thinking seriously about how I could regain a more satisfying life.

So I took a five-week mini-sabbatical from my job-practically unheard of in an industry known for grueling competition and non-negotiable deadlines. I spent those weeks slowing down, rediscovering what was really important, and spending a little time with someone I had lost track of-me. It was the beginning of a real transformation. You, too, are probably letting your agenda-and everyone else's needs-control your life. I'll bet you're just as much of a More addict as I was, and I can prove it. Just take this easy quiz:

1. The last time I had an hour to do whatever I wanted was:

- a. last week
- b. last month
- c. don't ask

2. If I had an hour to myself, I'd:

- a. take a walk
- b. do the 14 errands I should have done this week
- c. collapse in shock and exhaustion

3. If something on my schedule gets canceled, I:

- a. Smile, tell no one, and put my feet up
- b. am irritated and start worrying about how to get it done anyway.
- c. am delighted because now I have 3 more things I can fit into that time.

4. While waiting in line to pay at a department store, I:

- a. use the time to just let myself chill out.
- b. pull an old envelope out of my purse and start making a to-do list.
- c. beg the person behind me to save my place so I can run over to the sale on socks and grab three pairs and get back in line just in time for my turn at the register.

5. I'm watching TV (yes, TV) and:

- a. that's it
- b. sorting through mail in my lap and talking on the phone.
- c. playing with my kids, dragging a dust rag over the furniture, and making chicken salad for tomorrow's lunch.

If you checked three or more a's, congratulations. You've discovered the joy of Less. If you checked mostly b's and c's, read on. And if you checked c all five times, put the baby down right now, hang up the cell phone, turn off the computer, and try to concentrate on yourself for the next five minutes.

Believe me, if I had taken this quiz a year ago, I would have flunked with flying c's. My typical day started at 6:30 a.m. with a halfhearted workout, followed by speed-dressing for an early morning meeting. Then I'd talk, meet, e-mail, and voice-mail my day away until 10 p.m.,

when I'd stumble home and crash into bed, dead tired from doing so much More.

After my sabbatical, as a new convert to Less, I began suggesting to other women that they might want to take some real time off before they burned out. But the answer was always a resounding "no way!" They felt that the demands on them, particularly with kids, were too constant. They claimed there were no tasks they could just blow off. And yet there was an underlying hunger for some personal time.

"I used to be such an interesting person, but I don't know who I am anymore," says Jill Sandin, 41, a Los Angeles public relations professional and mother of 10-month-old Ella and 4-year-old Samuel. "I used to be conversant in film, belong to a book club, and be politically involved, but I no longer have time for that stuff. My mom is concerned because I have so much stress in my life. She says, 'Why don't you just work less?' I tell her it doesn't work that way."

Midge Kyle, 38, has actually left her job for two years to stay home with her 2-year-old son, Christopher, in Katonah, NY. But even she could use a little more Less: "Even though I'm home, I don't have time that's just mine," she says. "My husband will say, 'Well, at least you went to the park today,' but when I'm there I can't even finish a conversation without running after the baby. I thought that when I was home, I would do something I'd always wanted to do, like take a photography class. But it seems decadent even to take a stupid class!"

Doing something for yourself isn't decadent. It's deserved. I believe that being overscheduled, overwrought, and overcommitted to everyone else has become an epidemic among women. Undoing some of that isn't about being selfish. It's about choosing to take care of you, by building in time for you. And here's the surprising part: it's time you already have and use.

When I was on leave, I realized I had been giving away chunks of time and huge emotional resources to people who'd come into my office, saying, "Can I have five minutes?" That lengthened my day and usually

didn't resolve their issues. Now I treat my whole day, not just the workday, as precious. I don't give away before- or after-work time easily, and that means I can put back some of the things-seeing friends, working out-that matter to me.

You don't have to take a long sabbatical to start to undo the Must-Do marathon. You only have to do one simple thing: Learn to take bite-size breaks-tiny bits of downtime-to relieve the sense of unrelenting responsibility. Lightening your agenda in this way takes practice, but eventually it can teach you how to kick back and take better care of yourself.

Here are five ways to get started:

1. Stop Doing So Many Things At Once Women are natural multi-taskers and proud of it. But the constant wear and tear of operating all the working parts at the same time takes the pleasure out of just doing. Pay attention to yourself the next time you're about to do four things simultaneously. Stop doing one of them. Try ten minutes of listening to a favorite CD without talking on the phone. Or drink a cup of coffee without reading the paper.

Here's one I practice: Chill out when you're waiting in line. I tell myself that the next few minutes are meant for me to relax and breathe slowly-and it works.

2. Schedule "You" On Your Calendar If you keep a weekly to-do list, pick one hour a week and write your name next to it. And mean it. Make 4 p.m. every Thursday "Maureen time." Don't fill that time with overflow from your normal schedule. Try just taking a nap, or putting your feet up, or taking a long, rambling walk.

Book a babysitter if you have to. Lori Moskowitz Lepler, 36, of Columbus, OH, took a sabbatical to be with her 3-year-old son, Jake, but even though she's home full-time, she still has to schedule those tiny breaks. "You keep thinking you'll find the time for you, but it doesn't happen by accident," she says. "Planning to have someone to help me occasionally has been a lifesaver."

3. Open Five-Minute Windows For Breathing Yes, breathing. When you're zipping through your day, every once in a while, just stop. If you're in an office, close the door. If you're at home, go into the bathroom or out on the back porch. Just stand there and breathe-deeply, way down into your belly. Barrie Dolnick, author of the book *Simple Spells for Hearth and Home*, comments, "When you get really stressed out, you hold your breath, and that makes you even more stressed. Just taking a few deep breaths can relax your body and make you more capable of handling everything that's going on around you."

4. Dump Something Off Your "Good Girl" List Each of us has an unwritten "good girl" list: Can't leave the house without making the beds. Have to wash my hair every day. Won't let the gas tank go below half a tank. Why do we try to fill in every blank?

"Women don't think they have control over feelings like these," observes Susan Lee Levine, a psychotherapist in North Brunswick, NJ. "They'll tell me 'That's the way I'm wired,' not realizing that they can retrain themselves not to have to be so perfect."

So how do you retrain yourself? By giving yourself permission to fail once in a while. "Ask, 'What would be the worst thing that could happen if I fail?'" suggests Levine. Then let yourself do it so you can learn it's not the end of the world.

For some of us, failing even a tiny bit goes against the grain. Take Hope Gros, 32, a high sales performer with Office Depot in Dallas. Her day typically begins at 6 a.m., when she wakes, dresses, and feeds her 5-year-old daughter, Alexandra, before dropping her off at school and heading to an 8 a.m. sales meeting. "I'm a Virgo, so I'm meticulous," she admits. "But I've learned that it doesn't really matter if the dishes are in the sink or if Alexandra's tennis shoes don't match her T-shirt. She's happy, and that's what matters to me."

5. Create Your Own Bite-Size-Break Place Is there a space in your home with your name on it—a hammock under a tree or an oversized

storage closet that's just got junk in it? Convert it to your bite-size-break place: somewhere where the colors of the walls, the pillows, the objects are chosen by you, for you.

For me, it's the rocking chair on my front porch in Pennsylvania. When I sit there at around 5:30 on a Saturday evening and watch the fading light filtering through the trees, I feel true bliss. In the past, I would have been holed away with the computer, sending weekend e-mails. Now I just rock and exhale.

Surprisingly, just establishing the idea of your private place lets your family know that sometimes you need time for yourself-and that it should be respected. It's also a great example to set for your kids. Let them learn from you how to take time to relax and focus.

You can also create this break place in your office just by lighting a scented candle. You'll see that it makes a little space in the chaos and even has a calming effect on others who see it (and smell it).

You get the idea: Instead of continuing to let your schedule eat you alive, try taking a bite out of it. It's a very tiny, very doable first step toward doing Less. And living more. Yes: more, more, more.