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Couldn't Stand the Pace

by: *Fawn Fitter*

As the CEO of an ad agency, Mary Lou put in 16-hour days and paced her apartment at night, worrying about work. Here's how she made her life less hectic-and why she's happier than ever.

"I used to have the attitude that I was the only person who could do things the way I thought they should be done." Mary Lou, 46; from advertising CEO to marketing consultant, I grew up the daughter of a working mother at a time when that was unusual, and as a result, I never questioned that I would be a successful professional. Right after I graduated, I went to work for the public relations office of my college. By the time I was 22, I was the director of PR and events planning.

I dreamed of being a writer at an ad agency, so when I got married and moved to New York in 1978, I took a job in the human resources department at Avon, figuring there would be an opportunity to move up. Within four months, I had moved into a job as the newsletter editor. I wanted to be a copywriter, though, so I made a point of interviewing all of the people in that department so I would get to know them. And sure enough, when a copywriting job opened, they hired me. After that, I just kept climbing. I think it was because I never took a job and just did it the way it was; I always transformed it into something more challenging. Plus, I would jump in and try things, even if I didn't think I could do them.

After 10 years, I did move on to a big advertising agency, where I became the first and only woman on the senior management team. I felt powerful and capable. But because my life had this incredible momentum, I became unhealthily impatient. I couldn't stand to even walk behind someone; I'd have to blow past them. If I was on an elevator that had to stop on an extra floor, I would grit my teeth.

One day after my 7 a.m. workout, I rushed back to my apartment, changed clothes and got into the first cab I saw. I glanced up from reading the newspaper and saw a car headed right for the passenger side of the cab. It hit us hard enough to spin us completely around. As I was lying on a stretcher in the hospital with what turned out to be three broken ribs, I was demanding my husband's cell phone so I could call the office. At the time, it seemed normal, but in retrospect, I was so work-focused that I didn't even let my own health get in the way.

Seeing the Light

Two jobs later, I became president of an ad agency, and after a year, I was made CEO. Most people replace themselves when they're promoted, but it never occurred to me to hire someone else to be president; I just figured I could do both jobs. I had this attitude that I was the only one who could do things the way I thought they should be done. But despite the awards and money and publicity, I started feeling like I was going uphill on a treadmill. I

was getting up at 6:30 a.m. to work out so I could get to breakfast meetings. I worked through lunch every day, then I'd realize at 2 or 3 in the afternoon that I hadn't had time to eat anything. A few times a week, I'd get decked out and go to black-tie events, then come home and crash into my pillow for a few hours. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and walk around the apartment worrying about everything I had to do.

Finally, one of the few friends I'd managed to stay in touch with suggested I take a leave of absence. I'd never thought of that-I thought I had to get fired or quit to get some time off! But two weeks later, I decided to take a five- week leave.

It was the most incredible five weeks of my life. I did only what I wanted to do. I signed up for dance lessons, but other than that, my days were totally unscheduled. I wore jeans and flat shoes instead of suits and high heels; I kept flowers around; I lost weight; I spent a lot of time with family and friends. I went to the local diner and drank coffee and read the paper, but I wouldn't let myself read about advertising. And I didn't see or talk to anyone I worked with, not even socially.

I didn't let myself think about work at all until the last week of my leave. Then I made a list of what I liked about my job and what I didn't, and it became clear to me that my favorite things-like writing, speaking and coming up with creative ideas-were taking a back seat to management tasks. I started to dream of a small company where I could work on projects oriented toward women and do the things I love. When I returned to work, I went to the head of the parent company and said, "I don't want to be the CEO anymore. I want to start this new idea." And they allowed me to create it as a division.

In my current position, I'm the head of Just Ask a Woman, a marketing strategy and content development company that helps firms understand their female customers and employees. Even though I'm the boss, I sleep later than I used to, I try not to have breakfast meetings more than once a week, I eat lunch and I go home by 6 most nights. Weekends are sacred to me now-I don't allow myself to work. But the real difference between my old and new life is that I try to maintain a balance between work and free time.

While we were planning the new company, I was still working as CEO, but it felt completely different. I felt calm and clear, while everyone around me seemed to be talking and moving really fast. It was like looking through a window at what my life used to be like. It didn't attract me anymore.

I admit it's still tempting to slip into that business-driven frenzy, but I know how to say "enough" now. The most important thing to me was giving up "ought to" and "should." When women think about easing up, the first thing they often say is "I can't"-either because they feel obligated to keep up appearances, or because they don't want to disappoint someone by failing to meet expectations. But all women should realize they have assets they can leverage to exert some control over their lives.

I still have a busy schedule, and I still work with great enthusiasm-I just have a broader perspective now. I'm a valuable commodity, and I need to relax and eat and have a life so I can be the passionate, productive person I am. It's not like I turned into someone different; I just put myself on my own agenda.