

Grace in the Gray Areas

The Beast of Busyness

BY KAREN KULLGREN

I am not superwoman. I cannot do it all. I must stop trying to do it all. I must slow down.

It's hard. It's really hard. I can write these words. I can write columns on the subject and know in my mind and my heart that it's true, but why is it that I still slide back into and struggle anew out of the abyss of excessive busyness, of multitasking (which I still believe is a dirty word)?

It's not just me. It's every woman I know, married or single, with children or not, in her 30s or in her 60s. Ask someone, "How are you?" and they answer "busy" or "crazed" or "slammed at work." I used to love how a friend would say her life was "abundant," instead of saying "too busy," and I started saying it too. But I'm not saying it anymore. Because what I'm experiencing isn't abundance—and *her* life has become so abundant her friends don't see much of her any more.

It's not just bad for our mental health, it's bad for our physical health, our spiritual health, our productivity, our clients and our relationships with colleagues. It's bad for business, too. It's gotten worse with the crashed economy and with the technology we thought would save us—spurring us only to higher expectations of productivity and constant overavailability.

I hear myself telling people I feel like "a rat on a treadmill" or a "hamster on a wheel" and I cringe. We are overcommitted and overstretched, and we are certainly not without blame. And as has been much chronicled in recent years—but has not changed one iota except in acceleration—we've let our kids become infected with the disease of

busyness, too, from their overscheduled extracurricular lives to their ever-plugged-in short attention spans.

I walk a very fine line, as do many women I know, between introverted and extroverted, between the need to be social and engaged and the need for downtime. One friend, who recently adopted a child, loves being a mom but is amazed at the loss of what little free time she once had. Even with a support system most parents would envy, caring for a toddler fills up every waking moment. Another woman, trying to build her dream alternative healing practice, juggles three jobs to support that and only barely makes time for her religious community, with no time for a social life. And another woman I know finds her time happily but overabundantly full of caring for her grandchildren to help out her overstressed children.

Sometimes we struggle so hard with the balancing act that we overcompensate and shut out friends, social engagements and community connections. As authors Jacqueline Olds, M.D., and Richard S. Schwartz, M.D., argue in *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*, "A web of relationships is like the hammock that holds a person safely above the hard ground of depression; a web of relationships is also like a snare that holds a person back from the freshness of possibilities. It's never easy to get the balance right, but when a person sheds too many obligations because they feel more like a snare than a hammock, he may shed the very connections that keep him from going to ground."

I have to push myself out the door many

times to social events where I know I'll have a great time. But I also need to see my friends and family, who keep me sane and whole. And my work situation is quite isolating. As a pal in a similar situation laughs, "The only way we'll ever find a soulmate is if he's delivering a package or coming to unplug the sink!"

It's funny (funny sad, not funny ha-ha) the ways in which we capture all the "shoulds" in our lives—on BlackBerries, on Post-Its that litter our desks and our dashboards, on "To-Do" lists tucked in our purses, or, in my case, on notes I've written in the middle of the night then thrown on the bedroom floor as I drifted off and suddenly remembered something that had to get taken care of the next day. We're "shoulding ourselves to death," as the wise-beyond-her-years Carrie Bradshaw once wrote on "Sex and the City." Even things that used to bring us joy become burdens. Taking a much needed vacation, should we have the financial luxury to do so, seems impossible when we feel under so much pressure to get things done before we leave and know we will be slammed with catching up once we get back.

I fretted about the financial drain of a recent decision to hire some help for my home office. And then my old friend Cathy emailed me, "You can always get some more money, but once you've lost your mind, well, that's pretty much it." That was my epiphany, my "aha" moment.

Coming next month—some big and small steps we can take to restore the quality of our lives. Until then:

B—r—e—s—t—h—e. (w)

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