

INSIGHT



Feeling Overloaded and Time-Starved? The Answer Is *Not* Better Productivity and Efficiency

Does the thought of doing absolutely nothing for an entire afternoon seem as wasteful as throwing a week's worth of groceries out with the garbage?

But there are bills to pay, you might say to yourself. I've got to get the laundry started. Oh, and return those screws that were the wrong size. While I'm out, I should stop by Costco and then drop off those boots that need new heels. And the garage is just sitting there, waiting to be cleared out...how can I just do nothing?

Free time with nothing to do can generate near panic if you're chronically overloaded and time-starved.

"We seem to have a complex about busyness in our culture," says Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. "Most of us do have time in our days that we could devote to simple relaxation, but we convince ourselves that we don't."

And yet, the harder we push, the more we need to replenish ourselves. As Stephan Rechtschaffen, author of *Timeshifting*, says, "Each of us needs some time that is strictly and entirely our own, and we should experience it daily."

The importance of this downtime cannot be overstated. We see more clearly, we hear more keenly, we're more inspired, we discover what makes us feel alive.

On some level, we know this already. But claiming time to ourselves—time that is often labeled "unproductive"—and sticking to it can be difficult. We need to establish formal boundaries around our idle time to ensure that others—and we, ourselves—honor this time. Some ways to do this are:

Make a date with yourself. Get to know someone who deserves your attention—you.

Stand firm. Learn how to say "no" to co-workers, children, a spouse or a friend. In just a short while, you can say "yes"; now is your time.

"There's never enough time to do all the nothing you want."

—Bill Watterson

Be clear about your needs. It's not, "I need more time to myself."

It's more like, "I'd like to spend 20 minutes by myself in the morning before everyone gets up."

Be on the lookout for stolen moments. Use a canceled dental appointment to sit on a park bench watching pigeons.

Practice doing nothing. "Doing nothing" is an art, and like all art, you need to practice it to reach your highest potential.

How we define idle time varies by individual. For one person, gardening may be meditative downtime, whereas for another, it is one more item on the to-do list (to be done as quickly as possible). A walk through the woods is, for some, an opportunity to be in and with nature; for others, it's a great place for a power walk while dictating letters into your phone.

Our idle time should be like a beautiful flower: it has no purpose—it's just there—yet it refreshes us and reminds us of nature's glory.

Do something that has no purpose other than joy. Take a half-hour a day to surprise and delight yourself. Keep it simple, and keep it consistent.

There's a good chance you'll find yourself happier, kinder, more inspired—and more successful with all that you do. *

10 Things to Be Thankful for All Year Long

We tend to focus more on gratitude and giving thanks in the fall. Consider, however, all there is to be grateful for every single day.

1. Color. Sunsets, Gauguin paintings, green peppers, blue eyes. Imagine a world without color.

2. Beauty. What do your eyes feast on? What splendor makes your soul rejoice? It is all around us every day. How often do you stop to drink it in?

3. Music. What inspires you, lifts your mood? Rock & roll, African drumming, violin concertos, Turkish ud, gospel? A nightingale?

4. Young children. They model for us innocence, faith, resilience, playfulness and unconditional love.

5. The ability to learn. There is no age limit on learning. When we stop learning, we really stop living.

6. Opportunity. It's our steady companion, and it's always ready to take us down a path yet unknown. (Hint: We just have to say "Yes!")

7. The plant world. From the productivity of a late-summer tomato plant to the delicate unfurling of a fern, nature's exuberance and tenderness is something to behold.

8. The ability to give. Every act of love benefits the giver as much as the receiver.

9. The senses. Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—daily miracles each of them.

10. Change. It's unavoidable; the only constant. Change can be unsettling or challenging. But the mystery of it and what lies beyond it can keep us young at heart. *

A Letter From

Caroline MacLean



Certain times of the year bring with them a sense of more intensive busyness. But even in those seasons, a little do-nothing time—even 10 or 15 minutes—is important to our well-being, as you'll read in this issue's page 1 article.

This issue's quiz allows you to test the level of stress that exists in your family, to see whether you could use support in lowering it. Sometimes we don't recognize the stress that has developed in our homes until some situation erupts or someone explodes.

Regular awareness of gratitude for things we take for granted can help lower stress any time of the year, as the Top 10 points out. Sitting for 15 minutes reflecting on your gratitude could even be a way to get in some healthy idle time!

The page 3 feature in this newsletter speaks to the issue of working on a relationship alone. While it may seem impossible to affect a relationship when your partner refuses to seek counseling or to engage in improving the relationship in other ways, the article points out what is possible within the relationship when you work on yourself.

Finally, the back-page story discusses healthy boundaries, those limits we set over our emotional and physical well-being that we expect others to respect in their relationship with us. Without healthy boundaries, we stand to lose our personal identity, uniqueness and autonomy, or to create impenetrable walls around us.

If you'd like to talk about the issues raised in these articles, or any other issues in your life, don't hesitate to call.

How Stressed Is Your Family?

Stress is normal in family life. And in some cases, stress can make us become better parents, as we stretch to meet challenges we encounter. But too much stress—or the wrong kind of stress—can spiral our families in the other direction. Take this quiz to see how your family fares.



True False

Set 1

- 1. Our family has experienced a lot of significant change recently (divorce, death, blended family, job loss, illness, other trauma).
- 2. Money is very tight. My partner and I have constant conflicts about how to spend it.
- 3. My spouse and I argue a lot about how to raise the children.
- 4. My child has been having behavior problems at school.
- 5. There is a lot of bickering in our house. Someone is always angry at someone else.
- 6. There's never enough time to sit down together, either to talk or to eat. There's always too much to do.
- 7. It's like pulling teeth to get the kids to help around the house.
- 8. The children get upset when they hear us arguing.
- 9. I work too much, and it's really getting to me.
- 10. We don't really talk about hard issues; we just hold our breath and wait, hoping they will go away.

Set 2

- 1. We plan time for family activities. And we eat together at least once every day.
- 2. We acknowledge feelings, encourage their expression and allow time for dealing with the issues these feelings raise.
- 3. If a blended family, we maintain and nurture original parent-child relationships and let new relationships develop in their own time.
- 4. I feel confident in my role as parent.
- 5. Our family easily maintains a sense of humor and playfulness.
- 6. Family priorities take precedence over work.
- 7. I know what's important to my kids.
- 8. When issues arise that we get stuck on, we ask for help from other family members, support groups, community-based programs, clergy and/or a therapist.
- 9. We have enough money for the important things.
- 10. Everyone in the family has responsibilities around the house and does them without being nagged.

If you answered true more often in the first set than in the second set, you may want to seek help to lower the stress level of your family. Families that communicate about problems, who face issues as they arise, who support one another and seek help when it is needed, can build strong bonds among themselves, nurture a healthy and loving family and have a lot more fun doing it! ✨

Relationship Need a Rescue? Try Working on Yourself First

We say that it takes two to make—and break—a relationship. So we assume, therefore, that it takes two to mend a relationship.

But what happens when one person in a relationship doesn't want to do the work—especially if that work means going to couples counseling? Is there a way to work on the relationship by working only on yourself?

The good news is, yes, it is possible. But first, it's important to make sure your mate truly doesn't want to join you in marital/relationship therapy.

- **Ask your partner to join you in therapy.**

Most people are just afraid to ask. Express your concern about your relationship in a non-blaming way. Don't let the myth that "he/she will never go to counseling" dissuade you. Ninety percent of the time, it just isn't true that someone will never go to therapy.

- **Don't let your partner pull you into an argument.** Try a broken record technique such as: "We disagree; and we disagree a lot. That's why I would like for us to go to marital therapy." Say it over and over (like a broken record), rather than get pulled into an argument. Also, ask for what you do want from your partner, rather than what you don't want.

- **If you have previously asked your partner to go to therapy before and he/she refused, ask again, but ask differently.** Most people have great difficulty asking their partner to counseling in a non-defensive, caring way because they are hurting. Try, "I love you, I care about us and I need some help in learning how to communicate to you better. I would like to try counseling." Select a time when there are no distractions, and your partner is rested.

So what do you do if, even after these efforts, your partner still refuses to try couples counseling? Go yourself. Even if only one person in a relationship sees a counselor or therapist, change can happen.

"The overall relationship you have together may or may not improve; however, your own attitude about it will," says Larry James, author of *How to Really Love the One You're With!* This alone is a positive step in the right direction."

Dr. Phil C. McGraw puts it more bluntly. In his book, *Relationship Rescue*, he urges all partners who are unhappy in a relationship to first tend to themselves before trying to change a spouse, lover, partner or boyfriend/girlfriend.

"It is not possible for you to have a seriously defective long-term relationship unless you have

generated and adopted a lifestyle to sustain it," he writes in *Relationship Rescue*. "The reality of your relationship, along with your overall lifestyle and your relationship with yourself, are one hundred percent inextricably intertwined."

In other words, how are you doing with your own relationship with the #1 person in your life—you? Although it's important to acknowledge your disappointment that your partner won't go to therapy or read about relationships with you, it's even more important to move on to the next step.

"The most important relationship is the relationship you have with yourself," James says.

If taking care of you means going to counseling, first make sure you are truly committed to changing. Counseling can be very emotionally challenging because you

are forced to come face to face with some painful realities about the ways you interact with your mate. An approach of "What can I do to be a happier person and maybe improve my relationship, too?" will be more effective than "What do I do to get him/her to change so I can be happier?"

Alabama mediator and divorce lawyer Lee Borden urges his clients to seek counseling, even if it means going alone. He even urges couples who have decided to divorce to seek counseling to understand what went wrong and perhaps avoid certain behavior patterns in the future.

As he puts it, "As you work to know yourself, and particularly as you do it under the guidance of a caring professional, you may discover what makes you tick and find yourself on the road to healing and wholeness."

That step takes a lot of courage and commitment but it's a step few regret taking—even alone.

The Three Cs of Change

Any change begins with courage, clarity and commitment.

Courage. It takes courage to be truthful about your own part in keeping the relationship "stuck." For some people, being "right" is more important than creating a new and better relationship. It takes courage to jump off that pedestal.

Clarity. Who are you and what do you want in your relationship? When you can clearly see how you helped create your relationship, it's a lot easier to change.

Commitment. Change requires taking the leap and sincerely dedicating yourself to creating a shift. Your partner may or may not cooperate with you, but in the end, you will have made the necessary changes to be ready and willing for a productive relationship. *



Healthy Relationships Through Healthy Personal Boundaries

Boundaries, those invisible lines of protection you draw around yourself, let people know your limits on what they can say or do around you.

When personal boundaries are too weak, too soft, you'll allow others' actions to harm you. When they're too solid, you'll build walls. But boundaries that are just right make for good relationships.

The problem is, it's not always clear where our boundaries are or need to be. It's helpful to start by learning to recognize the signs of ignored or ineffective boundaries, as these "symptoms" give clues to the needed boundary. See if any of the following ring true for you.

Aloofness and distance. When you are fearful of opening your space to others, or when you build walls to insure that others don't invade your emotional or physical space, this may be a defense against cruel behavior, abuse or neglect that you allowed to happen. A person with healthy boundaries draws a line over which they will not allow anyone to cross because of the negative impact of its being crossed. They recognize their right to say, "No!"

Chip on the shoulder. This kind of at-

titude declares, "I dare you to come too close!" and is often the result of anger over a past disregard of your physical or emotional space by others. Healthy boundaries mean you are able to speak up when your space has been violated, leaving you free to trust that you can assertively protect yourself to ensure you are not hurt.

Over-enmeshment. In this game, the rule is that everyone must do everything together, and must think, feel and act in the same way, without deviation from group norms. Healthy boundaries acknowledge that you have the right to explore your own interests, hobbies and outlets.

Invisibility. The goal here is not to be seen or heard so that your boundaries are not violated. Healthy boundaries are in effect when you stand up for yourself. Others can learn to respect your rights, needs and personal space.

Disassociation. If you "blank out" during stressful emotional events, it results in you being out of touch with your feelings and unable to assert your limits. Healthy boundaries allow you to assertively protect yourself from further hurt and to choose to end relationships

with those who will not respect them. With healthy boundaries, you can begin to feel your feelings again.

Smothering and lack of privacy. When another is overly concerned about your needs and interests, or when nothing you think, feel or do is your own business, it can be intrusive into your emotional and physical space, leaving you feeling overwhelmed or like you are being strangled. Healthy boundaries ask that others respect your uniqueness, your choices, your autonomy.

Here are some strategies for applying limits when your boundaries are intruded upon:

- Calm yourself and take deep breaths.
- Remember your right to set limits.
- In a firm and composed manner, tell the other person how you feel.
- Communicate clearly what your limits are, especially when you are extending a new boundary.
- Ask the other person to respect your boundaries.
- Make decisions about the relationship according to how the other person responds to your requests. ✱



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