

**COVER STORY**



The background is a light blue color with several overlapping, semi-transparent white squares. Scattered across these squares are several paper butterflies on sticks. The butterflies are in various colors: orange, pink, yellow, and light green. They are positioned around the central text, with some appearing to be flying or placed on the squares.

How to prevent busyness  
from ruining your life

# TAKE BACK YOUR TIME

BY NAOMI K. LEWIS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABRIELLE SYKES

**MARGARET GRIFFITHS, 62, IS NO STRANGER TO BUSYNESS:** she had two children in her early 20s and raised them while running the St. Catharines construction business she co-owned with her husband at the time. At 40 she reinvented herself, embarking on a new career as a social worker. Finally, her life felt balanced. But just six years later, Griffiths was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and fatigue forced her to reduce her work hours. Within a decade, her partner, Lynn Bird, became ill with congestive heart failure and increasingly required help. Before long, Griffiths' daily to-do list far exceeded what time and energy would allow. She knew she had to make some changes.

When we're juggling a number of different commitments—familial, professional, personal—it's easy to feel overwhelmed. We go to bed sure we'll never catch up and wake up feeling worse because we didn't sleep well. Busyness is a kind of trap: stress exacerbates physical and mental health problems and gets worse when we don't take good care of our bodies and minds.

Although it can be difficult to see how to break that cycle when you're caught up in the fray, some smart strategies can help make your life better—and a whole lot less hectic.

## THINK PRODUCTIVE, NOT BUSY

After Ottawa resident Chris Bailey completed a degree in business, he dedicated a year to exploring productivity, spurred by what he describes as “a life-long obsession.” He published *The Productivity Project* earlier this year, at the age of 26, and since then

has devoted himself to the subject full-time as a speaker and consultant. The key isn't corporate-style efficiency, Bailey insists, but rather establishing and achieving goals without wasting energy, focus or time. You may aspire to build a deck or do your taxes or get to appointments on time—or to spend a lazy afternoon reading on the beach. If you accomplish what you've set out to do, you've had a productive day.

In one test, Bailey alternated between devoting 90-hour and 20-hour weeks to his productivity research to see how much a committed workaholic might actually get done. Though he felt far more productive during the longer stints, the logs he kept showed he'd accomplished only 10 to 20 per cent more. He filled the rest of his time with “busywork”—checking email, dawdling on projects, and so on. “Productivity doesn't just involve spending more time on tasks,” he says. Rather, it requires us

(ASSISTANT) MARC-OLIVIER BÉCOTTE; (HAIR AND MAKEUP) LAURIE DÉRAPS/DULCEDO; (STYLIST) TINASHE MUSARA/FOLIO; (MODEL) KRISTINA/DULCEDO; (PHOTO AGENCY) RODEO PRODUCTION

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to focus on the *right* things and allocate our attention and energy wisely.

One of Bailey's favourite discoveries is simple: the list of three. Instead of beginning his days with an epic (and growing) set of to-dos, he writes down the three main tasks he intends to accomplish—whatever is essential to stay on top of things. "The brain is wired to think in threes," he says.

Edmonton-area psychologist Chad Bodnar agrees that prioritizing is key. "You're going to have to evaluate what you can do, what you have control over and what's urgent. Do you have the resources to solve something now, or do you need time to gather what you need? Can you delegate some tasks to other people?" He stresses that we thrive best when we reach out to our social networks, especially in challenging times.

As Griffiths cared for Bird, wrestled with her own fatigue, worked part-time and ran her household, she resisted asking others for help. But when she and her partner both ended up in the hospital at the same time, it was clear she needed support. Griffiths hired a housekeeper and started requesting rides from relatives and friends to get to appointments. She stopped doing unsatisfying volunteer work and declined social invitations that didn't interest her. Bodnar says women often feel especially guilty about saying no but can learn to prioritize activities they find

fulfilling or necessary. Today, Griffiths feels no qualms about turning down appeals and invitations and says her true friends understand.

## TAME TECHNOLOGY

The first time I emailed Bailey to set up an interview, I received an automatic response: he only checks his inbox once a day. Constant digital demands can occupy vast amounts of time—and if we read each message as it comes in, we feel like we're doing something when we're merely distracted.



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According to Heather Menzies, technology is more than simply an annoying diversion. In her 2011 book, *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*, the Ottawa-based author and scholar says we end up feeling busier and busier because we're required to work at the speed of technology. Once we're accustomed to that hectic clip, we easily develop compulsive behaviours, such as constantly checking email and text messages, revving up our brains to an unhealthy pace.

That knee-jerk need to be perpetually plugged in can be exacerbated when we have a lot going on, whether we're anxiously scrambling to finish a project or bustling to coordinate plans with relatives. Some reliance on technology may be unavoidable, Menzies acknowledges, but she maintains that focusing on one thing at a time, at a human (not digital!) pace, and turning off the phone or Internet when possible, can significantly decrease the sensation of frantic busyness.



FOR JUST ABOUT  
EVERYONE, SILENCE  
IS BEST WHEN  
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MENTAL DEXTERITY.

But what about those of us who prefer some background noise—music or even talk radio—while we're doing something else? Researchers have been studying the effects of this sort of stimulation since the 1970s and their findings are mixed, depending on the type of music or broadcast you're listening to, the kind of work you're doing and even your personality type. A 1997 study out of University College London, for instance, found that pop music

affected introverts' cognitive performance more than that of extroverts. That said, the consensus is that, for just about everyone, silence is best when performing tasks that require mental dexterity.

## MIND YOUR BODY

People often feel their ailments are caused by having too much on their plates, says Bodnar, when sometimes "the body's just not properly cared for." You may not need less to do; you may simply need more energy.

In a 2011 survey of Canadian adults conducted by the Heart and Stroke Foundation, 44 per cent of respondents said they had no time for regular physical activity. But Scott Forbes, a professor of human kinetics at Okanagan College in Kelowna, B.C., says just five to 10 minutes—or a total of 150 minutes per week—of moderate exercise, such as walking or cycling, immediately lowers stress. For adults over 65, those 150 weekly minutes become especially vital. They'll lower your resting heart rate, increasing your sense of vitality and making any day's activities less daunting.

In a national survey of Canadian workers conducted between 2011 and 2013, University of Toronto sociology professor Scott Schieman found that only 37 per cent of respondents reported that they frequently woke up feeling refreshed. He identified feeling rushed and busy as the

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crux of the problem. We're caught in a vicious cycle: the more we ruminate about all we need to get done, the more trouble we have sleeping—and the more tired we become, the less we can accomplish each day.



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Though Schieman specifically followed workers, Forbes says older adults tend to struggle the most with falling and staying asleep, which is another reason to embrace fitness: if you get enough exercise, you'll sleep better. According to a 2013 study by researchers at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University in Illinois, even people with significant insomnia notice improvements with three or four 30-minute moderate exercise sessions per week. The effects are cumulative and can take four months to kick in, so don't give up if your first workout fails to result in a sound sleep that very night.

## EXERCISE YOUR MIND

For Catherine Phillips of Edmonton, mindfulness is both a personal and a

professional passion: she credits her daily practice with enabling her to balance a career as a professor, psychiatrist, meditation instructor and consultant at the city's Mindfulness Institute, all while raising two kids with her husband.

If you're unfamiliar with the concept, mindfulness meditation involves "awakening" to the present moment, rather than remaining preoccupied with the past and future. In his 1990 book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, professor and author Jon Kabat-Zinn provides an accessible introduction to the philosophy and science behind the practice. While he focuses specifically on chronic pain, he also offers practical instructions for anyone experiencing stress, detailing a daily practice that includes sitting, walking, breathing and yoga.

Spending just 15 or more minutes meditating each day, Phillips says, can have positive results. She cites several benefits that are tailored to managing a busy schedule: better sleep, feeling less stressed and being conscious of unhelpful cognitive and behavioural patterns. Some people rely on smartphone apps, such as Headspace, that lead users through short daily routines that can include breathing techniques and learning to bring awareness to our bodies and minds.

Phillips uses the following metaphor to describe the effects of meditation: "If you put a teaspoon of salt

in a cup of water, the water takes on the taste of the salt." In an expanded volume of water—say, the size of a lake—that same teaspoon of salt will disperse and become diluted. "Awareness and its contents are like this," she says. With practise, it becomes easier to access our inner sense of stillness. From there, we can assess the urgency of life's demands and calmly prioritize.

## BUT WHATEVER YOU DO ... STAY BUSY!

Edmontonian Barbara Dacks worked as a freelance journalist for 20 years while raising her two sons. In 1996, at the age of 50, she founded the magazine *Legacy* and spent up to 60 hours a week running the publication until she retired in 2011. "I'd worked since I was 14 years old," she says. "I was doubtful that not working would take easily."

Her concern was warranted. Both a report published by the U.K.-based journal *Economic Affairs* in 2013 and a 2005 study by an associate professor of economics at Bentley University in Massachusetts found that physical and psychological health often decline shortly after retirement. "We're designed to keep busy," Bodnar says; retirees get depressed, anxious and sick when they don't know what to do next. Some tend to withdraw from social and work life, which makes matters worse.

In 2010, researchers from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business and Shanghai Jiaotong University's Antai School of Management found that busy people do indeed rate themselves happier than idle ones do, as long as they believe that what they're doing is meaningful. Many people dread boredom more than excessive activity.



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For Dacks, the solution was seeking out novel challenges. To ease her transition, she took up the saxophone and learned how to knit. As she practised her instrument three times a day and crafted hats and scarves for her grandchildren, she felt completely absorbed. "You're not thinking, 'What am I going to with myself?' You're too busy learning something new," she says. Since then, she's also taken on volunteer work that allows her to find a new use for the interviewing skills she acquired over a lifetime of journalism by reaching out to parents on behalf of an early-childhood-development initiative.

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Dacks's newly full schedule is a boon—but as Christopher Hsee, one of the authors of the idleness study, emphasizes, “To maximize overall well-being, one needs to strike a balance between leisure and work.” The key, says Bodnar, is “finding your comfort level,” which can be different for everyone. Retirement often brings the opportunity to experiment till you hit on the sweet spot between

leisure and stimulating activities.

One of the biggest—and most welcome—shifts in Dacks's lifestyle as a retiree is that she no longer passes 5 p.m. “chained to the computer for a deadline.” Though she never enjoyed working overtime, for years she kept going anyway. Now, she says, “I can pour a glass of wine and read a novel without any guilt. What's better than that?” **R**

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## FEEL LESS BUSY IN FIVE MINUTES

Stuck in overdrive? Try one of these simple tricks to slow down. **BY KATE DALEY**

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■ **ZONE OUT** According to a 2012 article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, daydreaming can help improve your memory, imagination and ability to manage your emotions. Turn off distractions (a.k.a. silence your smartphone) and let your brain shift into neutral—a well-rested mind will thank you with a more thoughtful, creative outlook.

■ **GET CREATIVE** Making art—whether it's colouring, doodling or playing with clay—has been shown to significantly lower stress hormones. Self-doubters take heed: you don't even have to be good at it. A study published in the journal *Art Therapy* earlier this year showed that making art produced positive physiological changes in people, regardless of their skill level.

■ **TURN ON THE TUNES** If you're feeling overwhelmed, plug in your headphones and turn up the volume. Numerous studies have shown that listening to music before stressful situations positively influences the body's nervous system. To max out the benefits, try a playlist of relaxing sounds, such as rippling water or classical music.

■ **PLAY HARD** “In our workaholic culture, play is undervalued and seen as a waste of time, but it's what opens us up to new experiences and creativity,” says Brigid Schulte, author of 2014's *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time*. Reclaiming a sense of fun doesn't necessarily mean you have to hunker down in a sandbox— simply doing something you like can open up a space for yourself that's not on your to-do list, says Schulte.