

In defence of downtime

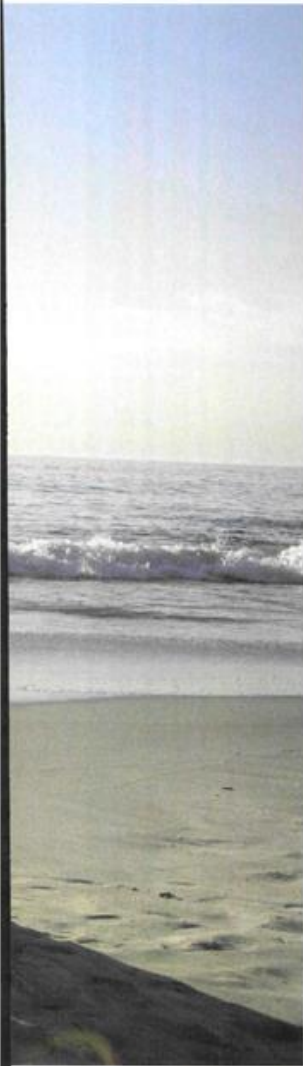
Cramming a week's holiday into an overstuffed annual schedule won't give you the rest your body and brain deserve. It's how you live every day that matters, says Toni Youngusband

Linda Browning wears the look of someone resigned to disappointment. Her luxurious family holiday home on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast is packed with people – boisterous children, laughing teens, grandparents – but the man who paid for it all, her husband Martin, isn't there. "He'll try to get here by Christmas Eve," she tells the noisy group, but nobody hears her. Like her, they've become used to his absences.

"I do this for them," Martin tells me two weeks later when he jets in on Christmas morning, watching his children tear at their expensive gifts. He's with his family for a week.

Tetchy, tired, disinterested. They're symptoms former Sandton banker Richard Hawkey identifies as typical of burnout. His were short-temperedness, growing cynicism and negativity, and no energy to even build sandcastles with his kids. "I'd been exhausted for ages, literally years, but I had two children and was busy, so I thought it was normal," he recalls.

Persistent coughs and colds wracked his depleted immune system. But it was only when his sex drive disappeared in tandem with his appetite that he slowed down long enough to think about what he was doing.



Two out of five adults have high blood pressure due to stress

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

"It's not terribly nice to admit, but as a stereotypical man, I identified with my sexuality quite strongly. When desire disappeared I got worried." Richard's GP diagnosed burnout and the beginnings of clinical depression. "In hindsight, I was probably working on my burnout for 10 years. I'm a Type-A personality, so that undoubtedly contributed," he says.

"This is quite possibly the most stressful that life has ever been," declared a recent article in Britain's *Daily Telegraph*. It claimed 95% of business people in therapy in London were being treated for stress-related conditions. Even high-profile high-flyers like Antonio Horta-Osorio, the chief executive of Lloyds Banking Group, had been ordered by his doctors to stand down for six to eight weeks due to mental exhaustion.

Unstable economies, global political turmoil and worldwide job losses have contributed to our levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Throw in modern technology's ability to make us available – and answerable – 365 days of the year and we're headed for mental meltdown.

Clinical psychologist and executive self-management consultant Dr Neil Tuck says technology has created huge expectations of our accessibility, availability and response times. It's become increasingly implausible to use "out of reach" as an explanation for not responding to someone wanting input from us. And so laptops are packed in with the holiday luggage, smartphones download email while we wait for restaurant orders to arrive and Skype meetings are as much a feature of home life as television soap operas.

"Modern technology has made instant demands possible, while fierce marketplace competition makes quick responses vital," says Cape Town industrial psychologist Laura James. But at what cost? This is a relationship that poses dire consequences for our mental and physical wellbeing. Insomnia, heart palpitations, anxiety, depression and eventually burnout are common

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symptoms of our race to stay on top of things. The enormous strain this puts on our minds and bodies can lead to heart attack, high blood pressure, alcoholism, stroke, drug addiction and obesity.

"I'd never make it through the day without a whisky at the end of it," admits Pete Sulcas, a Durban marketing executive. "Whisky helps me wind down." South Africa's Central Drug Authority says we're among the top 10 consumers of alcohol globally, downing an average 20 litres of alcohol per person per year. "If we had a boozing World Cup, SA wouldn't even have to practice," said the authority's acting chairman, Dr Ray Eberlein. South Africa's current anti-depressant market is valued at R757 million per year.

Global statistics suggest that one in seven men develop stress-related heart disease, and two out of five adults have high blood pressure due to stress. "The prevailing conviction that sweat is obligatory and with each new drop an executive moves a little closer to financial heaven isn't healthy – and it isn't true," says maverick millionaire businessman Ricardo Semler. "You can't make a successful business by arriving early and staying late." Semler is the chief executive officer of Semco SA, a Brazilian company known for its radical form of democratic management. He's an advocate of employee downtime, but it was only after his own near heart attack that he changed how he worked – and what he demanded from his staff.

Hawkey's Type-A personality drove him to seek answers to his burnout as aggressively as it had driven him to virtual collapse. "Psychiatry, cognitive behaviour therapy, lifestyle changes... I read everything in the known universe about stress and depression. I took what worked for me from various sources and took responsibility for my own health and happiness – that was key," he says.

TUCK'S TIPS FOR TIME-OUT

>> Challenge precedents and set limits. The sky will not fall in if you delay the delivery of an outcome by a few hours or a day – as long as you communicate to the affected party and agree on an alternative.

>> Time-out isn't a one-off event that you treat yourself to during your annual three-week holiday. Build in regular and frequent rituals (however brief) that reflect a gesture of time-out and re-energising.

>> Time-out is subjective. Choose the activity that works for you and make sure that you choose a realistic time frame.

>> Give yourself permission to relax and to let go.

>> Like any other skill, it takes preparation and practice. You may need to have ongoing conversations with yourself to appease the guilt.

Burnout taught him to include "happiness" and "fulfillment" in his personal definition of success. "I started to do more things that felt right for the sheer pleasure of feeling good. The only person who can make you happy is you. Unfortunately, that scares a lot of people."

Hawkey had sweated blood for the big family house in desirable Morningside Manor in Sandton, the fancy car, the private school fees and the twice-yearly holidays at the coast. Now, he says, he no longer judges his self-worth by how much "stuff" he has. "As long as one's fixated on the ever-increasing accumulation of stuff as your sole source of happiness, you'll be disappointed. Yes, you'll have fleeting moments of ecstasy when buying the iPhone7, but it can never sustain you."

He resigned from his job as senior portfolio manager with a leading bank and now runs his own company, Equilibrium Solutions, which raises awareness about unmanaged stress. The biggest challenge he faces every day is not slipping back into his old Type-A ways. "I've caught myself working 15 hours a day again and, though I really enjoy the work, when you're working 15 hours a day, you can't hope to have balance in your life."

Of course, not everyone can change their jobs or become self-employed as Hawkey has, but there are things we can all do, every day, to minimise the risk of burnout. And chief among those is to understand the true meaning of time-out and how to put it into practice.

When we take time-out (on condition that it's done properly), we're responding to our body, mind and soul's natural need to recharge and re-energise, says Tuck. "It's not just about the amount of time that you dedicate to time-out – it's about the extent to which you're able to defocus from daily demands and responsibilities. Sometimes, a mere 60 minutes during which you can truly switch off is more energising than a full day off, which is spoilt by constant distractions, guilt and anxiety." Which may explain why some of us feel no more rested after a three-week holiday than a half-hour afternoon nap.

"To achieve the full benefits of time-out, you need to dedicate all of you to the activity at hand," says Tuck. "If you take a walk on the beach, engage all your senses to embrace the environment and the activity. Don't take calls or fire off outstanding emails from your smartphone. And don't take the time-out if you have a pressing deadline. Prepare and plan so that you minimise the risk of your time-out being compromised. Also, don't fall into the trap of imposing these commitments and deadlines on yourself. If this happens, you'll always have a rationalised reason why you can't afford a time-out."

Hawkey says he practices quiet time several times a day. "Some might call this meditation, some might call it prayer; I just call it being quiet with myself and tuning all my senses to that specific moment, giving myself permission to not think about anything else for a few minutes. It takes time, discipline and dedication, which can be scary in our instant-gratification world."

Time-out is not a "nice to have" that we treat ourselves to if and when we've attended to all other priorities, warns Tuck. "If it's viewed in this way, healthy, re-energising time-out will forever elude you. You need to make a disciplined and conscious decision to prioritise time-out, just as you would any other important activity." ☺

* Psychologist Neil Tuck is a member of Discovery magazine's editorial advisory board.

HAWKEY'S TIME-OUT

"I started slowly, with practical physical things that don't cost money – going for a walk every day, cutting down on caffeine, eating reasonably healthily, finding quiet time. I also wrote a book about my experience, *Life Less Lived*, and found a new passion. It's incredible what energy you have when you're doing something you like, that gives you a sense of purpose and fulfillment."

Where to get help

The South African Depression and Anxiety Support Group (SADAG) offers support for a range of stress-related disorders. Go to www.sadag.org or call 011 262 6396.

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