

# Slow down your life.....

## Finding respite from the frenzy

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By Martha Coventry  
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The other day, one of my daughter's friends wistfully talked about the rest periods I used to make any children staying at our cabin take during the summer months. From 1:00 to 2:00, everyone had to go someplace by themselves and be quiet. They could read or nap or draw or play solitaire, but they had to take a break from everyone else and the activities of the day.

I say wistfully because I saw the yearning in this young woman's face and I knew that, at 22, she was already caught, exhaustingly, in a whirlwind of busyness.

**Rest.** We have a hunger for rest, even if we won't acknowledge it. And although that need for rest isn't just about sleep, sleep is a crucial element. According to Mark Mahowald, University professor of neurology and director of the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorder Center, we sleep one third less than people 100 years ago, and "there's not one shred of evidence that they needed more sleep and we need less."

"Time together is food for the family and we are in a state of 'time famine' in family life these days," says Doherty. "What's strange about this, culturally, is that it has become a boast: 'Oh, you think your family's busy! You should see mine!'"

And that degree of sleep loss is devastating. "What our society has to become aware of is that any degree of sleep deprivation--any degree at all--will impair performance," says Mahowald. "Many major industrial accidents, like Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, the Exxon Valdez spill, and the Challenger disaster, were officially attributed to errors in judgment in the workplace due to sleepiness. And one night of sleep deprivation is as impairing behind the wheel as a legally intoxicated blood-alcohol level. Nobody gets [the seriousness of the problem]."

"The two initial consequences of sleepiness are impaired sustained attention and irritability," says Mahowald. "The latter is more difficult to measure, but it exacts a terrible toll--you can have an entire classroom full of irritable, sleep-deprived students, you can have a whole family of people who are short-fused and who are going to say things they otherwise wouldn't have said, and you have sleepy drivers who can fall into road rage."

### What the body knows

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But the craving for rest goes deeper than the need for sleep--it is a visceral yearning to slow down our lives, to have a respite from the frantic schedules we create for ourselves and, more and more often, our children. All over the world, people have simply had enough with what the demands of modern society have done to their bodies, souls, families, and cultures.

In 1985, physician Larry Dossey, in his book *Space, Time & Medicine*, coined the term "time sickness" to describe the illnesses that nag us because we believe we're in the race of our lives against a ticking clock. We use every product, day planner, appliance, and trick we know to win that race, even as we backfill more and more activities into our already busy schedules. According to philosopher Jacob Needleman, our frenetic pace of life is a "new kind of poverty." And it is killing us.

Karen Lawson, a University physician and the director of integrative clinical services at the Center for Spirituality and Healing, explains that our bodies have one stress response--on or off. If we see a car crossing the center line heading in our direction, our pulse goes up, our blood pressure goes up, our stress hormones--like adrenaline and epinephrine--go up. That reaction affects the release of sugar into our bloodstream and that has an impact on our insulin level. In the case of a car coming toward us, that's a good response. It helps us think and act quickly. Once the danger is past, ideally our stress response turns off.

"The problem occurs when we have stress that doesn't resolve and our body stays at the accelerated level," says Lawson. "We raise our set point and we ratchet up what a normal base line is." In other words, it becomes easier and easier to get stressed and harder and harder to return our bodies to normal. The higher that baseline gets, the more elevated the long-term levels of cortisol hormones, and, says Lawson, "elevated cortisol levels have been associated with literally every chronic disease that exists."

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## Family life

That kind of damage is done on an individual life, but the "cult of speed" takes its toll on another organism--the family. Precious in every culture, it now suffers greatly from the economic demands of modern life as well as from "the energy of restlessness," as the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls our driving need to keep our minds and bodies busy.

As we work longer and longer hours and face unprecedented demands in our professional lives, we have--in all innocence--scheduled our children's lives to match our own. We want to give them every advantage, foster their "gifts," and be what American society has deemed a "good parent." As a result, the once revered and dreamy life of childhood is becoming a thing of the past and family life a quaint and old-fashioned concept.

Families rarely eat together anymore or have a conversation, and grandparents have a hard time getting on their grandchildren's "dance cards," says William J. Doherty, professor in the department of family social science. "Time together is food for the family and we are in a state of 'time famine' in family life these days," says Doherty. "What's strange about this, culturally, is that it has become a boast: 'Oh, you think your family's busy! You should see mine!'"

A big part of Doherty's work these days is to turn what is seen as a virtue into a problem--overscheduled children. "Children have a need for structure, a lot of quantity time, not just quality time, and they need a lot of sleep," says Doherty. "They need down time to play and use their imagination. They need time to play with their friends without adults supervising, and without trophies and league schedules."

But Doherty doesn't blame individual parents for the intense busyness of their children's lives. Instead, he points to the massive cultural phenomenon that dictates that to be a good parent, we have to expose our kids to everything so they will have a head start against the competition. Parents don't want their children to be left behind.

## Hitting the pause button: how to slow down

Hundreds of opportunities exist to slow down your life. The following ideas are a few ways to relax your mind and body.

--Bring back a day of rest. No matter what your religion or cultural background, set aside one day during the weekend when you and your family do absolutely no work. Force yourself, if you must, to just enjoy each other and the world around you.

--Every once in awhile, cross a few things off your to-do list, even if you haven't done them. Accept the fact that we can't accomplish everything, that we're not perfect, and that's perfectly all right.

--At random times during the day, do what Karen Lawson challenges her medical students to do outside the exam room--take three conscious breaths. Studies have shown that we can change the tracings on a heart rate monitor in just three breaths.

--Nap. Napping is slowly moving into corporate America as a highly-effective way to improve performance. "[At the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorder Center,] we endorse napping and sleeping in at every possible opportunity," says Mark Mahowald. Celebrate National Workplace Napping Day this year on the first Monday after the beginning of daylight savings time.





--**Turn off the television.** A radical act, but going without the distraction and glare of television for even two days a week encourages peace and calm in a household.

--Walking for exercise is important, but the lost art of strolling can be extremely relaxing. Just go out by yourself, with your dog, or with a friend and wander, with no particular place to go.

### Permission to rest

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One thing Mahowald, Lawson, and Doherty all agree on is that if a critical number of people--the field theory says it takes 10 percent--cry "Enough!" to the frenzied tempo of modern life, then a cultural shift can happen.

For Mahowald, the sleep expert, that critical mass needs to acknowledge the serious consequences of sleep deprivation and turn away from the shame of slowing down. "Our society has equated sleep deprivation with a badge of honor," says Mahowald. "The less sleep you get, the more you're perceived as a hard-driving, successful, committed person in the workplace or the classroom. We have to realize that sleep is a biological imperative. It's like eating or drinking water. Your brain needs sleep."

Lawson says that when working with professionals in the healthcare system, the starting point is to give them a reason why it makes sense to slow down--and that reason is better performance. "Everything in our culture is based on productivity," says Lawson. "If they find that taking time out not only makes them more productive, but makes all parts of their lives better, then they start to let go of the judgment that resting is bad."

Giving parents the motivation and courage to step back from over-scheduling their children's lives is a daunting challenge. No one wants themselves or their children to be guinea pigs for social change, says Doherty. "A lot of social pathologies--[such as our unsustainable need for activity]--show themselves first in children and youth. We need to turn this around for our children, if not for ourselves," says Doherty.

### Part of the solution

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Everyone has a little bit of the revolutionary in them, so why not be part of that 10 percent needed to make a cultural shift? It's risky, but you could be responsible for restoring the health and sanity of our entire country. There are plenty of ways to get involved, like the Family Dinner Initiative and a Weekly Family Night Initiative being organized by a citizen group in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. The goal is to have 1,000 families pledge to gather their own families together for dinner five to seven times a week and to have a family night once per week.

You could take part in any number of stress reduction classes, workshops, or lectures at the University, like the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction series sponsored by the Center for Spirituality and Healing.

And you could buck that Scandinavian Lutheran heritage or that punishing work ethic and doze on the couch on a Sunday afternoon. Or you could decide to change your schedule so you actually get all the sleep you need.

"Don't use the excuse that [slowing down] is too hard, or it takes too much time. It's not and it doesn't," says Lawson. "It's about choice and presence and learning a few basic tools. In America, more, bigger, and faster is always better, but that's a voluntary mindset. It doesn't have to be that way."

So do get caught napping, don't be the early bird who catches the worm, and take the risk of idle hands being the devil's workshop. Take back your life. After all, what's the hurry?