

## Learning to live again

If you've been living in the fast lane, it can be hard to shift down a few gears. Here are some tips on how to slow down your pace of life.

### 1 GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO STOP

Going to the gym may be necessary, but it's not urgent. Doing the washing-up may be useful, but it can wait. "Ask yourself, what's the worst thing that could happen if I don't get this done?" says psychologist Meredith Fuller. "You'll be surprised how often the answer will be 'nothing much'."

**2 PASS ON PERFECTION** Let the bed go unmade if you're running late for work. Send a card to a friend instead of writing a letter. By unbending a little, you'll begin to lighten up and see that there is always room to slow down and put your own needs first – regardless of how busy you are.

**3 PLAN TO HAVE NO PLAN** Leisure time is precious, so make it a rule to spend it doing things you totally enjoy. If you're feeling lazy and crave time alone with your husband, cancel that dinner date with friends. If you want to get an early night so you're fresh for the week, tell your parents you'll catch up with them next Sunday. Every now and then stay home on a Saturday morning, ignore your "to do" list, make no plans and do something spontaneous. Sleep in, go to the art gallery or walk barefoot in the rain to remind yourself that you're alive.

**4 THINK ONE THOUGHT AT A TIME** "It's a skill to be able to give one thing your

undivided attention, and if you can manage to do it, you can really save on time and minimise stress," advises Meredith. "The best way to practise living in the moment is to experience life through your five senses. When you're walking to the bus stop, perceiving the phone, making love or eating a meal, notice what you are doing, thinking and feeling. Once you have finished a task, don't dwell on it – learn to trust yourself, let go and move on."

**5 FACE YOUR FEELINGS** "Keeping chronically busy can often be a subtle form of procrastination, which shields us from thoughts and actions which we don't want to feel or acknowledge," Meredith warns. "The heavier your commitments, the busier your schedule, the more out of touch you will be with who you are, where you're at and which direction you want to take next."

**6 NURTURE YOURSELF** Meditate, contemplate, close your eyes and sit in a quiet place, walk, listen to music, paint, or write regularly in a journal. It doesn't mean that if you pamper yourself you have licence to push yourself harder. Quality "me" time should have no strings attached. It means finishing a book because you can't put it down, not because your sister gave it to you for your birthday. Or why not just sit and soak up the sun while you have a cup of coffee? The more you enter that magical realm where you feel free of worry and at one with nature, the more you'll want to stay there at your leisure and make time to ensure that you can.

## Anne Heath Mennell

WRITER AND ENVIRONMENTALIST, AGE 55

I had a long-standing dream to write fiction and I realised I was running out of time," says Anne Heath Mennell, a university administration assistant from Melbourne, who has won several short story contests since streamlining her life. "Through working part-time, I have the luxury of exploring my writing and other interests, such as gardening, contributing to the local newspaper and being involved in an environmental group.

"My life feels incredibly rich and my days are extremely busy, full of things I have chosen to do – which nourish me rather than drain me like work used to."

Had she not been forced into change, Anne might never have known her free spirit. "When the university department where I worked as a training consultant merged with another department, I was offered a redundancy," she recalls.

"I was absolutely devastated and felt like a failure. I have no partner and my family live in the UK, so my job had always been the major focus of my life. Work gave me my identity."

For three years, Anne took stopgap jobs and did lots of soul-searching. "I was obsessed with asking, 'Why am I here?', 'What is life for?', 'What have I achieved?'. Exploring these questions made me start to see the total lack of balance I had come to accept as normal. So when a permanent part-time job came up, that I could leave at the office at the end of the day, I took it and started to change my priorities."

One Saturday morning, while flicking through the newspaper, Anne saw a small two-bedroom house for sale not far from the beach. Within months, Anne had sold her Melbourne flat and fulfilled a lifelong dream to live by the water.

"If I walk a kilometre, I'm at the bay and the beach. If I sit on my balcony, I can watch kookaburras lingering on the bird feeder in my backyard or look out at ducks and black swans on nearby wetlands. From my bedroom, I see the sky and the trees, so every morning when I wake up I feel incredibly delighted."

Three days a week, Anne commutes to town. "At first, I found it tiring and worried that I'd made a mistake, but now I find the commute easy. The biggest hurdle has been the financial adjustment. However, I accept that this is the trade-off for my new lifestyle. It's worth it, I feel more centred and happy than I've ever felt before."

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Anne Heath Mennell, 55, sold her Melbourne flat to fulfil a lifelong dream to live by the water: "If I walk a kilometre, I'm at the bay and the beach."

## MAKE YOUR JOB WORK FOR YOU

Want more time to sit in the sun, be with your children and talk with your partner? Slow and steady does it. "The danger is you'll do the reactive thing and say, 'I've had a giftful and quit your job before asking yourself some pivotal questions,'" says psychologist and careers counsellor Meredith Fuller. Before taking irrevocable steps, consider these options:

**THE FINANCIAL FACTOR** Calculate your financial position by adding up all your assets and subtracting all your debts. Then examine your spending habits by going over old bank and credit card statements. Tally up your survival expenses, including food, travel and pocket money. This will help you decide if you could survive if you weren't working full-time.

**CONSIDER A SABBATICAL** You may think you're tired of the industry you're in, when, in fact, you only need to have a break or relocate to a new organisation. "Often women working at high levels are stressed and think they want out, when they actually need renewal by taking leave for six months to a year," says Morozov.

**OTHER OPTIONS** Rather than opt out of work entirely, consider trying to strike a deal with management to take on a part-time job or cut down the hours in your current position by organising to job share. By going part-time, you will at least have money coming in and enough free time to pursue more fulfilling activities. Or follow the current trend towards the "portfolio career" – having several part-time or freelance income streams which offer variety and flexibility.

**DISORIENTATION** Although some women who've been married to their jobs quit that work culture and never look back, many experience feelings of ambiguity about their new identity. "This adjustment period may involve tiffs and frowns, feelings of detachment, numbness and panic, coupled with great relief and joy," says Meredith.

"The longer you've been with an organisation or industry and the harder you've been working, the longer and more intense the recovery process will be when you try to change that status quo."