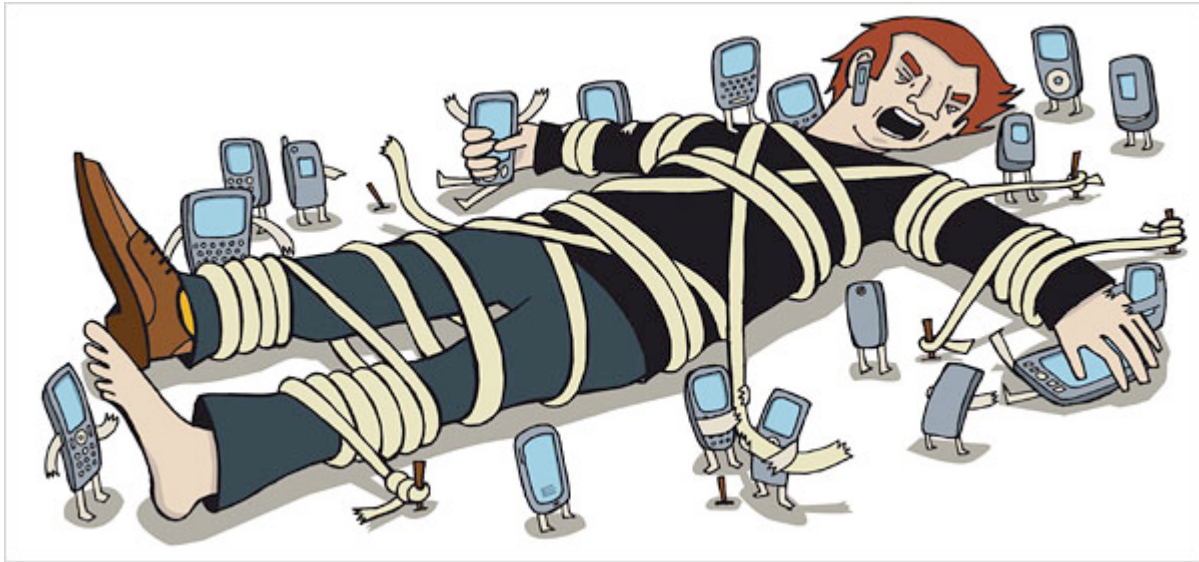


Too Busy to Notice You're Too Busy



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RECENTLY I've found myself annoyed by how busy my friends seem. Putting aside the possibility that they are avoiding me, some are so on the go that they barely have time to tell me they do not have time to talk. Every phone call, no matter how short, seems to be interrupted by several others. That is, of course, if I actually get a live person on the other end of the phone.

I consider my life to be somewhat filled and fulfilling. I have a husband and two children, work part time, volunteer, exercise several times a week (well, usually) and socialize regularly. For the record, I do not have a baby sitter, but do have a house cleaner for about four hours every two weeks.

But, and I am almost embarrassed to admit this, I also have time to read novels, catch a movie or play once in a while and have the occasional long lunch with a friend. In our busy, busy world, however, I sometimes feel as if I am the odd one out. Although those who are overworked and overwhelmed complain ceaselessly, it is often with an undertone of boastfulness; the hidden message is that I'm so busy because I'm so important.

Now I realize that busyness is not an absolute: everyone has a different threshold. I have one friend for whom more than one social engagement a weekend is just too much; others love to party, party, party. And most people would trade in bored and stagnant for a little stress if they were engaged in doing something they loved.

I am also aware that there are many who have no options; who must work exhausting hours simply to survive. But I am speaking about those who choose to keep up a frenetic pace that seems largely self-imposed, unnecessary — and unenjoyable.

Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of “CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked and About to Snap” (Ballantine Books, 2006) writes about how he knew he had crossed into the dark side from busy to crazy busy when he got mad at a rotary phone while staying at a vacation house.

Unable to use a cellphone, he was driven nuts waiting for the dial to return to start.

Then calming himself, he timed how long the dialing actually took: 11 seconds.

“What a fool I had become,” he writes. “I had become a man in a hurry even when I had no need to hurry.”

According to Dr. Hallowell, there are many (26 in his book) overlapping reasons we all fall into the trap of being overly busy. A few are:

¶It is so easy with cellphones and BlackBerrys a touch away.

¶It is a kind of high.

¶It is a status symbol.

¶We’re afraid we’ll be left out if we slow down.

¶We avoid dealing with life’s really big issues — death, [global warming](#), AIDS, terrorism — by running from task to task.

¶We do not know how not to be busy.

Not only are we constantly occupied, but we, as Americans, are also famous for not knowing how to be unoccupied.

My husband and I would no more fail to use up vacation time than we would hand back our paycheck. But, according to a 2005 study, “Overwork in America,” released by the nonprofit group Families and Work Institute, 36 percent of 1,000 salaried employees surveyed by telephone said they did not plan to take their full vacation.

Of course, it is not just in the work force that people are madly busy. Many people I know, who might be able to enjoy some downtime because their children are in school and they do not have paying jobs, pile errands on top of volunteering on top of working out on top of, well, you name it. When the children get out of school, they race from one activity to another, and if at some point life seems to calm down, then it is time to take on a big construction project, get a dog or have another baby.

Paradoxically, Dr. Hallowell writes in “CrazyBusy,” it is in part the desire for control that has led people to lose it.

“You can feel like a tin can surrounded by a circle of a hundred powerful magnets,” he writes. “Many people are excessively busy because they allow themselves to respond to every magnet: tracking too much data, processing too much information, answering to too many people, taking on too many tasks — all in the sense that this is the way they *must* live in order to keep up and stay in control. But it’s the magnets that have the control.”

One way to wrestle back control is to take a hard look at our priorities, he said, “to decide what matters.” This does not necessarily mean big career changes or moving from Manhattan to rural Vermont. It can also be figuring out in small, but significant ways how to scale down frantic to manageable.

My friend Leah and her husband have three children and have tried many different permutations of the work/life balance over the years. She had the full-time job while he worked part time; he went back to a full-time career when she cut back to part time. Now, with a 14-year-old daughter coming up on college, they are both working full time.

“We’ve set up our lives, so we take turns doing the class trips for our kindergartner, so we can go to the field hockey games, but it’s really tough,” she said. “I work hard at making life less insane.”

On a day when she had to pick up her father from the airport, for example, she made the decision to bring work home so she wouldn’t race to her office, then rush to the airport, then hightail it back to her job.

“That’s a big thing,” she said. “There’s a conscious effort not to feel so chaotic, but I can’t say it’s always so successful.”

We can long for the days when parents at class events didn't spend as much time tapping on their BlackBerrys as watching their children haltingly recite their poetry; when cellphones were not the background noise of daily life.

But instead of bemoaning technology, it is time to make it a tool of good rather than evil.

Often, small changes can be amazingly simple. For example, one woman took back some of her time, Dr. Hallowell said, by making a seemingly minor but crucial shift in her workplace: "She put her computer behind her instead of in front of her, so she had to swivel around to use it. To use the computer — to write, to do e-mail, go to [Google](#), whatever — she had to make a conscious decision to do so. This is huge."

Other times it can take a little training.

Answering and receiving e-mail messages can suck up enormous amounts of time during the workday, said Mike Song, a co-author of "The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your E-Mail Before It Manages You" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

Mr. Song, along with his co-authors, surveyed 8,000 employees working in major corporations over three years, and found that most say they spend about 40 percent of their workday on e-mail activity.

"E-mails put other people's priorities in your lives," he said. And although his emphasis is on work, to a lesser extent we all see it at home in the form of the friend who constantly sends out the group messages or passes on every joke.

With a few relatively simple tactics, that time can be cut way back, said Mr. Song, who used to be a money manager and now is a founding partner of Cohesive Knowledge Solutions, a firm that trains corporations on, yes, controlling e-mail.

For example, 75 percent of those surveyed said their colleagues used the "reply all" function far too often. Yet only 15 percent said they felt that they themselves did so.

So Mr. Song suggests largely eliminating the "reply all" and "cc" options.

I particularly like some of the codes you can use to avoid having to reply, such as NRN, for no reply needed, and NTN, for no thanks needed. I never thought I would accuse people of being overly polite, but perhaps we can cut a wee bit back on the e-mails that say "Thanks!"

The trouble with writing about busyness is that, like focusing on dieting or budgeting, I am now hyper-aware of how I spend each moment. It is exhausting. And if I didn't need to rush off, I would lie down.