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A call for

Enjoy life more by doing less

By Stephanie E. Ponder

AT SOME TIME, most of us reach a point when we are too busy to add even one more task to our overbooked schedules. What used to be free time has been hijacked by work, classes, social events and errands. And we're tethered to devices that offer an unprecedented amount of information and accessibility.

This constant connectivity, combined with the feeling that there is too much to do—and with no end in sight—leads to negative stress.

That stress, in turn, can take a toll on health and the ability to focus on work tasks; alter how employees feel about their employer; undermine accuracy and creative thinking; and foster depression, resentment and feelings of para-

noia about job security. (For more on the effects of stress, see "Stress can kill" on page 36.)

The bottom line: Sustained busyness is taking a toll on the quality of our work along with our personal relationships.

The good news is that there's no need to wait for a health crisis or major life event, such as a heart attack or divorce, to take a break. The following article and special health section look at the reasons we're overbooked and overly busy, along with ways to slow down, take a break between activities, bring mindfulness to your activities and reclaim your life, even if it's for just seconds or minutes at a time.

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The birth of busyness

With the advent of the industrial revolution, time could suddenly be measured in output as well as minutes and hours.

There's little doubt that technology over the last two centuries has made most work easier, but the more recent introduction of smartphones and tablets, in particular, has rendered the term "on the clock" nearly obsolete. However, unstructured downtime is often when we do our best creative thinking.

"At every red light you [can] look over and people are checking their email or texting somebody," says sociologist and Costco member Christine Carter (christinecarter.com). "There is no such thing anymore as just waiting, just staring into space."

Carter, an author and senior fellow at the University of California, Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, is eager to let everyone know that "if you want to be highly productive and efficient, then there are ways to do that and it does not involve working all the time. It involves taking a lot of breaks."

Journalist Carl Honoré, who wrote *In Praise of Slowness* (HarperOne, 2004; not available at Costco)—which examines the benefits of infusing every aspect of our lives

with slowness—offers insight into why people stick with overloaded schedules.

Honoré tells *The Connection*, "The world is this huge buffet of things to do, and the natural human instinct is to want to have it all. [However], if you try to have it all, you will end up hurrying it all."

Another reason, he says, is that slow "is a four-letter word that's a byword for lazy, stupid, unproductive, boring—all the things that nobody wants to be. And because of that taboo, even when people can feel in their bones that it will be good to put on the brakes, or they yearn to slow down, they don't do it because they feel afraid, they feel guilty, they feel shame."

The last reason Honoré (carlhonore.com) cites is the physical nature of stress addiction. "A high-speed lifestyle is like a drug; it's where we're in fight-or-flight mode. It changes the chemistry of the body and the brain," he says, addressing how people become stress junkies.

Finding your slow

Honoré's wake-up call came when a book of one-minute bedtime stories caught his attention. His first thought was, "Hallelujah!" And then, realizing that he was looking for a shortcut through what should have been a treasured time with his son, he saw himself, he says, "in sharp relief, and what I saw there was ugly and unedifying."

"I have a before and after that is crystal clear. Before, I just felt like every moment of my day was a dash to the finish line. And now I don't have that feeling," he says.

Honoré, who lives in fast-paced London, is the first to admit that the Slow Movement isn't about doing everything at a snail's pace.

It's about doing things at the right pace.

"I call it slow; other people might call it flow," he says. "You're fully immersed in the moment and you're at one, almost, with the act of the task itself."

That flow is what Carter refers to as the sweet spot, which she describes as the intersection of strength and ease where a person feels the most relaxed and the most productive. In addition to strategically saying no and refraining from multitasking, Carter encourages people to take an occasional recess to help find that sweet spot.

She says that, for her, feeling overwhelmed is the signal to step away



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from what she's doing, give herself 10 to 15 minutes to get outside, leaf through a magazine or just stare into space.

"To everybody else it looks like I am not working very hard; to me it's a strategy for getting [everything] done," she says, adding that most people are skeptical about how taking breaks can help with work. "The irony is that the best way to get your head in the game is to actually fully take it out of the game."

Slow start

Because it's difficult to envision slowing down without falling behind, Honoré encourages people to start small. (See "Slow down, live better" on page 34 for more tips on adding slowness to your day.)

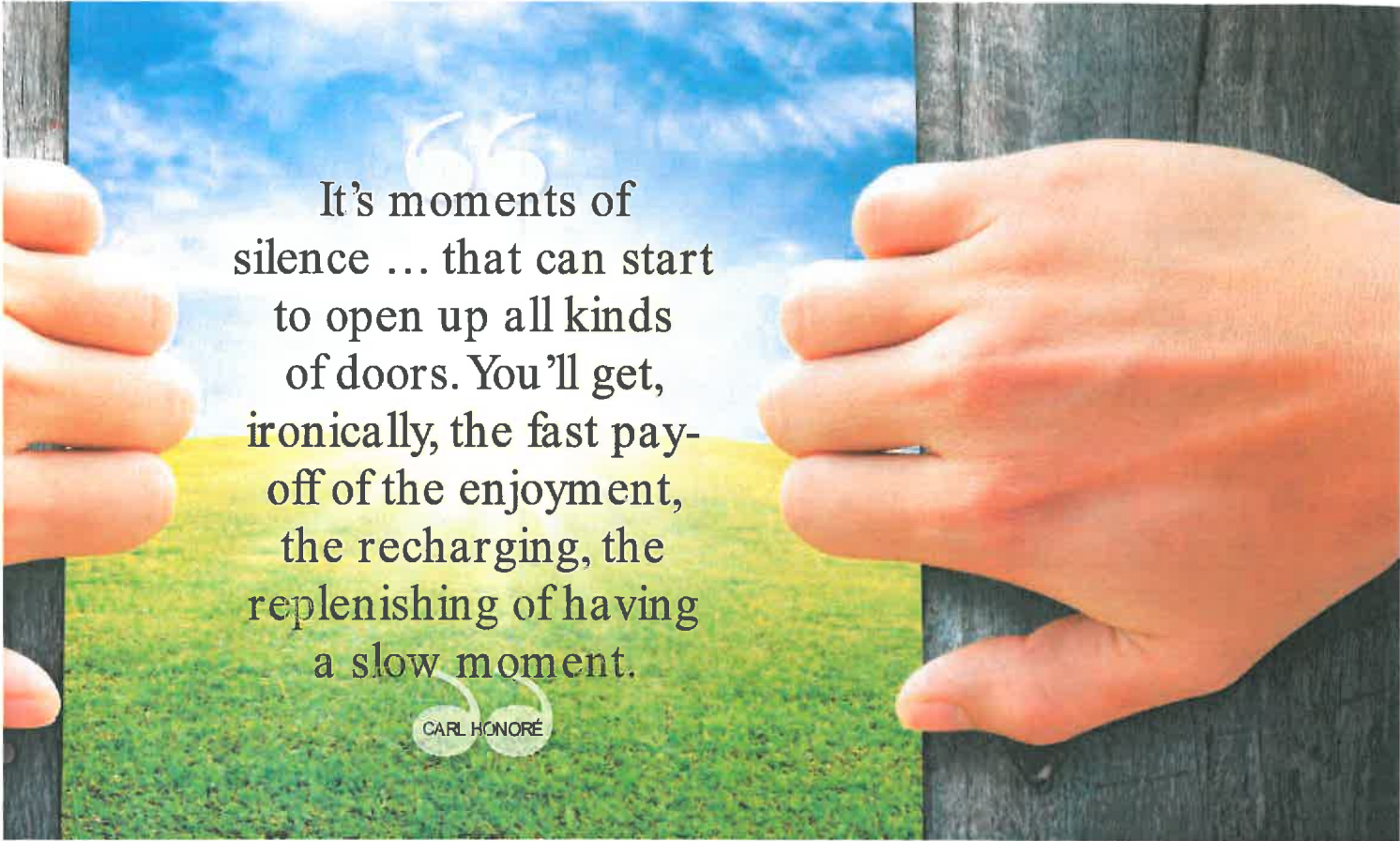
"It can be as simple as the next time you make yourself a sandwich at home alone ... set the table with cutlery, plates and a glass of water, and just sit there and eat it rather than trying to do something else at the same time," he suggests.

Whether it's a sandwich moment, getting away from your desk or turning off gadgets for an hour each day, each act is a step in the right direction. "It's moments of silence ... that can start to open up all kinds of doors. You'll get, ironically, the fast payoff of the enjoyment, the recharging, the replenishing of having a slow moment," Honoré says. He adds that most people don't apply it to just one aspect of their lives; it starts seeping into all areas until it becomes a state of mind.

"If you're going to make the most of your life, then you have to have the time, the attention, the energy to invest in what's happening right here, right now," he notes. "You can never



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CARL HONORÉ

do that if you're overburdened, if you're over-scheduled, if you're doing too many things."

He continues: "I think what's often missing is that real, deep living. And it's when we slow down and we're fully engaged when we're doing things, that we remember them. And so much about a life well-lived is memory."

The art of savoring

The importance of creating happy memories is not lost on Fred Bryant, a social psychologist at Chicago's Loyola University, who, for more than three decades, has been researching savoring—particularly how an experience gets translated and transformed into happiness and good memories.

His research often involves presenting people with pizza or chocolate and telling them that their assignment is to enjoy that food as much as possible. Bryant says that the first thing people do is slow down.

"When people want to enjoy something, they try to make it last. They try to stretch the experience out," he says.

Unfortunately, today's pace of doing as much as possible in as short a time as possible is the antithesis of savoring. "If you want to smell the roses, you have to stop," says Bryant. "You can't drive by, just roll the window down and say, 'Well, that was great.'"

"[Busyness] robs us of the desire to linger. It tells us that ... if you're not doing something, you're wasting time, which is crazy. Time is time. You can just spend it in a different way. It never gets hoarded and saved," he continues.

Bryant's advice for savoring is to take the time to build mental pictures: "It's in the building of the mental photo that you notice the

things that you want to remember—the joyous, beautiful things that are worth savoring. It helps you focus on them and enjoy the moment more—not only in the moment, but later on."

Mighty mindfulness

Giving yourself to a good experience sounds easy, but what if being still requires paying attention to nothing more than your breath or, worse, creates negative or uncomfortable feelings?

Meditation expert, author and Costco member Sharon Salzberg (sharonsalzberg.com) points to a University of Virginia study in which participants, when given the choice of spending six to 15 minutes in a room with

nothing to do but think or receive electric shocks, more often opted for the shocks.

While it may be initially uncomfortable, mindfulness—the act of being aware of what's going on at a particular moment without assigning judgment to what you're feeling—and mindful meditation have been shown to have a variety of benefits. (For more on mindful meditation in the Connection, see "Mindful matters," July 2014. At Costco.com, enter "Connection"; at Online Edition, click on "Back Issues" and search "meditation.")

"I do think [mindfulness] has the potential to help people," Salzberg tells the Connection. "If you're having a hard time at work and things are really confused, agitated or angry,

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A mindful minute

MEDITATION INSTRUCTOR Sharon Salzberg offers the following tips and "stealth meditations" to infuse mindfulness into the workday.

Take a lunch break. This is your personal time to take a mental break from work and recharge for the afternoon, so take advantage of it.

Be realistic about your time. You can't do 15 hours of work in an eight-hour day.

Read an entire email twice before composing a response.

Experience the transition to work as a journey.—SEP

Reprinted with permission from *Real Happiness at Work*, by Sharon Salzberg (Workman, 2014; not available at Costco).



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DAVID GELLES

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you need to regroup. All you need to do is settle your attention on the feeling of your breath. You don't have to sit down cross-legged and close your eyes and look weird."

Salzberg understands how mindfulness may appear to be a passive way of avoiding work, but she adds that research shows that the practiced focus enhances work performance and response to situations. At the same time, she notes, her emphasis is on the words of "an old, venerable Tibetan lama" who spoke of "short moments, many times."

Whether you wait until after the phone rings a third time to pick it up or remind yourself of your priorities before a meeting, instead of needing large chunks of time, mindfulness can mean taking moments throughout "the workday where we can break the sometimes crazy momentum of what's happening around us and take a breath and regroup," Salzberg recommends. "Because when we come back to ourselves in that way, we also come back to our priorities and our purpose and what we really care about."

Employing mindfulness

Salzberg isn't alone in recognizing the benefits of using mindfulness to create much-needed breaks during the workday. Earlier this year, business journalist David Gelles wrote an article for *The New York Times* about how Aetna's CEO, Mark T. Bertolini, after a near-fatal accident, began offering free yoga and meditation classes at the company. To date roughly 13,000 employees have taken the classes. The result is a feeling of less stress, decreased heart rates and a decrease in the levels of the stress hormone cortisol among those employees—along with reduced health-care costs, which translated into about \$9 million in savings for the company.

Not just an assignment, the story was personal for Gelles (davidgelles.com), who says, "Mindfulness and meditation have helped me

navigate a saner path through" balancing a busy work and home life.

In *Mindful Work* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015; not available at Costco), Gelles, a Costco member, shares stories of how those practices are working for individuals and companies, such as General Mills and Google.

"We all are stressed about something or another," says Gelles. "Mindfulness meditation helps us create some room around that stress, and one of the ways it does that is by training us to be a bit more accepting of what's happening. But this doesn't mean being totally passive or just being a pushover."

Gelles adds that while mindfulness is no panacea, in addition to reducing stress, it can increase focus and the ability to stay on task.

"When we actually start paying attention to what we're doing, we'll notice a whole lot of things that we might otherwise miss," he says. "When we can stop this incessant mind wandering and actually be fully present in the moment, there is a whole range of sensations that reveal themselves to us that we're otherwise usually too distracted to notice."

Finding calm in WhiteSpace

Costco member Juliet Funt, CEO of WhiteSpace at Work, has a different approach. Simply put, WhiteSpace is the act of making a little space between workday activities.

"A little space can be 30 seconds to breathe before you get on an elevator, or it can be a CEO sitting [and] looking out the window for an hour, or it could be anything in between. The idea is to open up quiet, unscheduled time that lurks between activities," says Funt, daughter of Candid Camera creator Allen Funt. "The problem is the meeting, which connects to the conference call, which connects to the lunch. We are putting in these little wedges of time to break the chain of connected activity"

Funt (julietfunt.com/whitespace) says she first started talking about WhiteSpace about 10

Slow down, live better

CARL HONORÉ, who coined the phrase "Slow Movement," has the following tips to add a little slowness to your life.

Breathe. Slow, deep breathing reoxygenates the body, which slows the heartbeat and stabilizes blood pressure. When you feel panicky, stop for a moment and take a few deep breaths.

Speed audit. Stop and ask yourself if you're doing whatever you're doing too fast. If you are going faster than you need to when you do the audit, go back to the task and work more slowly.

Downsize your calendar. Look at your schedule for the next week, pick the least important scheduled activity and drop it. This will take some of the heat out of that particular day.

Schedule unscheduled time. Block off two hours in your week when you don't plan anything in advance. This will guarantee you some time when you can slow down to your own rhythm.

Find a slow ritual. Find a slow ritual that acts as your personal brake and helps you shift into a lower gear. It might be gardening, reading, yoga, cooking, knitting, painting, whatever.—SEP

years ago as a keynote speaker, and since then people have wanted to hear about little else.

"It was the most clear, gigantic and visible arrow from the market, just pointing [out] that this is our problem," she explains.

Funt's experience is that most businesses don't appreciate the need for WhiteSpace until they see an uptick in health issues or a creative stall without the time to create. Other warning signs include a group making potentially costly mistakes, a downward shift in morale or people jumping ship for other companies.

While getting people to create time in their schedules isn't impossible, it does, she notes, involve addressing the culture of business in which "you take the pain and you don't question and maybe you're so buried in denial that you don't even have any perception that anything is wrong."

"I think it is that boundary-less, creative, playful, free experience that people miss so much, and I think that that's one of the reasons why it's so nurturing," explains Funt, who adds that the benefits include more focus, engagement and invigoration. "You don't have to breathe deeply in WhiteSpace; you just have to be not doing a whole bunch of other stuff during that moment." ■

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