

## Slave to your office trivia? You can escape

JOHANNA WEIDNER

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Arriving at work and logging on to your computer, you're hit with dozens, even hundreds of messages clogging your e-mail inbox.

You start weeding out junk mail and quickly reply to unimportant messages to get them out of the way. When the inbox is cleaned out in a few minutes, you move on to the day's more important endeavours.

But you've already made a big mistake, says corporate trainer Cathy Shaughnessy. Time wasted on an unimportant chore is time diverted from your priorities.

This bad strategy -- just one of many people mistakenly employ to cope with work overload -- only bolsters stress and hampers productivity, said Shaughnessy, an owner of the Waterloo training company ShaughnessyHowell.

"It's this endless circle of running as fast as you can to stay in the same place," she said.

Worst of all, people are afraid to admit they're stressed. "People feel like they can't fess up that they feel overwhelmed," Shaughnessy said.

Stress becomes a "dirty little secret" while busyness is a "badge of honour."

But the overload takes a huge toll.

"People are working very hard to keep their heads ... but in the process they're losing their minds," she said. It's no coincidence that that's the topic of a quick, 90-minute workshop Shaughnessy is offering in Kitchener next week.

She says that while juggling demands in the daily struggle to stay in control, people are falling apart inside.

"Instead of exploding, they're imploding trying to do it all."

A short temper is a tell-tale sign of stress. Emotionally drained and overloaded people often overreact, usually in situations unrelated to what is causing the stress, such as a long line at the bank or driving conditions.

Instead, "we're expressing our overload in what we think are safe places," Shaughnessy said. "That's where people are letting the pressure off."

But that's only a temporary measure. Without change, the pressure will build to a critical level again.

Shaughnessy's solution: create balance in your life.

Life has four components: relationships, work, health and recreation. Focusing too much attention on one area steals from others.

Shaughnessy said people must assess their lives, figure out where their energy goes, and the sacrifices they make. The next step is making changes to find balance.

Taking time every day to regain balance is not a waste of time because then "you are more productive in the other areas of your day," Shaughnessy said.

Employers should help employees find that balance because it also helps the bottom line, Shaughnessy said. Stressed workers take more sick days, are less efficient when they're at work and are more likely to leave for new jobs.

### WHAT IS BALANCE?

A balanced life is when demands are equal to time and energy. Balance is not a destination, but a journey, Shaughnessy says. Vigilance and continued work are a must to enjoy a balanced life.

There will be good days and bad days on the quest. Look at days that work and figure out what you did right. Then examine days that went wrong and figure out what to avoid.

And, most importantly, "it's OK to ask for help." Shaughnessy said. "We cannot do it all."

For example, hire a concierge for an hour or two to do your errands when work is hectic. The extra help is a relief and lets you focus entirely on work.

And see it also as a great alternative to paying for a babysitter. Instead of rushing around town in your car, you can spend the time at home with your children.

During her workshops on finding balance in life, Shaughnessy gives participants little plastic lizards, her symbol for bad approaches to overload.

Lizards absorb heat from their environment and thrive when the temperature soars. Bad coping strategies flourish in hot, inhospitable environments, but they just absorb the heat and provide no relief.

"The only way to get rid of your lizards is to cool down the environment," Shaughnessy said.

### STRATEGIES THAT DONT WORK:

Packing work into home time.

Leave the lap top at work, turn off the cellphone or BlackBerry and don't open the briefcase. Working at home doesn't necessarily boost productivity, and it is guaranteed to rob time and attention from other areas of life, like relationships and relaxation.

Without rejuvenation, you'll be less productive the next day at work, she said.

Multi-tasking.

Juggling several tasks only makes a person feel more stressed, and cultivates mistakes and oversights. Instead, focus on one task and do it well.

Moving faster.

Working, walking and talking faster only propels you to continue moving fast. And it's physically draining. Your body assumes that because you're going non-stop, there must be something important going on, and it stays on high alert.

"Your body is always in stress response," she said. "Physically, your life is like you're constantly firefighting. You're rushing from one thing to the next."

Shaughnessy said many people work through breaks and lunch, planning to leave the office early to take care of personal chores. But when that doesn't happen, and often it doesn't, the person's hectic pace continues.

"They fly into the rest of their life like they're shot out of a cannon," she said.

The solution: Slow down.

### STRATEGIES THAT DO WORK:

Prioritize. Decide what's most important and take care of that first. Low priority items should always be taken care of last.

Focus. Concentrate your attention and care on the task at hand, whether it's a work project, a leisurely stroll or playing with your kids. "Be where you are," Shaughnessy advises. Focusing on one task makes work time more productive and personal time more enjoyable.

Regroup. Continual evaluation -- "asking yourself the tough questions" -- is crucial for maintaining balance. If something is not working in your life, drop it and try a new approach until you find one that works.

For example, if it's a struggle to prepare healthy dinners for the family, try preparing meals ahead of time that can be popped into the oven on hectic days. Or have the entire family pitch in to prepare dinner quickly.

