

Living longer but enjoying it less?

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

As a species we're living longer. The life span of the average cave man was 19 years. In 1895, the average life span in America was 49. Today it's 72 for American men, 77 for American women and quickly rising for both sexes. Yet, what's the use of living to a ripe old age if each day races by so fast and your to-do list grows so large you can't enjoy life? Why do things seem to be speeding up, despite the introduction of new technology that's supposed to make our lives simpler? Even though a day is still 24 hours long, it seems to shrink as our expectations get higher.

Look at what fills your days and why. Are they filled with activity but not the experiences and accomplishments you'd like to enjoy? A wheel stuck in the mud, spinning fast, certainly represents rapid motion. Yet the car is not moving.

Busy or not, everyone has 168 hours per week. One way or another, everyone fills them. Any regular activity that consumes 30 minutes of your day consumes two years of your life.

If time pressure has been a lingering issue for you, look beyond routine, ritual and victimization to ownership and responsibility for what's going on in your life.

Ritual is routine behavior that's comfortable but outmoded and unrewarding — such as opening all the mail you receive.

Victimization is believing that circumstances or other people cause your lack of breathing space. It means continuing to act powerless rather than taking responsibility.

Ownership is claiming and accepting full responsibility for what occurs in your life.

What are you busy about?

Decide what's important to you and allocate your efforts accordingly. This is intensely personal and can be genuinely rewarding. Break free from collective, cultural images of success and let your own choices guide you. Great leaders fit this mold. Can you imagine Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. getting up in the morning and lamenting all the things they wanted to accomplish that day or week but never got around to?

Many people will endure years and years with little breathing space, but will not sit down and decide what does and does not merit their attention. Others cling to antiquated notions of attempting to stay on top of everything. Think about how you spend your time. If you're experiencing any of the following, you're in a malfunctioning mode:

- constantly shortchanging the most important tasks
- attempting to do everything yourself
- feeling closed in, cramped for space
- having piles stack up
- having too many interruptions to concentrate
- always being late

Everyone experiences recurring short-term malfunctions. But if malfunctions are allowed to become long-term, they can lead to hazardous situations. Chances are you haven't identified what's important to you; you only have lingering notions.

What is important to you?

You need to make your choices away from distractions, and to acknowledge the fixed components of your existence:

- Youth, young adulthood, and middle age are finite.
- Your productive work life is finite.
- Change is guaranteed.
- Life is finite; death is guaranteed.

The choices confronting most individuals often come down to the same few issues: career advancement vs. a happy home life; income goals vs. income needs; and social, peer or employment induced priorities vs. individual wants or needs.

The things most meaningful to you in life are, by definition, your priorities. Priorities are broad elements of life that often become misplaced somewhere within your daily high-wire balancing act. In this era, it's wise to have only a few priorities. Too many priorities become paradoxical and you're not likely to respect each of them. In setting your priorities, try the following:

- List important things you wish to accomplish.
- Assess your list. Eliminate the unimportant items.
- Combine any similar items. Having too many priorities leads to frustration and despair, similar to what you've got now.
- Rewrite, redefine or restructure any of your choices. If you're not sure of an item, delete it.
- Put your list away for another day, then review it again.
- Delete, combine or rethink any of the remaining items. If something seems less important, drop it. You can't afford the responsibility of more priorities than you can support.
- Complete your priority list. Here are examples of priorities you might choose:
 - providing for the education of your children
 - achieving financial independence
 - maintaining a loving, happy marriage
 - working for world peace

Your priorities may change radically as years pass. They are always based on deeply felt needs or desires, usually representing challenging but ultimately rewarding choices.

Your priority card

For maximum benefit, write your priorities on small business-size cards. Keep one in your wallet, one in your appointment book and one in your car.

Read your priority list as often as you can — it contributes to your sensation of breathing space. It's invigorating when you're actively supporting what you've chosen as important. It isn't overkill to review a list of your life's priorities every day. In fact, it is a superior approach to controlling your life — after all, it's going to be a long one. 

Permission to reprint article granted by author Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC, executive director of the Breathing Space Institute in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Davidson also is a professional speaker and author of 18 books.

Do you need more breathing space?

Ask yourself the following questions, then examine your priorities in the categories where you answered "yes" most often.

All about you

- Do you feel overwhelmed with information and reading material?
- Do you find yourself racing the clock almost daily?
- Do you find yourself over-committing when your plate is already full?
- Is your to-do list progressively getting longer?
- Do you believe it's your responsibility to keep up with current events?

Your office

- Is your office too noisy for you to get any real work done?
- Are staff or co-worker interruptions reducing your productivity?
- Does it take you a minute or more to find a letter or document?
- Does it seem that the more you try to reduce clutter, the more it grows?
- Do you feel you could be organized if you had more physical space?

Your career

- Have you read time management books but are still at a loss to feel caught up and in control?
- Do you have trouble making time to look at the big picture of where your career or life is heading?
- Do you sometimes lose sight of your chosen priorities?
- Have you put off buying items that would make you more efficient?
- Do you neglect to schedule some quiet time among your tasks and activities?

Around and about

- Is shopping more stressful for you than it was a few years ago?
- Do you frequently engage in multiple activities, such as eating while reading?
- Do you save errands and odd jobs for the weekends?
- Do you have subscriptions to magazines you can't keep up with?
- Do you spend your time rather than your money to get things done?

Your work day

- Do you feel rushed most mornings just getting to work? Does commuting make you anxious?
- Do you sometimes think if there were more hours in a day you could get everything done?
- Do you sometimes find it difficult to get started on large projects?

Your life

- Do you feel as if there is never enough time to slow down and relax?
- Are you sleeping fewer hours per week than you would prefer?
- Have you ever wondered what's the use of living to a ripe old age if the pace of your life is continually going to be hectic?
- Do you find yourself preoccupied more often than you were a few years ago?
- Is it getting more difficult for you just to relax?
- Is quiet reflection all but impossible?