

Scaling Back Isn't Selfish

Sometimes too much is simply too much.

Diane Paddison



Every woman I know experiences some kind of pressure to do *more*. Pressure comes from work, from family, from church, from countless worthy causes, and especially from a culture that values achievement so highly.

We pressure ourselves, too. We pressure ourselves with unreasonable expectations, with false comparisons to what we imagine or assume other women are handling: “Look at her,” we say to ourselves. “She’s doing so much and she’s not struggling. I really should be doing more. What’s wrong with me?”

Aside from these external and internal pressures, life has its own way of demanding more of us when we least expect it. Illness, injury, death, and other personal crises will always be a part of living in a broken world, and they all draw from our reserves of time, energy, and emotional health.

Combined, our choices and circumstances are leading to a growing number of women who are overworked, overcommitted, and overwhelmed. It’s stressful. It’s bad for your health. It’s toxic to your relationships. And it impairs your ability to connect with and serve God well.

Creating Space to Breathe

It's one thing to recognize that you're overwhelmed—it's quite another to know what to do about it. Many women I speak with know that they're doing too much, but they feel trapped and don't know where to start. If you're ready to make a change, here are some steps to get you back on track.

1. Rest and Restore. Lifeguards-in-training are sometimes surprised to hear warnings about the dangers posed not by water hazards, but by distressed swimmers themselves. One might assume that those in danger of drowning would be compliant when help arrives, but instead, panicked swimmers have been known to impede or even attack their rescuers.

Drowning people are terrible decision makers. If you are overwhelmed by commitments and obligations, your brain isn't functioning much better than it would be if you were a panicked swimmer. Before you make any changes in your life, you need to get to a place where you are able to make good decisions. Take a "mini-retreat" weekend—even a day, morning, or an hour—whatever you realistically can do. Set some time aside that can be life-giving and restorative.

My life over the past year or so has been dominated by the devastating illness of my daughter Annie. It is mentally and emotionally overwhelming to see her in pain every day and to be constantly faced with new challenges and decisions regarding treatment options, all in addition to my other professional and familial commitments. I've learned that the only way to keep moving forward is for me to force myself to periodically retreat.

I think of this as a chance for me to come up for air. I try to do a short version of this every day and plan a bigger break every three or four weeks.

Practically speaking, for my bigger breaks, I make sure I get good sleep the night before, and then first thing in the morning, I spend some time exercising (even if you just go for a walk around the block, the movement and fresh air are good for the brain and the body). Then I fix a nice big decaf mocha just the way I like it—just something refreshing that makes me smile. It's a small thing, really, but this little bit of "self-care" is healthy and good. Finally, I settle into God's Word (when I'm feeling overwhelmed, I often turn to [Isaiah 55](#)) and pray for healing and direction.

Your rest and restoration time might look different than mine, and that's okay, but you absolutely must take the time. The goal is to break free from that frenzied, panicked place and get your heart and mind clear and ready for healthy decision making.

2. Review. You need to get a full, complete picture of where your time and energy are going. This is a great exercise to go through with a mentor, but you could also enlist the help of a respected friend. Consider physical time commitments, but also take note of

where you are spending your energy and emotional resources. What do you spend most of your time worrying about? What activities tire you out the fastest?

For comparison, also make a list of your strengths, passions, and priorities. Try to understand how each of the items on your first list (the to-do list) relates to those items on your second list. This is where it's especially helpful to have outside input.

Sometimes our identity can get so wrapped up in our choices and commitments that it becomes hard to view our lives with clarity. Getting someone else involved can provide invaluable perspective.

3. Recalibrate. Based on what you've learned from your reflection, it's time to start pruning. Look for items on your to-do list that are taking up lots of time or energy, while they're actually serving lower priorities on your second list. Write or talk through the very bare-bones of what you absolutely need to do to keep a healthy spiritual foundation, take care of yourself, maintain essential relationships, and do well at work. There will probably be a lot fewer things than you think. Over the long run, there is a lot of time to serve in many different ways, but life comes in stages, and you don't have to tackle everything at once.

When I was in my late twenties through mid-forties with school-aged children at home, it was all I could do to cover the basics. If I was able to attend church and Sunday school class, read and pray each day, connect with my husband, care for my children, and do well at work with the gifts God gave me, my life felt "full" in the right way. There wasn't room for much else. At later stages of my life I was able to get much more involved in community and church activities. I launched a ministry and joined a number of corporate and nonprofit boards. I took on more mentoring relationships, attended more conferences, and pursued other learning opportunities.

Now with a sick child to focus on, I'm back to paring down some of my outside activities and obligations. I try to look at what only I can do, and then I consider how I can delegate or hire out the rest. I've had to cut back on travel and meetings even as many of my coworkers, friends, and family pitch in. In this stage of life, I'm learning to ask for—and accept—help.

Cutting back isn't necessarily easy, even when you know you need to. Besides the basic discomfort that comes along with saying no to some people and opportunities, there's a deeper issue of value and self-worth at play. In our *do-more* culture, we've all learned to associate busyness with importance and purpose, believing that if we're not always doing "something," you must be wasting your time.

Stripping away the extra layers of commitments and obligations is life-breathing, but it can also expose areas of insecurity. I encourage you to try to recalibrate how you think about time—especially downtime. Consider [this warning](#) from philosopher Thomas Kelly: "Too many well-intentioned people are so preoccupied with the clatter of effort to

do something for God that they don't hear him asking that he might do something through them.”

Think of all the times in the Bible when we are called not to action, but to stillness ([Psalm 46:10](#)), to consideration ([Job 37:14](#)), and to waiting ([Isaiah 40:31](#)). Reflect on Isaiah 30:15: “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it.’”

As you begin the hard work of breaking free from doing more, keep in mind that you're not just doing less. By cutting back, you're opening up. You're creating space to breath, to grow, and to hear and respond to God's call on your life. What could be more important than that?