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## Simplicity

Cut out the clutter  
in your life.



## Simplicity

Cut out the clutter in your life.



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Introduction

# Little House in the Suburbs

by Janine Petry



I confess: I like the old television series, *Little House on the Prairie*. Sometimes I'll put it on in the evening as the background to doing chores or laundry. There's just something about it that eases my mind and helps me to relax. And I think I've finally figured out what it is: simplicity.





## Simplicity

### Little House in the Suburbs

Watching "Ma" hang laundry or collect eggs to trade; watching the girls walk to their one-room schoolhouse; watching the family eat dinner together or attend Sunday service—it was a predictable, simple life. Work and eat. Rest and play. Repeat. When I watch the portrayal of our culture's quieter yester-years, I almost envy them. My life doesn't look half as peaceful—even when I'm sleeping.

From early morning till late at night, I'm on the go. My attention gets divided in so many different directions: kids, relationships, ministries, work, and home. In my modern-day, suburban American dwelling, I don't even have to step a toe out of my front door in order to be bombarded with busyness and demands. Now, everything comes *right to me!* Unlike life in Walnut Grove, with the internet, cell phones, speedy transportation, and snow blowers, there are absolutely no excuses to slow down or stop—ever.

While I sometimes wish for the Ingalls' lifestyle, I do believe God put me in this time and culture for a reason. And despite the plethora of opportunities I have to stay busy, that doesn't mean I have to be. I know I have a choice in whether or not I accept needless complications into my life. I can have a full and simple life, which means I stick to doing *God's* will each day and eliminate those things that sidetrack me from running the race marked out for me (Hebrews 12:1).

If you're battling the busy life, you're definitely not alone. And if simplicity feels out of reach, don't despair—it's not. You can learn to uproot the unnecessary





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### Little House in the Suburbs

complications in your life and plant habits that foster life and peace instead. And this resource can help guide you. As you seek to introduce the principles of simplicity into your daily life, this download will provide the wisdom and advice to get you started. You'll also find plenty of other resources packed inside to further your personal growth in this area. God bless you as you discover his peaceful plan for your life and leadership.

Blessings,

*Janine Petry*

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads  
Christianity Today International



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The Heart of the Issue

# Too Much Stuff

If clutter's got you down, try these secrets to simplifying.

*by Mayo Mathers*

Several years ago while on vacation, our family ate at a restaurant that claimed to have the largest buffet in the United States. We swarmed the mind-boggling array of culinary delights as though we'd never seen food before. By the time we finished gorging ourselves, we could barely walk out of the restaurant.





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Unfortunately, our restaurant experience reflected my lifestyle at the time: *excessive* possessions, commitments, goals, and desires. While our house had reasonable storage space, our belongings had expanded from the attic to the garage and beyond. My daily calendar was filled with back-to-back meetings for church and other ministry functions and civic groups. And they all had to be woven around family and work! My cluttered life left me no significant time to spend with God, and fractured my family time. But I had no clue how to begin creating more physical, emotional, and spiritual space in my life.

Then, one morning I read in my Bible, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). I'd never considered myself greedy, yet my home was filled with more clothes than I ever wore, more dishes, books, gadgets, and knickknacks than we ever used. Was God telling me to simplify my overcrowded existence?

I thought of a church family who'd adopted a Romanian girl. She'd spent her first five years in an orphanage, and after living in America for a few months, her new father asked her how she liked it.

"Oh, Daddy!" she said, laughing. "I love America. In Romania we had no stuff. But in America WE HAVE STUFF!" Like the little girl, I like my "stuff," but if God saw my excess as greediness, it needed to be eliminated.

I immediately set to work to declutter my house, only to find my "stuff" had a stronger hold on me than I'd realized.





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So I focused on the area of my greatest excess: *my closet*. I love shoes and owned more than 50 pairs. The thought of parting with any of them was painful. First, I boxed up all but one pair of each color and moved them to the garage. That way, if I went into shoe withdrawal, I knew where to get a quick fix.

To my surprise, once the shoes were out of sight, I never thought of them again. So I did the same with my clothes and accessories. I boxed them up, moved them to the garage, then eventually passed them on to a secondhand store.

The more spacious my closet became, the stronger my sense of freedom grew. Before, when my alarm clock went off in the morning, the first thing I faced was a jumbled closet. It made my day feel jumbled before it even started.

After the successful closet campaign, I advanced the *battle to the bathroom*, cleaning out makeup drawers (why have six tubes of lipstick when I only wear one?), medicine cabinets, and cleaning supplies. I started severely limiting the array of choices in my home.

I was shocked at how much time had been devoured by the upkeep of all these unnecessary possessions. My growing sense of freedom and time was exhilarating!

My next step was to *limit my shopping excursions*. Most of my excess was the result of casual shopping. Going to the store for a jug of milk, I'd return home with a pair of sale earrings from the drugstore next door. Now I limit







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### Too Much Stuff

myself to shopping once a week for groceries, household supplies, clothes—everything. One shopping trip a week doesn't leave much time for casual shopping.

My success at decluttering made me take a hard look at the other areas in my life. My calendar was chronically overbooked with too many commitments. *A critical, prayerful look at my commitments* showed me ones that were unnecessary. I resigned my position in a local speaking organization and looked for other things to prune from my schedule, asking God to guard the time I freed up, filling it only as he directed.

I also *listed the things of greatest importance to me*. To my surprise, my list was short; it consisted entirely of people, not goals or dreams or possessions: my husband, my sons, my family, and friends. I realized that no matter how fulfilling a career is, it's temporary. But my relationships as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend remain—and deserve more attention. I pray God will help me never to become more committed to temporary things than to the permanent relationships in my life.

By creating material and physical space, I automatically created more emotional space, but I knew that to keep that space intact, I needed to take more deliberate steps.

In his book, *Margin*, Dr. Richard Swenson recommends *planning pauses into each day*. He suggests doing things that force you to slow down, such as choosing the *longest* line at the bank or grocery store instead of the shortest. This has been the hardest habit to develop! I seem driven to find the shortest line and feel stress building when





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another line moves faster than the one I'm in. Forcing myself to step into the longest line and relax still requires great effort—but I'm learning.

Another way I've created emotional space is by *taming the stress-promoters in my day*. Since we operate a business from our home and the telephone rings incessantly, my greatest source of stress was the telephone. My stomach always coiled in a knot from the constant interruption of this necessary evil.

One day it occurred to me that I behaved as though I *had* to answer every call. So I started letting our answering machine take over when I didn't want to be interrupted. At first, I felt guilty about ignoring calls, but it so completely diffused my stress that I soon forgot about my guilt.

Along the way I've learned other ways to create emotional space: a brief walk or a few moments of solitude behind a closed door. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey encourages viewers to create emotional space by keeping a *gratitude journal* in which they list five things they're thankful for every day. These simple actions promote a shift in attitude that keeps troubles in perspective so they don't affect me negatively.

Finally, I knew I needed to declutter my spiritual life. Much of my time is devoted to "spiritual things"; I speak to Christian groups, write for Christian publications, work in women's ministry, and serve with an international missions organization. But as important





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as all this Christian "stuff" is, it becomes sin if it crowds my relationship with God. I must never allow anything to interfere with that.

I can only maintain that all-important relationship by *spending a significant amount of time alone with God each day*. If I don't build space into my days to allow my relationship with God to mature, I'll never be able to maintain a healthy amount of physical and emotional space.

It's been two years since I first began decluttering my life. It hasn't come easily; it cuts against the grain of my natural desires. When a store advertises a huge sale, I still find myself getting in my car—even though I don't need anything. An invitation arrives in the mail that I long to accept—even though it will steal time from my family.

My struggle to maintain physical, emotional, and spiritual space is ongoing, but the rewards of my perseverance are as enticing as that giant food buffet we encountered on vacation: a serenity, order, and satisfying sense of God's approval. It's impossible to accumulate too much of that kind of stuff.

*Mayo Mathers lives in Oregon. This article first appeared in the January/February 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*



## Reflect

- *How can you relate to the author's "excessive" lifestyle? Which areas are particularly excessive and why: possessions, commitments, goals, or desires?*
- *Reread Luke 12:15. What does "all kinds of greed" mean? How do you sense God calling you to simplify your "overcrowded existence"?*
- *How might creating more physical, emotional, and spiritual space change your life? Which of the author's methods for introducing change is the most appealing to you and why? Which is the least appealing and why?*



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Practically Speaking

# Running Yourself Ragged?

Here are five good reasons to simplify your schedule.

*by Jeanne Zornes*

**I**t was "errands morning," and for several hours I raced through the tasks listed in my organizer. Finding myself near the fast-food district, I decided to splurge on a drive-through lunch. After all, I had a coupon.

Sneaking through the back of several adjacent parking lots, I pulled up to an order monitor and said coolly, "One regular roast beef on a 99-cent coupon, please."





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As I dug in my organizer for that elusive coupon, I heard the monitor reply, "Ma'am, do you know where you are?"

"Right in my car," I said, "ordering a roast beef ."

"Ma'am," the voice continued, "we don't do roast beef. This is Kentucky Fried Chicken."

As I looked around, I realized I'd overshot Arby's by two businesses. I meekly waved goodbye to the chicken people as I slinked past the pickup window.

Sometimes God sends a reminder that I'm trying to go too far, too fast. My good intentions end up bungled and I fulfill the old saying, "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get."

It took a few crimson-faced incidents such as the roast-beef blunder to teach me what God really meant by Proverbs 19:2: "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way."

There are days, of course, when rushing around is simply unavoidable, writes time management expert Sybil Stanton, author of *The 25-Hour Woman*. But that, cautions Stanton, should be the exception, not a way of life.

Try planning each day with attainable goals to cut down on senseless running. If you typically find yourself on a schedule that "keeps going and going" like a battery bunny, consider these reasons for applying some brakes to your runaway lifestyle.





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***For renewal.*** When a friend moved his elderly mother out of her home, he offered to sell it to my husband and me. But the house came with 20 years of accumulation and neglect. After several months of cleanup, yard work, and painting, we were exhausted. Just after Christmas, a nagging pain in my back started shooting down my leg so intensely that even getting out of a car became unbearable. When the doctor diagnosed "sciatica" and advised bed rest, I balked. I had too much to do!

For several weeks I limped through each morning's get-the-family-ready rush, then retreated to the couch with my heating pad. I stacked a TV tray with paperwork, but soon my arms ached from trying to write or study while lying down. Eventually I dozed off. At first I resented having to make time in my schedule to "recover," but as the pain subsided, I realized God knew how much I needed time off.

***For relationships.*** At night, my "motor" tends to run out of fuel. By the time I've washed the dinner dishes, I feel like the dishrag I drape over the faucet. But it's also when my family most needs my time and attention. When my son is frustrated to tears over seventh-grade pre-algebra, or my daughter worries about labeling and coloring a map of South America, or my husband can't find a slip of paper with an important phone number—guess who rallies?

Many times I'm tempted to tell my children (as my dad told me), "Get your nightie on and don't forget your prayers." But in our house, bedtime is a "sacred" process that includes Mom reading to the kids. The habit I started with toddlers and picture books continues with 12 and 14 year olds and the classics or missionary biographies. Work has to wait as





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I sit in the hall between their rooms, reading as they tidy up and put on pajamas. Afterward, I kneel by each child's bed for small talk and prayers.

The bedtime routine takes nearly an hour—an hour I could spend warming up a recliner or hitting another project—but it's the golden time of the day to build those relationships that will last a lifetime.

***For responsiveness.*** I have no dramatic stories of missing a flight on an airplane that later crashed. But sometimes I've come across an accident that happened minutes before—often the same amount of time as an unexpected delay in my schedule. As I pass the wreckage and pray for the victims and emergency professionals, I also thank God for sparing me from being part of the scene. The delay reminds me of Jeremiah 29:11: " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' "

But I've also learned that God sometimes interrupts my hurrying so I can be part of his plans for other people. One morning the telephone rang repeatedly before I embarked on several hours of errands. When I finally made it to the bank, my first stop, I picked the drive-up line that moved the slowest. Then all the way downtown, I hit one red light after another.

"Why me?" I whined as the traffic slowed for an accident. Threading my way around the scene, I realized I knew the elderly lady just crawling out of her damaged vehicle. It was the 84-year-old widow to whom we'd become a second family. When I pulled over and ran to hug her, I







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noticed how much she was trembling. I helped her respond to police, then took her home in her still driveable car. When she seemed calm enough, I called a friend to take me back to my own car.

My to-do list was still on the passenger seat and the morning was gone with only one item checked off. But the most important though unexpected task got done.

***For reflection.*** "Be still, and know that I am God," says Psalm 46:10. The problem with people who always hurry is that they think "being still" is a waste of time. Yet I've found that sometimes doing absolutely nothing is a better way to exalt God than grinding out some job or ministry. One hot, muggy Sunday afternoon, I suggested to my kids that we drive into the nearby foothills for a hike around a small lake. When my son asked his best friend, Kyle, to come along, Kyle's mother, Nicki, also joined us.

As we panted our way through switchbacks and rock slides, and crawled over fallen trees, we moms occasionally sent the kids ahead to let our 40y-plus bodies recover. I savored "being still" and watching large-leaf plants quiver in the feeble wind while treetops hissed overhead. Nicki paused at a flower-speckled meadow and mused, "How can anybody deny the Creator God when they see this?"

When we got home, the Sunday paper was still strewn around the living room. Dirty dishes cluttered the sink. The kids had added challenging stains to their jeans. My "to-do" list for the next day was filling up. But for once, I'd swapped my hurry-up habit with a peaceful afternoon—and come away physically and spiritually refreshed.





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For repentance. Sometimes God allows me to experience the consequences of my hurry-up personality to recognize my need for grace. We have baseboard electric heaters that leave a gray haze on the walls above them. One morning, eager to paint the offending wall in our bedroom, I decided to shake the can rather than pry it open and stir it. However, the last person to use the paint hadn't hammered the lid on tightly enough. "Ivory Linen" spewed all over the dark brown rug by my side of the bed. Despite frantic scrubbing, I lived with the reminders of my haste for several years until we could afford new carpet.

Another time a neighbor wanted to borrow our lawn mower. No problem—but it needed gas and my husband had several unmarked cans in his shed. One, I knew, contained an oil-and-gas mixture for his snow blower, but he wasn't around to tell me which. Determined not to wait, I made a quick guess and poured. The mower wouldn't start—and never would—on kerosene.

The humiliation of having to confess my misdeeds to my husband was bad enough. But I know these incidents are simply reflections of a hurry-up personality that chafes at delay and won't trust God to do all things in his good time.

I'm all for personal efficiency. My organizer helps keep me on task to do what's needed. But I'm learning I can't jot my to-do lists on lines that are too narrow. I need to allow breathing room so that my schedule's not mine, but God's. That way, when he catches me in the midst of life's busyness and asks, "Do you know where you are?", I'll have some valid answers.





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### Running Yourself Ragged?

Now, if I can just find that coupon for a chicken bucket . ...

*Jeanne Zornes is a widely published writer and speaker from Washington. Her latest book is When I Prayed for Patience ... God Let Me Have It! (Shaw). This article first appeared in the March/April 1997 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

- *How can you relate to the author's overwhelming to-do lists? Is simplifying a busy schedule something you struggle with? Why?*
- *Which of the author's reasons for simplifying a busy schedule would benefit you the most right now: renewal, relationship, responsiveness, reflection, or repentance? Why?*



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Biblically Speaking

# Task Master

Is doing it all, all at the same time, really the best way?

*by Liz Curtis Higgs*



**B**usy moms do it out of necessity. Drivers do it at 60 mph. And teenagers do it better than anybody.

Multitasking. No longer mere computer lingo, the word now describes life as we know it. Noshing on a burger while steering a car through traffic while fumbling with directions. Gone are the days of one task at a time. Now we do everything simultaneously. Work. Play. Eat. Travel. We feel so efficient, so on top of things. Look, Ma ... no hands!



But when one of those multiple tasks includes a human being, we may be missing what matters most: an eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart connection.

I watched a young mother at the post office sort through her mail, talk on her cell phone, and try to keep tabs on her toddler. Nothing too dangerous there. Except she tossed out a letter, only to realize she meant to keep it, called out to her wayward little girl without really getting her attention, and apologized numerous times into her phone, "Sorry ... what did you say?"

The child was clearly frustrated. No doubt the caller on the other end of the line was, too. Both of them received the same unintentional message: "You're third on my list of priorities right now."

Do we really have to do three things at once to feel productive? Apparently we do, and I'm the worst of sinners.

While on the phone with a long-winded friend, I open my e-mail, turning down the computer speakers so she won't hear the telltale sound effects, even as I wave a sheet of fast-food coupons at my husband, pointing to what I want for lunch.

Or I'll take a stack of correspondence into our family room and tune in a movie I've been eager to see. Distracted by the film, I have to read each letter twice, not really connecting with the dear person who's written to me, nor fully involved with the story on the screen. When a family member joins me and starts to chat, I catch myself scribbling words that make little sense, trying to follow the movie out of the corner of my eye and only half-listening, half-nodding to whatever

my loved one is saying. Is there any hope for a multi-tasking mama?

Yup. A simple one: Follow the Lord's example.

When Jesus spoke with people, they had his complete attention. The Bible does not say, "And while he sanded wood and kept watch on a pot of stew, Jesus said ..." He simply listened, then responded. Individually and compassionately.

In Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well—his longest one-on-one conversation ever recorded in Scripture—she was amazed a Jew was even willing to speak to a Samaritan: "How can you ask me for a drink?" (John 4:9). The disciples were taken aback, too, when they "returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman" (John 4:27).

Clearly Jesus put conversations first on his to-do list, ignoring what was politically correct or productively expedient. Nothing mattered more than this thirsty woman.

His disciples got the message: "No one asked, 'Why are you talking with her?'" (John 4:27).

She got the message, too, putting aside her task in favor of talking to people: "Leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town ..." (John 4:28).

Now it's our turn to get the message: Relationships aren't a task. Listening intently is the most valuable gift we can give. And looking into the eyes of someone we care about is time wisely spent.

My New Year's resolution? Do one task at a time and do it well, always putting people first.

Sure, it's old school. About 2,000 years old. Thank the Lord it's never too late to learn.

*Liz Curtis Higgs is the author of 26 books, including her historical novel, Fair Is the Rose (WaterBrook Press). She lives with her husband and their two teenagers in Kentucky. This article first appeared in the January/February 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

- *In what ways are you a multitasker? What things do you constantly try to do at the same time? How does this affect your relationships with those around you?*
- *How could you simplify your schedule and do less multitasking in order to make time to be more like Christ and put people first? What effect would this have on those in your sphere of influence?*

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Getting Deeper

# Just Say “No”!

Why it might revolutionize your life.

*by Ramona Cramer Tucker*



**M**y life hit the fan one ordinary weekend.

I was in the midst of running errands when it happened. I'd just settled into my car seat when I realized I'd forgotten the bills I intended to mail. As I dashed inside, the phone rang.

"Hey, Mona," my friend said cheerfully. "I haven't seen you in ages. Want to get together today?"







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Just Say "No"!

"Uh, sure, what time?" I said, distracted by my "to do" list. We set up the time and place, and I hung up the phone.

Then, on my way back to the car, I did something that startled even me: I sat down on the big rock by my driveway and cried so hard, I couldn't catch my breath.

Later that night, after my three-year-old was tucked into bed, I pondered why my friend's phone call had brought me to tears. My emotional meltdown showed me how stressed-out I was by life's demands—many of them self-induced. I needed to take better charge of my life. After all, God hadn't created me to run around constantly "chasing the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14)—which was exactly what I felt I was doing!

The answer to my problem narrowed down to a simple word: "No." But the problem was that "yes" rolled off my tongue so easily that "no" seemed cumbersome ... even embarrassing. So if someone needed snacks for the office, I'd bring them. If my child's playgroup was meeting, I organized not only the activity, but the crafts too. Add all this to working full-time, or full-time-plus when a rush project came along, and it's no wonder I was exhausted. Eventually I taped a neon "Just Say NO!" sign to my phone. Once I'd said "no" a few times, my lips began to form the word more confidently. It's still not easy, but I'm gradually gaining more balance in my life.

Are you feeling exhausted? If so, you may need to simplify your life by learning to say the word "no" more often, too. Here's how.



### **Know Yourself ... and Your Slots**

What's your energy level? Personality? Family situation? How much "regroup" time do you need? Do you crave interaction, or run from it?

Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, trying to please everyone by "doing" only brings about exhaustion or bitterness. And that's certainly not the way God calls us to live. Psalm 139:1–3 makes it clear: "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways." God knows your personality intimately because he made you, and he doesn't expect you to be someone you're not. He also knows you need to stop sometimes and rest.

So figure out how many activities a week you're comfortable with, and then consider those "available slots." For instance, my friend Mary craves time alone since she works in a busy office. One evening out a week is enough for her, so that's all she schedules. On the other hand, Claudia, a friend with incredible energy, schedules four evenings out and still longs for another!

When I was single and worked full-time, I booked every lunch during the week. After all, it was a great opportunity to grow relationships with someone other than my roommate. But after a year of running every day from work to lunch with a friend and then back to work, I discovered I needed some downtime. So I made a personal policy to book only three lunches a week and to save the other two for "necessity runs" (to buy groceries or run





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Just Say "No"!

to the post office), or simply for some me-time (even if it meant sitting alone in my car to read an encouraging psalm while I ate my sandwich). When I got married, I lunched with friends twice a week and set a standing weekly lunch date with my sister, since it was more difficult for us to get together after work. Our Wednesday lunch date continues to this day.

Instead of blindly booking activities simply because they arise, make sure you save the slots in your schedule you need for "sanity time."

### Learn to Prioritize

Some of your stress-inducing situations may be nonnegotiable—such as traveling for your job or keeping up with an energetic toddler. But other activities may be negotiable, such as hosting a wedding shower, chairing a "Fun Fair" at your school, or attending a Pampered Chef party. The crucial question is this: Do these negotiable activities stress you out ... or energize you? Your answer will reveal whether or not your life is in balance. If your blood pressure rises when you even *think* about the activity, why not take a pass?

Recently I was invited to three product-demonstration parties in friends' homes—all in one week. After thinking through my priorities (one of them being time for my husband in the evenings) and praying about my use of my time, I said "no" to all three. Although I felt guilty turning down the invites, I also felt relieved when I hung up the phone after each of these conversations. And because I'd said "no," I had the time and energy to say "yes" to an impromptu stroll later in the week—complete with a





## Simplicity Just Say "No"!

picnic and a chat by a bubbling fountain—with my soul-rejuvenating friend Linda.

God alone knows what's ahead for us and can help us sort out our priorities. As Jeremiah 29:11–13 says, "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." But Scripture also says, "Commit your way to the Lord" (Psalm 37:5). We need to ask God to guide us—so we'll do what *he* has for us instead of doing everything that comes our way. Then we won't have to worry about "missing out."

### Set a Limit—and Stick to It!

To most people, it's the getting together that counts, not the length of the stay. Even a short lunch can mean as much as an all-day outing. And telling friends or coworkers, "I have from 12:30 to 1:30 free for lunch. Would that work?" sets comfortable parameters for you.

Recently I had a Saturday with nothing planned—a rare treat indeed. I was looking forward to organizing my neglected photos when a good friend phoned to invite me to an impromptu party that was to start at 6 p.m. But because my "to do" list at home had been growing, I said, "I'd love to come. But I won't be there until 9 p.m. because I have to get some things done at home first." This response allowed me to be a real friend—and also protected me from a too-scheduled weekend.

Many of us juggle multiple roles, including keeping up a house/apartment, working either inside or outside the home, and playing "relationship fix-it" for people we





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Just Say "No"!

love. Add a boyfriend or husband, kids, or in-laws and it's no wonder we feel overwhelmed at times! But setting a time limit—then sticking to it—can work wonders in balancing the demands of your multifaceted life.

### Be Proactive

I've discovered if I wait for others to come to me, I react by jumping to action and marking my calendar before I really have a chance to evaluate the activity or my looming schedule. Initiating activities gives me time for advance planning; it prepares me not only physically, but also emotionally.

So don't wait for others to contact you. Contact family and friends first. "I'd love to get together. How about two Saturdays from now, from 1:00–3:00?" When you do receive a phone call, say, "That sounds like fun. Let me check my schedule and get back to you." That will give you the emotional distance to evaluate your week realistically.

A friend of mine once quipped, "We women accomplish 90 percent of the world's workload ... and we look and feel like it, too!" The reality is, we're afraid of letting people down even if we're driving ourselves crazy with activities. It's no surprise that "no" seems like a four-letter word we must avoid at all costs.

But "no" isn't a dirty word—in fact, sometimes it's one of the healthiest things we can say. After all, sometimes we have to say "no"—even to good things—in order to say "yes" to the best things. If we're constantly scurrying around like the well-known Martha in Luke 10:38–42, we won't have time to sit, like Mary, at Jesus' feet.





## Simplicity

Just Say "No"!

So go ahead ... say "no" loudly. It won't kill you. In fact, it just may revolutionize your life.

*Ramona Cramer Tucker is Senior Editor for Tyndale House Publishers. She and her family live in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the September/October 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

- *Which of the author's tips do you struggle with the most: knowing yourself and your time slots, prioritizing, setting limits, or being proactive? How might overcoming this particular struggle help you to simplify your life and protect the things you value most?*
- *How are you seeking God for guidance so you can do what he has for you, instead of doing anything that comes your way? Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 and reflect on how "simplicity" fits into the way God leads us and works in our lives.*



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Bringing It Home

# Are You a Slave to Your Schedule?

Here's how to keep your family  
calendar under control

*by Susan Alexander Yates*

School's started, and suddenly your home's a drive-thru in which you grab a meal, zap it in the microwave, and race to the next carpool. Your kids are signed up for another extra-curricular activity, and you've just agreed to chair another event—along with everything else you juggle! Does this sound all too familiar?





## Simplicity

### Are You a Slave to Your Schedule?

If this sounds like your life, surprise: You may be a chronic overcommitter—someone who bases her identity on how much she and her kids are doing or on how stressed she is. Stress is the new status symbol; if you're really stressed, you must be important!

My friend Molly was chairing a parent's group for her child's Christian school and had to make frequent telephone calls. One morning while she was on the phone, Molly's four-year-old son got a pair of scissors and cut the phone cord. As Molly tells it, this was her wake-up call! She realized her schedule was running her life, and she needed to just say "no" to many of the things in which she'd gotten involved.

If you, like Molly, want to reseize control of your family calendar, try these tips to help you simplify and achieve more balance in your life.

### Prioritize

What *should* your priorities be? There are a lot of admirable activities out there competing for our time and attention. The good news is, God doesn't just plunk us down in this complicated world and expect us to guess how to navigate through all these options. He's given us clear priorities in his Word. For example, Jesus tells us we're to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ... Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39).

How do you love God? First, you have to get to know him—and that involves time. My first priority is my quiet time with God—a time in which I study the Bible and pray.







## Simplicity

### Are You a Slave to Your Schedule?

As autumn begins, I buy a new journal and pens, and designate a time and place to have at least 30 minutes alone with God each day.

When I get frazzled, it's usually because I've neglected my time alone with God and been too busy with other things. I get cross, frustrated, and discouraged. Then I remember Jesus' words, "Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). So I curl up with my Bible, tell God I'm sorry I let my commitments crowd him out, ask him to forgive me, and allow him to give me his perspective on things. And he does!

### Nurture Your Marriage

Did you notice the second part of Jesus' command, "love your neighbor as yourself"? If you're married, your closest neighbor is your husband.

The husband-wife relationship takes precedence over the parent-child relationship. It's too easy to adopt the mentality, *I'll work on my marriage when life calms down*. Life never calms down—so nourish your marriage friendship *now*.

It doesn't take expensive evenings out to build your relationship; do a simple breakfast or lunch together once a week, or take an afternoon walk. But mark it down on your calendar, or it won't happen.





## Simplicity

### Are You a Slave to Your Schedule?

#### Determine Family Times

If your family's schedule is already so full you seem to be ships passing in the night, you need a major readjustment! You may need to say "no" to your child joining another athletic team in order to have dinner together as a family. Ask yourself this question: *Ten years from now, will this activity really matter? Will it help or detract from building family friendships?*

#### Guard Against Peer Pressure

Most often we think peer pressure has to do with teens. But we have peer pressure, too. Usually it centers on some other mother whose kids are involved in more activities than ours—making her seem to be a better mother! So we sign up our kids for yet one more thing just to keep up with her. We buy into the myth, *Whoever's child is the busiest is the best parent*. Wrong! The next time a great opportunity presents itself, don't immediately say "yes." Determine the needs of your child: Is he already overcommitted? Or does he need an activity outside the family to develop social skills and confidence? What impact will this activity have on family time?

#### Learn to Postpone

You can't have it all or do it all in any one season in life. You may need to postpone chairing that fundraiser in order to be available to aid in homework in the evenings. You may need to take a pass on that special musical opportunity for your child. Your child may not be happy about it—but who's the parent here? When we're afraid to say "no," our children become overcommitted. It helps to remember that delay isn't denial.





## Simplicity

### Are You a Slave to Your Schedule?

Cutting out things from our schedule can be painful. But remember, more isn't necessarily better. One of the best things you can do to keep from being enslaved by your schedule is spending time alone with God—and letting him guide you in your use of time.

*Susan Alexander Yates is the author of numerous books, including *And Then I Had Teenagers* (Baker Book House). Susan and her husband, John, have five children. This article first appeared in the September/October 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

- *The author writes, "Stress is the new status symbol; if you're really stressed, you must be important!" Do you agree with this? How can you relate?*
- *Are you living out the priorities of Matthew 22:37–39? If not, how can you simplify to begin doing this?*
- *When choosing which activities to eliminate from your schedule, try asking the question, "Ten years from now, will this activity really matter?" Keep only those activities which have lasting, godly value.*



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Leadership Tools

# Time for a Change?

Subtract from your life  
to add to it!

by Jane Johnson Struck



If you're anything like me, you probably feel overwhelmed by all the changes you'd like to see in your life. I know what I *need* to improve—my fitness level, availability to friends, amount of quality time with God. But sometimes, the more I resolve to change, the more I feel as though I've failed when my "to do" list of goals ends up a crumpled piece of paper on a corner of my desk—and in my mind.





## Simplicity

### Time for a Change?

That's why, this year, I decided to take the opposite approach to make some positive changes in my mental, spiritual, and physical health. Instead of adding *more* to my life, I'm simplifying by seeing what I can *delete* from it for a manageable, unintimidating span of time—a week. And I'm discovering that the benefits I gain from these "fasts" are surprisingly healthful. Give them a try; you'll benefit, too.

### Fast from WORRY

When my husband had to undergo biopsies for cancer, I was anxious. But once he completed radiation treatments and life went on, I *really* fell into the worry trap. Needless to say, my mindset wreaked havoc on my mental and physical state—I became sluggish, depressed, filled with aches and pains. I knew I had to change.

So I hit on the idea of "fasting" from worry—no easy feat when you're a self-proclaimed "worry wart." Each time I found worries swallowing up my thought life, I forced myself to *change the channel*. I'd intentionally focus on something concrete and pleasant—cardinals perched on the feeder, the winter sunset tinting the sky a frigid crimson—to blot out my preoccupation with "what ifs." I determinedly tried to "take captive" every negative thought "to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

If someone told me to just stop worrying, I'd say impossible. But I decided to try it for a week—with the help of God's Spirit and his Word. While I didn't become perfectly peaceful, for those seven days I felt healthier and more optimistic than I had for quite a while. This is one





## Simplicity

### Time for a Change?

fast I've repeated when certain situations start feeding my fretful nature.

#### Fast from SALE ADS

I admit it; I love to shop—not so much for myself, but for my family and especially for my house. I can talk myself into needing new towels or a set of queen-sized sheets—*especially if they're on sale*. I mean, what if they never go on sale again?

Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "There is nothing new under the sun." I might add, there's nothing on sale now that won't be on sale again. My trouble is avoiding temptation! Since sales supplements are meant to entice, fast from this by chucking those Sunday inserts without so much as a peek. It won't kill you—and may even save you some cash. I've found that when I toss them, I don't incite buying fantasies and am better able to resist the impulse sales that eat away our income.

#### Fast from FAST FOOD

I love Wendy's, and fortunately (or not!) there's one right around the corner from my office—not to mention other drive-thrus that call out to me at lunchtime.

We've all been told to cut down on the fat in our diet. But I only set myself up for failure with an all-or-nothing mentality. So this time, I tried the incremental approach. Instead of that Greek Pita or Big Combo, I brought a more healthy lunch from home for a week. And guess what? After skipping fast-food joints at lunchtime for a week or two, I discovered, surprisingly, the stuff just didn't have





## Simplicity

### Time for a Change?

the same appeal. Plus, I saved a load of money! And with the additional confidence I gleaned by making one small change—packing my own healthy lunches—additional change toward healthier eating habits now seemed less daunting. I bet you'll discover that, too.

#### Fast from THE MEDIA

No, I'm not talking about abstaining from all television, newspapers, and magazines entirely for a week—or from renting and watching a family video that lifts your spirits and makes you laugh. What I *am* suggesting is a fast from all the bad news floating out there.

It's important to keep a balanced view. Yes, real life is sometimes hard, scary, tragic. But it's also filled with hope, God's grace, and people who are loving, kind, and self-sacrificing. Life isn't all bad, dangerous, hazardous, brimming with imminent disease, disaster, or death—but on a steady diet of the daily paper or the evening news, you can often feel as though it is.

Several months ago, I decided to fast from the depressing stuff and concentrate on the upbeat. So instead of punching on CNN, I sat down with my 13-year-old daughter to watch *I Love Lucy* reruns. The benefits were twofold. I spent precious time bonding with my teen by cultivating a joint interest and I ended my day with vigorous laughter and happy thoughts—instead of visions of trauma, disaster, and mayhem. I found that when I limited what I exposed myself to for just a week, I felt more joyful, less fearful.





## Simplicity

### Time for a Change?

#### Fast from CRITICISM

I once read an article about a woman who decided to button her lip for a week and refrain from criticizing her husband when he forgot to take out the garbage or failed to call when he was coming home late. Would he notice the difference in her behavior—and would it make their marriage more loving? It did.

Stuffing my gripes, big and small, for a week, forced me to spend more time on my knees talking them over with the One who made me *and* my kids—and anyone else who occasionally bugged me. And the more time I spent with the Lord, the more petty those peeves became. There's power in what you say—but also in what you don't say. Fast from criticism for a week; it will impact the way you relate to others.

#### Fast from NOISE OVERLOAD

What would an "unplugged" life be like? And how does the noise I invite into my life, not to mention the unavoidable background drone of technology, traffic, and people, affect me? All those decibels, I decided, make me tense, tired, and crabby.

So I tried unplugging those earphones on my Walkman and turning off the car radio for a week. Talk about withdrawal! Yet as I took nature walks with my dog and listened to birdsongs instead of talk shows, or talked to my teens in the car instead of zoning out on "Dr. Laura," I found that fasting from the exterior noise that soundtracked my life calmed my spirit, readying me for







## Simplicity

Time for a Change?

God's still small voice. So—if only for a week—eliminate the excess noise you can control, and see what a difference it can make in your life.

*Jane Johnson Struck is the former editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine. This article first appeared in the January/February 1998 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*



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# Additional Resources

**A Spirit Fit to Lead**, a downloadable resource from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. When our souls aren't being nourished, it can be easy to bring unnecessary challenges into leadership situations—whether at church, work, or even at home. Maybe we aren't as patient as we could be. Maybe we seek conflict instead of peace. Maybe we ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit when we should be focused on them. This Training Pack contains the help you need to get back on track.

**Another Fine Mess, Lord! Finding Simplicity, Order and Insight in a Complicated World**, by Karon Phillips Goodman (Barbour Publishing, 2005). Looking for signs of the "abundant life" every day—not just on Sunday? You certainly don't want more to do! What you need is more of God. Favorite author Goodman offers insightful reflections on how to turn the frustrations and complications of your world into the simplicity and order of your heavenly Father's.



**Are You Working Too Much?**, a downloadable resource from the **Kyria.com**. Work is a part of daily life, but how much is too much? Download this guide for helpful tips that will keep you from becoming overworked. This guide will show you how to embrace rest, while creating healthy boundaries at work and home. Begin to view work as a gift and not as an idol.

**Balance Your Life**, a downloadable resource from the **Kyria.com**. Chances are you're trying to balance many demands each day, and that you often find you're not feeling rested, refreshed, and balanced in the midst of it all. This download provides encouragement for women who struggle to juggle their lives. You'll encounter real examples of women who've found their hope in the Lord and soared.

**Celebration of Simplicity**, by Joyce Meyer (Faithwords, 2001). Love God and enjoy your life by keeping it simple! Joyce Meyer's inspirational devotional *Celebration of Simplicity* helps you to concentrate on God, not your circumstances, and to discover the peace that passes understanding. Divided into six sections, each chapter focuses on a different theme: faith, grace, joy and peace, love, forgiveness, and prayer.

**Freedom of Simplicity**, by Richard J. Foster (Harpercollins San Francisco, 2005). Simplicity is not merely a matter of having less stress and more leisure. It is rather an essential spiritual discipline that we must practice for the health of the soul. Twenty-five years after it first appeared, this updated edition of





## Simplicity

### Additional Resources

Richard Foster's classic work explores the foundation of this discipline, its fundamental importance in the Bible, and how it has been manifested and taught by God's saints throughout Christian history. This beautiful, moving manifesto on incorporating simplicity into our hectic lives still rings true—and is even more needed today.

**The Simple Home: A Faith-Filled Guide to Simplicity, Peace, and Joy in Your Home**, by Sharon Hanby-Robie (Guidepostsbooks, 2006). Learn to make your home a pleasing, practical and spiritual place to live with this guide from QVC design expert Hanby-Robie. She shows you how to transform entryways into welcoming spaces, addresses storage and organization issues and set up your own reflective space for quiet time.

**Too Much Stuff**, a ready-to-download Bible Study available at **ChristianBibleStudies.com**. In a classic from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, Mayo Mathers confesses that greed is her ongoing temptation, and that it takes on some unexpected forms. These personal and homey examples of greed might seem worlds away from the multi-billion dollar scandals that have put Enron and WorldCom into the headlines, but the essential temptation is the same for all of us. Use this unique Bible study to prompt thought-provoking discussions in adult Sunday school classes or small groups, or in your private study.



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