

Introduction



Frazzled, Tired, and Behind? You're Not Alone

Ask a friend, an acquaintance, or even a stranger how she's doing, and more than likely, she'll sigh and say some variation of, "I'm so busy. I can barely breathe most days just trying to survive. You know how that goes" (insert forced smile).

Sadly, yes. Most of us do know the feeling. We are busy juggling a way-too-long to-do list, and we can't seem to get ahead—or even just get the basics crossed off many days. We wake up every morning feeling frazzled, tired, and behind. We can't imagine living any other way—though we want to.

I can relate because I've been there. A few years ago, I was stressed and exhausted. I had three young children, a husband who had a brand-new business, and a thriving blog of my own that required at least forty hours of work per week to keep afloat. This was more than enough to fill my waking hours each day, but instead of realizing this, I unwisely said yes to numerous other good things until I landed myself into near-breakdown state. It was only then that I woke up to how out of control my life and schedule were.

After months of relearning habits, reworking my priorities, and retraining thought patterns, I've become a new woman: one who is energized, excited about life, passionate, purposeful, healthy, and rested. This book shares my story of saying goodbye to survival mode. It's raw, vulnerable, and candid—and not a story I ever thought I'd write a book about. But after years of blogging, writing, and speaking to women, I knew that I wasn't alone in my struggles.

When I started my blog, *MoneySavingMom.com*, my desire was to give women practical, hands-on information on ways they could save money. I quickly discovered that many people desperately wanted to change their financial outlook, but they didn't have an ounce of time or energy left to devote to their finances with everything else they had on their plate. The majority of women had so much going on in their lives that they felt they were just barely surviving. Take, for instance, this note I received from Darcy:

I'm a brand-new mom of a newborn and I have my own business. I'm so happy that I found your blog, but I feel like I discovered it at a time in my life when I don't have a free minute to devote to implementing what you recommend. In addition, I'm a notorious procrastinator and money waster. I sincerely want to change, but being so new to this lifestyle, so set in my bad habits, and so busy, I have no idea how to go about it.

Darcy wasn't alone in her feelings; I was getting e-mails like this from women in all walks of life—single and married, work-outside-the-home moms and stay-at-home moms. All of them were saying pretty much the same thing: “We're tired. We lack purpose. We want to change our lives, but we have too much to do and not enough time. Help!”

These women wanted to escape the hamster wheel of life that had them spinning to meet other people's demands and expectations. But they didn't know how to walk away, how to say no, or how to find breathing room in their lives.

While I was trying to help people with their money and budget problems, I realized I couldn't address their financial struggles until I first helped women deal with these deeper issues, such as a lack of purpose, a loss of perspective, and a sense of hopelessness.

In 2010, after undergoing my own personal paradigm shift, I had a heartfelt desire to share my own experiences of how I went from simply trying to keep up with everything—my kids, business, marriage, and friends—to passionately living on purpose. The road hasn't been easy, and I've nowhere near "arrived," but the efforts and changes have definitely been worth it.

Take a few minutes and think about your life. Do you feel burned out? Stressed to the max? Stuck?

Do you struggle with having so many things you want to do each day but lacking the motivation to get them done?

Are you having a tough time creating and adapting a routine that works for you and your family?

Do you put unrealistic expectations on yourself to have and do it all—and feel you're failing miserably?

Do you find it challenging to figure out where your priorities lie?

Again, I can relate, and I wrote this book to share the

answers to these questions that I've learned and have seen others successfully answer and overcome in their own lives. This book is for you because I know there is a way out. My sincere hope is that by the end of our time together, you'll either see the light at the end of the tunnel or be out of the tunnel completely!

As you read through each chapter, soak in the life-changing principles and take the time to do the exercises. You will learn not only why it is so important to live with intention, but I'll also teach you effective and simple strategies so you can have more purpose in your life on a daily basis.

You'll find valuable suggestions and ideas on:

- how to become more self-disciplined;
- how to set and keep goals;
- how to manage your time, money, and home;
- how to juggle responsibilities and self-care;
- how to experience less stress and more joy;
- how to rediscover your passion and purpose for life;
- how to keep a balanced life perspective and make a difference in big and small ways.

Not everything in this book will work for everyone. So please don't feel like you need to heed each suggestion or idea I share. I completely understand there is no one-size-fits-all program that will work for everyone in every stage and season of life. We each have unique personalities, viewpoints, and life circumstances, and we each need to approach things in a way that works best for ourselves and our families. So don't feel pressure to approach every aspect of your life the same way I approach mine. However, I hope that the principles in this book will

inspire you to make some slow and steady changes in your life that will result in a big transformation over time.

I'm here to help you as best as I can. Use what works and save the other ideas for later, or just skip them entirely. My greatest hope for you is that you can escape from feeling stuck and find the freedom and fulfillment that comes from living your life on purpose.

You don't have to stay perpetually overwhelmed and exhausted, barely existing in survival mode anymore. You can start living with direction and passion. Today.

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Stop Trying to Do It All

Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony.

—THOMAS MERTON

Goal: Streamline your life and cut schedule clutter so you can focus your time and energy on the things that matter most.

Strategy: Create a personal priorities list and use it as a springboard for culling your commitments and to-do list.

I had to make the call. And I was seriously dreading it.

I was supposed to meet some friends for a fun outing that afternoon. I had been looking forward to it. What mother who barely has time for herself wouldn't be ecstatic about doing something, anything, exciting? Problem was, I was already fifteen minutes late. And I wasn't even close to getting out the door.

With my feet glued to the sticky kitchen floor, I scanned the perimeter of my messy house. The dishes. The towering pile of laundry that had been mocking me from the bedroom

corner for the past week. The dust. The carpet needing to be vacuumed. The bathroom screaming for a good scrubbing. I looked at my hopelessly long to-do list I had scribbled on a scrap of paper. I watched my three half-dressed children under the age of five all seeming to need my attention at that very moment. I swallowed hard and felt a pair of invisible hands around my neck. My palms shook with the anxiety of way too much to do. It was the first moment I felt at the end of my rope.

I wanted to run away from it all. I was exhausted. I was stressed to the max. I felt stuck. I desperately fought the urge to yell, throw something, and cry—all at the same time.

Picking up the phone and admitting that I was in such an overwhelmed state (and late yet again) seemed to cement the fact that I was failing as a wife, as a mom, and as a woman.

Sure, I loved God, my husband Jesse, and my kids (Kathrynne, age four; Kaitlynn, age two; and Silas, a baby at the time). And yes, there were still times when I felt happy and fulfilled. But more and more, those stretches were a thing of the past—experiences and feelings that seemed unfamiliar and scarce.

I wasn't living. I was merely surviving. Scared of what might happen if I couldn't find a way out of this maze of misery, I prayed I'd find help. And soon.

THE SLOW AND STEADY DOWNWARD SPIRAL

How had things come to this? How could I not even manage to get out the door to meet friends for a fun afternoon without falling apart and feeling like a colossal wreck?

In retrospect, this wasn't something that happened overnight. Instead, it was a slow progression in an unhealthy direction. It started with a lot of major changes and crises in a short amount of time.

I had been married for six years—years that had been filled with a whirlwind of life events, some of which were very stressful: pinching pennies out of necessity while my husband finished college and went to law school, having three children in less than five years, starting four different home businesses (three of which flopped), moving four times. I felt life was spinning out of control.

I was working at least thirty to forty hours per week as a blogger and writer to try and keep our family afloat financially. My blog, *MoneySavingMom.com*, which I had started in 2007, was experiencing incredible growth. It was a great thing, but by the time my third child was born in 2009, I was in over my head. Around thirty to fifty thousand people were reading my blog every day, and I was a one-woman show, running the business without any help. I was getting up too early and staying up too late almost every day and night trying to meet all my business and writing deadlines. And I was still recovering from postpartum depression.

The lies started swooping in with a vengeance. “I’m going to be okay,” I whispered to myself when I felt suffocated by responsibilities and to-dos. I told everyone who asked that I was “great” and “wonderful.”

But deep down, I knew the truth. I was anything but fine. A chipper attitude and wide grin couldn't mask how overwhelmed I felt.

Stress is a powerful force and takes no prisoners. Running

at full-steam started taking a toll on me physically. Exhaustion-induced health issues began to surface. Every two to three weeks, I would be bedridden for a few days with a high fever, headache, and intense pain throughout my whole body.

As this sickness continued to hit every other week few weeks for four months, I became concerned. I knew what I was experiencing was not normal, and I wondered what was wrong with me. But I kept pushing myself, unwilling to admit I was the cause of my health issues.

FACADES AND GLIMPSES OF FREEDOM

In the midst of so much change and upheaval, type-A me wanted to keep up the persona of perfection. I didn't stop the insanity. I didn't sit down and analyze what I could realistically handle. I didn't recognize my limits and set boundaries. Instead, I wore a plastic smile and continued to say yes.

- “Sure, I’ll take on that project.”
- “Sure, I’ll meet that deadline.”
- “Sure, I’ll bake those brownies.”
- “Sure, I’ll look over your e-book and give you feedback.”
- “Sure, I’ll meet you for lunch and help you figure out how to start a blog.”

As time marched on and my rope grew thinner, I kept piling on more projects and responsibilities, ignoring all the warning signs.

But that cold spring day when I had to make the phone

call telling our friends we were running behind and going to be dreadfully late, something snapped inside me. For the first time, I realized how badly my life was spiraling out of control—and that something needed to give. For my children. For my husband. And for my own sanity.

I didn't make any outward changes yet, but my mind-set started changing. I stopped believing the lies that I could do it all, be it all, and have it all. I just wanted to be free again—free from the rat race, free from the burden of feeling that I had to say yes to everything, free from the pressure of trying to be perfect. I wanted to be free to enjoy life.

Though I had a long way to go to find total freedom, I had taken the first step.

THE WORDS THAT SPARKED THE ULTIMATE CHANGE

A few weeks later, after months of scrimping and saving, Jesse and I had enough to put an offer on a house we'd fallen in love with. Our offer was accepted and a moving date was set for five weeks later.

I reveled in the joy for about a second, when the reality of the situation finally hit. *What am I thinking? I can't add the responsibilities of moving to my plate!* I was barely keeping my head above water as it was. There was no way I could find time to pack up the house in six weeks too.

I was also in the midst of helping to launch an intensive training event for bloggers. Guess when this event was scheduled? Right during the time when my family were supposed to be moving!

My colleagues and I had spent months planning this blogging event, advertising it, finalizing details, securing speakers, and getting sponsors. We were excited about it and thrilled that we'd sold all the tickets in record time. The only problem was that we still had a lot more work ahead of us.

As I contemplated how on earth I was going to pull off the event and moving, all while juggling everything else going on in my life, I started to panic. In the past, when big projects were piled on my plate, I'd simply pushed harder, gotten less sleep, and powered through. This time, I knew I didn't have enough steam in my engine to do all that. Just considering it was completely overwhelming me.

Finally, I sat down with my husband and tearfully told him, "I can't do this anymore. I'm overwhelmed. I'm exhausted. Help!"

I was expecting a big hug or words of sympathy. And if I'm totally honest, I wanted a pat on the back for a job well done, you know, for my Superwoman efforts. I didn't receive the response I'd hoped for, but I got something better. Unfortunately, I didn't appreciate it at the time.

My husband looked at me sympathetically and then uttered some of the wisest words he's ever said to me. "Crystal, you know that you are the one who is bringing most of this on yourself."

Despite the truth and wisdom in his words, they were the last ones I wanted to hear. His statement only made me more frustrated at how stuck I felt. Instead of taking the epiphany to heart, however, I wallowed in a woe-is-me rant in my head. I felt sorry for myself and continued to blame everyone except for the cause of my problems: me.

ME—THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION

I mulled over what my husband said later that evening. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I knew he was right. I didn't have to spend so many hours blogging. I didn't have to be on the event planning team for the blogger intensive. I didn't have to say yes to every commitment and opportunity that came my way. Nobody and nothing was obligating me to do anything except me!

Finally! I had reached my tipping point. Relief washed over me, and I felt the weight of all the burdens I was shifting around release. I had more control over my life than I realized. I could stop the madness. I could eliminate the chaos. I could start setting boundaries. I could start saying no.

Yes, I was the problem. But I was also the solution.

CHA-CHA-CHA-CHANGES

In the days that followed, I made some drastic changes. I stepped down from the event planning project. I said no to pretty much all business offers that came my way. I shut down almost all my social media channels. I stopped feeling obligated to other people. I started making sleep a priority. I hired on more help with my business. I stopped trying to be Superwoman.

Sure, some people were disappointed in me—and weren't shy to voice their opinions—but I had never felt so at peace. I finally felt like I was living. Really living.

Within a month, my health had improved dramatically. In fact, the twice-a-month high-fever sickness disappeared within

six weeks and never came back again. Even in the craziness of moving, I felt calm, not frazzled or frantic.

They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.

—ANDY WARHOL

You know what surprised me the most about my new stance? My relationship with my husband did a 180-degree turnaround. Truth be told, I had been so busy spinning my wheels that I hadn't realized how bad things had gotten in my marriage. No, we weren't fighting all the time, and no one was threatening to leave. However, as with many marriages where busyness takes center stage, our communication had diminished to a purely superficial level. *How was your day, honey? Kathrynne drew a pretty picture today. That was a delicious dinner. Don't forget to pick up milk on your way home.* You know, that sort of thing.

My marriage had completely lost its spark. My daily schedule was so packed that I was missing out on some of the most important things in life. Gone were the hours my husband and I had spent laughing and enjoying each other. Gone were the deep discussions about our dreams, goals, and desires. Gone were the simple but romantic times holding hands and enjoying each other's company. Those precious moments had been replaced by work, deadlines, and conference calls. There was always business stuff to do, and in the process, my marriage and my family took a backseat.

My husband had been feeling neglected for months. He felt

I was too busy for him. The only reason he didn't mention anything was because, well, I was too busy to listen.

Sadly, he was right.

During the previous two years of building my business, I'd forgotten how to breathe. I'd become a workaholic and everyone except me seemed to know it was doing more harm than good.

AN IMPERFECT PROCESS

In the process of letting go, I admit, I've passed up a lot of great opportunities. But I'm okay with that. I've found that God always provides the right projects at the right time that I can realistically manage and enjoy doing.

Yes, there are moments when I want to dig out my Superwoman cape to impress others and hear them say how wonderful and accomplished I am. But when I remember how empty and exhausted it felt to try to do it all, I realize it's okay never to wear the cape again.

Now let me be clear: my life isn't perfect. There were times (and still are) where I've gotten off-course and have temporarily taken too much upon myself. But when that happens, I have a trusted group of friends who help me get back on track. I've asked these people to keep me accountable to having margin and breathing room in my life and to call me out when they see me sliding down the slippery slope of heaping my plate too full. I also remind myself regularly how bad things were a few years ago, and that helps me to be quick to make changes lest things get out of hand again.

I'd rather do a few things well, have my priorities in order,

and enjoy life than to try and do two hundred things poorly and have a stressed-out, exhausted, passionless existence.

JUST SAY NO

Time doesn't expand limitlessly. When I say yes to one thing, I must say no to something else. For example, if I choose to make getting up early a priority, I have to say no to staying up late on a regular basis. It also means I have to routinely say no to worthwhile activities and events that would keep me out late. In order to say yes, I must learn to say no.

You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, nonapologetically, to say “no” to other things. And the way you do that is by having a bigger “yes” burning inside. The enemy of the “best” is often the “good.”

—STEPHEN COVEY

I don't like saying no. But if my struggles and health issues a few years ago taught me anything, it was this: If I want to live a productive, efficient, happy, peaceful, and disciplined life, I must learn to say no. And I must say it often.

If you want to stick with and accomplish your goals, you're going to have to get good at saying no. It's hard to do, especially if you're an overachiever like me. This is a foreign concept, I know. We are taught that we need to be “yes women.” We worry

what people will think of us if we don't attend everything we're invited to, respond to every call for volunteers, or be on every committee.

But how can we stress less, sleep more, and restore our passion for life while trying to balance a full set of spinning plates? We can't. Living with intention means saying no to the things that aren't important to us so we can say yes to what matters most. If you're used to saying yes to everything and everyone, making the change to choosing well is going to be a challenge in the beginning. But once you start doing it, the benefits you'll reap will be so worth it that I promise you'll begin to do it even more!

WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW



Q: I'm a stay-at-home mom to a five-week-old baby boy. I have been following your blog for several years and I've always admired how much you accomplish in a day. Before my son was born, I had a full-time job and used that as my excuse not to do everything, but now that I'm a stay-at-home mom, I still can't seem to do everything. Do you ever have a day that you just relax and not worry about getting everything done?

A: There are days when I fantasize about a to-do list that has everything crossed off, and then I quickly realize that that is just not going to happen. So I have two choices: I can do the best I can do with the time and energy I have, or I can spend my life frustrated at everything left undone.

Mothering is a 24/7 gig, so I've learned that there's

no such thing as a complete “day off.” That said, I know my limits and try to take a few hours of respite and refreshment at least once a week. This might be sitting and reading a good book, snuggling for an hour with my children, watching a movie with my husband, going to a coffee shop or shopping by myself, doing something with a friend, or taking a bubble bath or afternoon nap.

We also try to take Sundays completely off at our house. I don’t blog or answer e-mails and often don’t even turn on my computer or phone! We typically spend the day at church, hanging out with friends and family, talking, reading, and yes, sleeping. I look forward to this one unplugged day every week. It refreshes, reenergizes, and renews me for the week ahead.



THE FOUR CS TO CREATING MARGIN

Does any part of my story resonate with you? Can you relate to my breakdown? My unhealthy need to say yes to too many things? Do you feel like you’re drowning? Merely surviving in life instead of thriving?

There are things you can do, starting today, that will help bring sanity, joy, and purpose back into your life. When you are stretched, frazzled, overwhelmed, and spent from packed schedules, never-ending to-do lists, and being pulled in every direction, you need margin. You need to eliminate certain things from your life that will give you breathing room.

I like how Dr. Richard Swenson describes margin in his

book *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. He writes, “Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion, the space between breathing freely and suffocating.”¹

Here are four ways to find that space. If you have an hour or so, treat each section below like an exercise to point you toward the margin you so desperately need. Plus, getting clarity now will be helpful as we move forward in this book. We’ll keep hitting these themes.

Create a Personal Priorities List

Take thirty minutes and sit down somewhere quiet. Use this time to craft a list of four to six personal priorities in the space provided or in your personal journal. You will use this list as a foundation to determine your schedule, responsibilities, and to-dos in the next chapter.

Ask yourself the following questions to figure out what you want to see on this list. What is most important to you? Family? Work? Health? Others? Where do you see yourself in twenty-five years? At the end of your life, what do you want to look back on and have accomplished? What’s going to matter most to you?

Start writing down your ideas. As you do, you’ll likely see patterns developing. Take note of these patterns to help you determine what really matters to you.

Remember, this is *your* personal priorities list, not someone else’s list. Catch yourself every time you start to write things down based upon the opinions of others (e.g. “I should probably include being involved in the PTA because that’s what the other moms would do.”).

“MY PERSONAL PRIORITIES LIST.”

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Once you have some ideas jotted down, divide them where applicable into the following categories:

- Personal (personal growth, physical health)
- Spiritual and Emotional (relationship with God, involvement in church)
- Family (relationship with your husband, children, and extended family)
- Career/Ministry (finances, business project, volunteer opportunities)
- Friendships

You don't have to include all these categories, or you can include others I may not have mentioned. I'm just giving you these examples to guide you. Create categories based on your unique situation, whether you are married or not, have children or not, have a career or are a stay-at-home mom. I highly recommend, however, including at least two of these categories as priorities to give you a healthy balance in life. For instance, exercising is important, and something I highly recommend.

But if you set a goal to exercise for six hours every day and don't plan to spend any time on your finances or building relationships, you're probably going to run into some serious issues in the not-too-distant future.

Also keep in mind that we all have unique family situations, needs, commitments, strengths, and weaknesses. What works for one person won't necessarily work for another. And what works in one season of our life might not work at all in another season.

We're going to flesh out these categories and ideas in the next chapter, but this gives you a solid backdrop to prioritize what you should focus on and do on a daily basis. If choosing four to six things seems hard for you, challenge yourself to do it anyway. The very process of listing things will help you figure out where your priorities lie. And remember that you can change this list at any time. What you write down now doesn't have to be set in stone for the rest of your life!

If you're curious, here are my personal priorities right now:

- Have a strong and vibrant relationship with the Lord.
- Maintain a wonderful relationship with my husband.
- Spend quality and quantity time with my children.
- Nurture my body and soul through rest, nutrition, margin, exercise, reading, and constantly challenge myself to learn and grow as a person.
- Write, speak, and manage my blog and business.

Clear the Schedule Clutter

I'm well known by my friends and family as a minimalist. I disdain clutter and owning stuff that I don't love, use, or need.

I admit. I can get a little OCD about it to the point that I get rid of stuff that I really should keep.

For instance, I have two pair of jeans that I wear in the fall and winter with boots. I don't know what I was thinking, but in one of my ruthless clean-the-house-from-top-to-bottom rampages last year, I put both pairs of those jeans in the garage sale box. I wasn't wearing them (since, hello, it was summer!), so I figured I could get rid of them.

A few months later, when the weather turned colder, I realized that I didn't have any jeans to wear with my boots. *How weird*, I thought. I was sure I had some jeans around from last winter. Lo and behold, as I prepared for an upcoming garage sale, guess what I found in one of my "for sale" boxes? That's right. My two pair of jeans. I had a good laugh at myself and my obsessive clutter-ridding nature.

Though I have a tendency to go overboard in eliminating clutter, I'd rather have to occasionally replace something that I inadvertently got rid of than have a house cluttered with stuff I don't need or use. I've learned that either we control the clutter or the clutter will control us. If we don't keep on top of the stuff that seems to breed in our closets when we're sleeping at night, it will soon overtake our houses and our lives.

It's the same way with our schedules. Many times busyness is mistakenly equated with productivity. But those two words are not synonymous at all. Just because we are spinning our wheels, rushing from one commitment to the next, doesn't necessarily mean that we are doing anything worthwhile.

If we don't carefully guard our days and regularly weed out the unnecessary from our schedule, pretty soon our schedule will be packed to the max with unwanted to-dos we got dragged

into out of obligation or because we didn't give ourselves the option to say no. If we want to say goodbye to survival mode, we need to make time for what really matters. This means we have to clear out the nonessential commitments.

As we've already established, we've got to learn to say no. This is the first step in finding margin and fulfillment in life. But we don't want to say no to everything, so how do we figure out what is worth doing?

Creating a personal priorities list is vital in enabling us to determine what is truly important and what opportunities we can pass up. After all, if we don't know what is most important to us, how we will know it when it comes our way?

I recently read the book *Leading on Empty* by Wayne Cordeiro. The author suggests writing a list of activities and commitments that currently seem to run your life and then determining whether they rejuvenate and energize you or drain and exhaust you. I found it helpful to consider all my activities in this light. Take some time out of your day and try this!

If you were beginning to doubt my claims to being Superwoman, let me set your mind at ease. I might have a few things that I do well, but there are many things I don't do at all.

Yes, I homeschool my children, run a widely read blog, and keep my grocery budget low, but that's because I stick to simple meals, don't have a garden, don't sew, don't even attempt to decorate my house, send my husband's dress clothes to the dry cleaners instead of ironing them, don't watch TV except for the

occasional show online, rarely go shopping for anything other than groceries, and only have my children involved in a few extracurricular activities.

But wait! There's more: I also don't take care of any of the bill paying or bookkeeping; my husband does this as he's excellent at it and loves it. We don't have pets to care for. I'm not in any regular playgroups or Bible study groups. I'm not on any committees. I don't pack lunches for my husband to take to work. And I only make dinner four to five nights per week.

If not doing similar things sounds like a blissful utopia to you, then you probably have some clutter in your schedule. Time to treat your calendar to a rigorous makeover!

You see, when you spend the bulk of your days doing things that really matter—things that make a difference, which help you to move closer to your overall goals that are really going to matter to you in twenty-five years—you can't help but feel like you're actually doing something and going somewhere with your life.

Cut Out Time and Energy Suckers

Last year, I deleted my personal Facebook account. Well, I didn't exactly delete it. I still have it up so I can run the Money Saving Mom® Facebook page, but I unfriended everyone on my personal Facebook profile. Harsh? Maybe, but I didn't unfriend everyone because I was fed up with Facebook or because someone on the site had offended me.

I deleted it because, for me, Facebook had become a time and energy sucker. A five-minute Facebook break in the middle of a writing or blogging project would turn into twenty-five minutes or more. I'd get sucked into this virtual world of

viewing other people's pictures, commenting on their statuses, reading through conversations (sometimes I didn't even know any of the people—pathetic, I know!), and responding to the many messages that came through my Facebook inbox.

Facebook had become a time-wasting distraction for me, so I finally got rid of it. You know what's amazing? Once I stopped using my personal account, I couldn't figure out how I had time to log on in the first place! Sure, I'm not always up on the latest news on everyone, but I certainly stay a lot more focused during my online time.

Best of all, I've found that people go out of their way to call, e-mail, text, or tell me things in person since they know I won't see it on their Facebook page. I feel like my face-to-face relationships with friends have grown stronger now that I'm not tied down to social networking.

Maybe Facebook isn't an area in which you struggle. But can you think of other time and energy suckers that you could amputate from your life? Like TV? Movies? Internet browsing? Blog hopping? Pinterest? Texting? Relationships? Shopping?

An eye-opening way to figure out what's eating up your daily allotment of hours is to keep a time log of everything you do every thirty minutes for at least two or three days. While this exercise might seem tedious, I'm willing to bet you'll realize you truly do have more time than you think. You might also be surprised to see how much time you waste on things that are meaningless.

Count the Costs

There's an important question I ask myself before I commit to anything: "What are the consequences if I say yes to this?"

For example, will saying yes to a late-night activity mean that I won't be able to get up early in the morning? Will saying yes to a big commitment mean that my home and family will suffer?

Count the cost of each commitment before you make your decision. Don't just blindly say yes when someone tries to convince you that you must do something. Don't give in to peer pressure or make decisions based on what people might think of you if you say no.

Recently, I was invited to go to a conference that I really, really wanted to attend. The conference coordinators offered to pay all my travel expenses, put me up in a nice hotel, and proposed coordinating a get-together with some women I've wanted to meet for a long time. There were no strings attached; they just wanted me to show up and have a wonderful time.

I was giddy as I thought about this conference and what an amazing opportunity it was. I excitedly showed my husband the e-mail, fully expecting he'd want me to jump on the opportunity. He surprised me by saying, "That sounds neat, but you know you can't go. We already made a commitment to go on vacation as a family that week." Oh, yeah, that vacation had totally slipped my mind in the midst of my enthusiasm.

"Couldn't we postpone or change the vacation?" I pleaded. "I've been hoping to have a chance to network with these women for a long time. It would be crazy to turn down this offer."

He looked at me and said, "It's a great opportunity and I'm glad they reached out to you, but you know that your family is more important. We've all been looking forward to this trip. I don't have any other weeks I can get off work for quite a while, and the kids will be so disappointed if we don't go."

I knew he was right. As much as this looked like an offer I'd be a fool to refuse, my commitments to my family took precedence. Besides, since this company reached out to me in the first place, there's a good chance they might be open to another similar opportunity down the road. I turned down the offer, and I don't regret it one bit. My kids are only young once; there will always be another business opportunity.

Now, that said, I don't turn down all invitations to conferences. In fact, I usually travel at least two weekends a month for business, whether it's for a media appearance, a speaking engagement, or a conference. But I evaluate each of these opportunities with my husband in light of our family priorities, my personal priorities, and what our family has already committed to during the same time period. If in doubt, I always say no. I'd rather err on the side of caution and margin than overextend myself to the detriment of my health and family.

Don't be afraid to say no. Women love to please others, and sometimes we do so at our own expense. Focus on your list of priorities. If saying no to something means your attention is drawn to what matters most—trust me, it's a good thing.

Caving in to demands that are emotionally overwhelming, relationally unhealthy, physically exhausting, and spiritually inauthentic is not the way to create the space and rest we all need. This dilemma is best solved by understanding and establishing boundaries.

—RICHARD SWENSON

GET PRACTICAL

Practice saying no. Get in the habit of saying no more than you say yes. Over the next week, make a concerted effort not to say yes to anything right off the bat. In addition, when you make your to-do list for tomorrow, force yourself to immediately eliminate three things from your list. This is not a mind trick to make you feel more productive than you really are. Instead, it's a way to help you start learning to give yourself some breathing room and to start evaluating your to-do list in light of what has to be done and what can wait, if need be.

Pruning away the excess commitments can seem daunting at first. But I promise if you put forth the effort to stop trying to do it all, it will free you to be able to focus your energy on those things that really matter. And this will bring you so much more fulfillment and joy in life than that heaping to-do list ever will!