

Time honored: Dialing down stress a matter of setting priorities

BY SANDI DOLBEE
Copley News Service

The words of a country song ring in like a carol for this caffeinated season:

"I'm in a hurry to get things done," sings the group, Alabama. "Oh, I rush and rush until life's no fun. All I really gotta do is live and die. But I'm in a hurry and don't know why."

Time is a grinch, stealing our days by overpacking them, but it doesn't have to be that way, say those who think about how we spend our time.

Time is about choices: Watch television or play a game with your children? Go shopping for more presents or get together with friends? Sign up to work overtime or do volunteer work?

You might call it the ethics of time, decisions people make about how to spend their time, that help define who they are.

"I think we are a society that doesn't believe in reflection. We believe in action. We are a society that seems to believe we can measure our health by the size of our gross domestic product," said John De Graaf, a Seattle public television producer and author who is active in the simplicity movement, which seeks to help people realize "that this rush-rush, hurry-hurry time-poverty society isn't working."

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John De Graaf, a Seattle public television producer and author

GIFT OF TIME

Certainly, we can't control all our time.

"In our society, long hours in the work place are really a requirement for many people," De Graaf said.

Other times, however, are another matter.

"How can we not understand that time is a family value without which families crumble?" he asked.

The holiday season from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day is particularly perilous. Throwing parties. Giving gifts. Decorating homes. Sending cards. Traveling to relatives.

"There is this whole sense of an additional layer of responsibility," he said.

His suggestion — give the gift of your time.

"Instead of rushing around shopping like mad, get together and have a meal and talk," he said.

San Diego resident Marge Wurgel does that.

"I invite people over for sharing tea with me or having a meal at my home or going for a walk — doing something together that we mutually enjoy rather than buying gifts," she said.

Eight years ago, Wurgel

helped start the San Diego Voluntary Simplicity Group, which meets monthly.

"It's all trying to live more consciously with decisions that we have weighed in our minds rather than live on automatic pilot," she said.

One of her tips: "Take a little bit of time every day for ourselves, to get centered, to get quiet, to decide what's most important to do and to let go of some of the expectations about doing a lot more during this time."

What Wurgel talks about — cutting back on materialism and focusing on what really matters — sounds enticing. So why doesn't everybody do it?

"I think living a simpler, slower life requires getting in touch with themselves, and that's scary," she said.

ABOUT VALUES

It may be easier to stay busy. At least for now.

"But I think too many people wait until they get a heart attack, a panic attack or a bout of cancer. Then they slow down," said Wurgel. "I think that eventually we learn it, but those of us interested in the Voluntary

Simplicity Group hope that we can learn it before we have a major catastrophe to help us learn the lesson."

Jeffrey Conte is an associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University who has studied and written about time management. He also collects pithy sayings about time. One of his favorites is



from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: "If you do not know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere."

"How you spend your time is definitely influenced by your values," Conte said. He makes lists of short-term things to do and long-term goals. When he gets overwhelmed, he goes back to those lists and refocuses. It happened to him recently when he was co-authoring a new textbook, *Work in the 21st Century: An Introduction to*

Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

"There were definitely days when I felt overwhelmed," Conte said.

He'd ask himself: "What am I trying to do in the longer term?"

Conte suggests that the holiday time pressure isn't all bad: "There is an emphasis on getting togeth-

er with family and friends

— and that's a valuable thing to do," he says.

And when you're feeling overloaded? "Step back and think about the meaning of the holidays," he said.

Again, it comes down to choices. An ethics of time. "If they want to accomplish things, if they want to see things, if they want to experience things, they'll have to use their time wisely," Conte said.

De Graaf, the Seattle time activist, suggests that what's at stake is both health and happiness.

"I think the time spent with TV and those kinds of things means a lot of things that are important to our health and our family's health fall by the wayside," he said. "There also are studies that show that people who really focus on things, on just having stuff and money, tend to be less happy than those who put their energy into other things, like family relationships."

For Wurgel, her choice was to have fewer commitments, spend less time at work and have less stuff around her.

"It's a much more satisfying way to live," she said. "I believe that as human beings we are meant to have a high-quality life, and I believe that being stressed reduces that high quality."

"It's all trying to live more consciously with decisions that we have weighed in our minds rather than live on automatic pilot."

Marge Wurgel, San Diego Voluntary Simplicity Group

'Fresh' local music and recipes

A new twist on music and food is just out for the holidays.

"Something Fresh" is a compilation CD and cookbooklet that is a tribute to the people and fresh food found in the Great Lakes region.

"Something Fresh" artists were given recipes featuring fresh food grown in Michigan and the 15 original songs and accompanying recipes are their musical response.

What you get when you mix recipes featuring fresh ingredients with musicians is "Something Fresh," a compilation CD and cookbooklet that features artists Claudia Schmidt, Don Julin, Steppin' In It, Daisy May, Seth Bernard, Eric Kelly, and Jen Sygit, and recipes from the Michigan State University Student Organic Farm, Chef Nancy Krcek Allen and more.

The project's purpose is to raise awareness about community supported agriculture (CSA's), farmers mar-



kets, soil microbiology, small-scale independent businesses, adding value to local commodities, eating with the seasons and our favorite musician friends — and to have fun mixing music with recipes.

"Something Fresh" is available for \$15. To get CDs call 947-0312 or send a check or stop by the SEEDS office (upstairs from Another Cuppa Joe) at 1200 W. 11th Street, Suite 220 in Traverse City.

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