

# 1. Practice

## *Simplification*

As you set out to define and live your ideal balance of self, family and career, it is important to create some space so you can think about and prepare for your journey. This necessitates carving out some time in your schedule to take care of you and looking for ways to share domestic responsibilities. You need to eliminate the noisy background that stops you from determining what makes you happy, what makes you fully alive to the possibilities of your life. Simplify your personal, family and work life, if only for a short while, so that you can see above the traffic to the road ahead.

**Intention 1**—*Take Care of Mom*

**Intention 2**—*Share the Daily Dance*

**Intention 3**—*Eliminate the Stressors*

## INTENTION 1—

## Take Care of Mom

Think about your car for a moment. Now imagine, whether it's true or not, that you keep your car in top condition. It's clean; it's comfortable. You've changed the oil recently and you've checked that the tires are inflated to the right pressure. You know you can rely on it to get you where you want to go. But now imagine that over time, as you get busier and busier, you start to take your car for granted. First, you put off scheduling its annual maintenance service. You notice one bright day that the windshield washer reservoir is empty. The oil light starts to come on from time to time. You stop washing it and the remnants of last week's lunch are still in the back seat. And eventually you even stop filling it up with gas. What happens to your car? Well, obviously, it stops.

Funnily enough, the same thing happens to working mothers when the precious gift of self-care is missing from their lives. Many working mothers tell me that they keep trying to “do it all” without paying any attention to their own needs. With no tune-up, no cleanup and no fill-up, eventually you can end up exhausted, overwhelmed and full of complaints and resentments.

Career-oriented moms are often so busy taking care of others that they tend to put the needs of their family first. That is not always a bad thing. Occasionally, even frequently, it may be necessary. But if you *never, ever*, get to come first on your list, this form of self-sacrifice can be a detriment to your own well-being.

Busy as we are trying to fit everything in, we can easily become preoccupied with taking care of the daily urgencies of living. But consider the important foundation that makes your family life happen—you. I know it can be very difficult

to put yourself first when there are so many other priorities competing for your attention. The demands of our lives often leave us believing that we have little time or space or energy left over to create something special for ourselves. Not only do we believe we have no space or time left, we can feel guilty if we think of taking time for ourselves as stealing time away from others.

Yet when our needs and self-care fall to the bottom of our priority list, this can be a one-way ticket to an unhealthy and an unbalanced life. Eventually we run out of gas.

*Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent.*

— C.G. JUNG

Understanding the theory, of course, doesn't make it any easier to put what we know into practice. Most working moms tell me that they appreciate and acknowledge the benefits of taking time for self-care. We know that we feel better if we give ourselves the opportunity to take care of ourselves—physically, emotionally and spiritually. We understand that the best gift we can give our family and ourselves is a healthy, happy, balanced mom. We recognize that if we break down, then we definitely can't be there for our family. The secret to transforming all this self-care theory into a concrete practice is to give yourself permission to put the quality of your own life at the top of your list.

### *Become positively selfish*

When most of us think of the word “selfish,” it brings up negative connotations. We associate “being selfish” with insensitive and indulgent behavior. In fact, *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary

defines selfish as: “caring unduly or supremely for oneself; regarding one’s own comfort, advantage, etc., in disregard of, or at the expense of, that of others.”

Two phrases are key in that definition—“unduly or supremely” and “in disregard of, or at the expense of, that of others.” Next time you think about enriching the quality of your life by going for a walk, getting a facial, reading quietly, meditating or taking an exercise class, consider whether these activities must be done in disregard of others. Is taking time to read something you want to read—not for work and not for the children—caring unduly or supremely for yourself?

I believe that such behavior is not caring unduly for yourself, but rather being positively selfish. This is “selfishness,” if we must think of it in those terms, that has a beneficial outcome for all. Looking at selfishness from a different perspective will open new possibilities for balancing your life. After all, creating a better quality of life starts with creating a healthier, rested, stimulated you. By becoming positively selfish, you will ensure you are at your best. Being positively selfish means choosing to spend your time and energy on things that bring you joy and occasionally making decisions that are based on what you need instead of what others want. (For more on joy, see Intention 7.)

Practicing positive selfishness is all about letting go of the harmful emotions you might feel because you took some time for yourself. You must believe that by serving your self-interests you will, ultimately, better serve the interests of your family, your colleagues and your community. Being positively selfish allows you to be physically and emotionally present at all times, without resentment.

When Cora began to work with me as her coach, it was probably the first time in years that she had done something just for herself. Cora, in addition to being a new mother in

her late thirties, was a successfully self-employed software programmer. When she wasn't working in her home office, she felt she needed to give her babysitter a break, so her lunch hours were spent looking after the baby. Her husband, also self-employed, worked long hours, which left Cora feeling responsible for the majority of the child care. Her life seemed to consist of working on her own, taking care of her son, dealing with domestic chores and sleeping. Just as her own mother had dedicated herself entirely to her family, so Cora tried to as well, while maintaining her career. But she was exhausted, beginning to feel bitter and finding little pleasure in her life.

*Seventy percent of Americans say they feel stressed and nearly 60 percent say they are pressed for time.*

—USA Today, SEPTEMBER 2003

What Cora needed was a little positive selfishness to get her life back on a more even keel. After several coaching sessions, Cora came to the realization that she had never given herself permission to do something just for herself. She

### Check Your Balance

Let's start by taking a look at how you can make yourself a priority in your own life. As you open your journal for the first time, quickly reread the remarks on personal journaling found in the introduction. Your journal is for your eyes only, and for your heart only.

Start using your journal to support you in taking better care of yourself. Take some quiet time to consider these questions truthfully. As you begin to write, let your heart lead

your pen, and don't worry too much about getting to the answer right away. It is in considering the questions that your real discoveries will emerge.

- When was the last time I did something just for me?
- In which areas of my life do I feel I need more support?
- Am I making decisions about what I do with my time based on what *I* want? or based on what *others* want me to do?
- Can I imagine becoming positively selfish?

remembered that, as she was growing up, her mother was always busy with caring for her children or baking or cleaning. Her mother had devoted herself to her family and never taken time for herself. Cora discovered that she was unconsciously modeling this behavior. After some initial resistance, Cora agreed to start slowly and commit to spending one hour a week just on herself. Strange as it may seem from the outside, this was a very difficult commitment, taken with many tears as she tried to push the guilt she felt into the background.

To begin with, I requested that she make a list of things she'd like to do, even if she had to ignore the pangs of irresponsibility while doing them. Near the top of the list was a long, hot bath. Her one-hour commitment for the first week was to go "self-care shopping," picking up bath salts, oils and candles to make that hot bath an indulgence rather than a practicality. The next week, she had a delightfully decadent soak. After that, dinner with a friend (which she had not done in over a year) was her assignment, and so on. It was the beginning of a change, and now, many months later, self-care no longer feels like a luxury to Cora. She knows it is necessary to keep her feeling energized, even-tempered and focused.

- What do I think my children/partner/mother/best friend would say if I told them I were being positively selfish?
  - How do I give myself permission to put me first?
  - If an unplanned opportunity to do something just for myself arose, how easy would it be for me to grab it?
  - How would I spend my "spare" time if I only had me to consider?
  - How can I carve out some time specifically for me?
  - How easy would it be to stick to a regular personal commitment?
- Do I see a difference between "taking better care of myself" and "taking better care for myself"?  
Once this journaling exercise is complete, begin taking care of Mom by making a commitment to yourself to capture some time just for you. How much time you feel you can take is up to you. It may be only fifteen minutes the first week. In the beginning, pick one thing you'd like to do, just like Cora did. Add others and extend your self-care time when you are ready.

*Eighty-eight percent of Canadians reported moderate to high levels of stress due to work-life conflict.*

—LINDA DUXBURY AND CHRIS HIGGINS,  
*Where to Work in Canada? An Examination of Regional  
Differences in Work-Life Practices*, NOVEMBER 2003

Cora is now extremely aware of her self-care and dedicates a minimum of two hours a week to being positively selfish.

There is no doubt that becoming positively selfish can be challenging at times, particularly if you have gotten into the habit of setting aside your own needs for those of others. But it is possible to put self-care at the top of your list without being egocentric or insensitive toward others. In fact, when you become positively selfish, you experience a pleasant after-shock. You find there is more of you to share with others.

### **Briefcase Moms Balance Zone**

#### *100 ways to take care of Mom*

Get your hair done. Talk to a friend. Just sit down in silence. Feel the wind. Do nothing. Take a bubble bath with the lights off and the candles lit. Treat yourself to new socks. Take a yoga class. Listen to great music. Meditate. Do a puzzle. Make cookies that you loved when you were a child. Leave work early. Go for a walk. Buy a new lipstick. Hire a one-time cleaning service for the housework. Say no. Ask for help. Live in the present...no saying "what if." Have a pillow fight. Stop worrying so much. Let go of your guilt...you are doing the best you can. Wear comfortable clothes, especially shoes.

Blow bubbles. Play. Do the Tarzan yell like Carol Burnett. Take a weekend trip. Get a facial. Have lunch on a patio on a sunny day. Buy yourself some flowers. Join a book club. Participate in your community. Stop procrastinating: if there is a project you've been avoiding or one that is in limbo, complete it. Go on a date with your child(ren). Try mountain biking, skiing or hiking. Stop trying to "fix" others. Stop letting others "fix" you. Play a board game with your family. Watch a video. Eat pizza. Go to bed at 9:00 p.m. Sleep in. Sing. Dance. Go to the beach. Listen to the sea. Admire the moon. Volunteer. Turn off the television. Unplug your phone. Say something nice to someone. Smile. Forgive. Let go. Fuel your body, mind and spirit. Be silent. Eat and cook foods that make you feel great. Share meals with friends. Eat by candlelight. Borrow a friend's dress. Keep a journal. Avoid emotional vampires. Cut down on caffeine. Resist the urge to judge others. Have a good cry. Reduce stress by arriving five minutes early for your next appointment. Throw out your to-do list for one day. Play. Take a risk. Paint your toenails. Slow down. Watch a comedy movie. Eat chocolate. Don't try to be perfect...just be you. Get a manicure. Redecorate your bedroom. Go outside. Treat yourself to your favorite junk food. Floss. Know your priorities. When you get stressed, ask yourself if this will matter in a week, a month, a year. Contribute to others. Have fun. Mute your e-mail. Stretch. Drink lots of water. Take vitamins. Nap. Read a book that you've really wanted to read. Romance your partner. Go to the park. Forget the mess and take a break. Feel the sun on your face. Make love. Knit or sew something just for you. Travel...near or far. Kiss. Tell someone you love them. Tell yourself you love you. Laugh.

## INTENTION 2—

## Share the Daily Dance

Logistical acrobatics is the best way I can describe the daily process families undertake to get moms, dads and kids where they need to be—work, daycare, school, after-school activities, doctor’s appointments, friends’ houses—when they need to be there. Life can feel like a constant daily dance of negotiating and renegotiating household and transportation responsibilities. But getting yourself and members of your family where they need to be is not optional; it is essential.

It used to be that the roles of caregiver and breadwinner were separate and distinct. Not any more. In a dual-career family, the roles of caregiver and breadwinner are often shared and interchangeable. Both parents are, as espoused in that infamous ’70s TV commercial for Enjoli perfume, “bringing home the bacon and frying it up in a pan.” Depending on the circumstances of the moment, the demands of each role may change. My clients tell me they feel like they are constantly conferring and bargaining with their partner. Sometimes working moms feel like they’re not simplifying their daily juggling act, but only making matters worse. And sometimes, they feel like this constant juggling is not worth it. But it is, because only through sharing the domestic roles and responsibilities can you each understand the other partner’s pleasures and pressures. Through that shared knowledge, generosity and cooperation, you can appreciate each other’s contribution and build a stronger partnership.

*In 2000, 60 percent of all married couples had two earners, while only 26 percent depended solely on a spouse’s paycheck, down from 51 percent in 1970.*

—USA CENSUS, 2000

Life with children and a career is complicated. Whose turn is it to pay attention to the kids? Whose turn is it to pay attention to work? Whose turn is it to drive? Whose turn is it to go grocery shopping? Whose turn is it to catch up at work by staying late?

Even when you think you've got it all worked out, your schedule or plan might need to change at some point during the day. Your boss might call a last-minute meeting that he wants all members of the department to attend—at four o'clock that afternoon. Do you feel you can call on your partner to pick up the kids in your stead? Your school-age son throws up just after breakfast on Wednesday morning and you recognize he's coming down with stomach flu. Can you stay home so your partner can get to his nine o'clock meeting?

*A recent review of Gallup Poll data from the last two years finds that in 63% of households studied, both partners bring home a paycheck, and in about one-fifth of those households, the wife earns more than the husband (18%).*

—Gallup Management Journal, JUNE 2003

Being able to call on each other for support, knowing that each person's career is equally honored, is key to sharing the daily dance. With this kind of understanding and recognition, your dual careers will rarely become dueling careers.

### *Keep your communication lines open*

Although there will certainly be unexpected additions to the schedule, it helps to have a good idea before Monday of what the week holds for everyone in your family. Try setting aside some time on the weekend to review individual commitments

and priorities. Through this forum all family members will be aware that Dad has a major presentation to make Thursday, that you have a school meeting Monday evening and that your daughter has soccer practice Tuesday night. You will not only know that it's "soccer practice Tuesday night" but the time and location as well. That way, if one parent can't make it, the other has enough details to handle the commitment. If you post the week's schedule on the fridge door or in some other central location, then everyone in the family will know each other's whereabouts, and you can better handle changes and additions.

My husband and I have been sitting down almost every Sunday morning for the past four years "to plan our week." First we review what each of us has upcoming on our professional and personal agendas. Then we determine, for each day of the week, who's home for dinner, who's out, who's got what deadlines and who's dropping off and/or picking up Adam from daycare, play dates or his grandparents' house. Once those plans are solidified, we then turn to deciding what we want for dinner in the evenings ahead. Although Adam is only five, he's also involved in the conversation... mostly from the perspective of what he would like to have for

### Check Your Balance

Use your journaling time to contemplate how to minimize the challenges of dual careers and ease your daily schedule. Take a few minutes with your journal to ask yourself the following questions:

- Are my partner, children and I communicating effectively about our schedules and commitments? If not, how can we improve?

- Do I feel like my partner and I are sharing our daily dance effectively?
- Do I leave enough space in my schedule to allow for the unexpected?
- Do I begrudge the time I spend transporting my children?  
If so, why?  
When you are ready, take another few minutes with your journal to think about the answers to these questions:

supper. He participates for as long as his attention span will allow him, which is about three and a half minutes. But you can bet he never forgets the days he has requested French fries. What we like about this process, which usually takes no more than fifteen minutes, is that it minimizes unwanted surprises, communication mishaps and misunderstandings, for we all know what to expect from each other.

To further enhance your communication, ensure you can easily reach your partner, whether by cellphone, e-mail, pager or other means. If there are any changes to your plans (and invariably there will be), you need to be able to get in touch with each other in a hurry. Strike an agreement to keep your communication lines open. There's no point in having a cellphone number for each other if you don't keep the phone turned on. Also agree that, if chatting to one another regularly during the day is not convenient, you will only call if it's an emergency and your partner will respond quickly.

- Can I make my routine/scheduling more enjoyable?
- Have my partner and I established clear guidelines about our individual roles and responsibilities for family obligations?
- How can I reorganize my schedule to allow for more flexibility?
- How can my partner and I better involve our children in our daily dance?



### **Briefcase Moms Balance Zone**

#### *Build in a little bit of time*

You will reduce the stress you feel in “keeping it all together” if you can add some flexibility into your schedule. Traffic is often unpredictable, for example, and no amount of fretting and banging the steering wheel will get you and your car through a jam any quicker. Make a supreme effort to allow at least five minutes around each commitment. For example, if you have to pick up your younger daughter from after-school care at 4:45 p.m. and you know it takes 35 minutes to get there, give yourself 40 minutes. You’ll be surprised at the calm that will envelop you when you realize that you’re going to be comfortably on time. The extra few minutes will also help you to cope with the unexpected—a stall on the highway or a quick stop for gas. Five minutes doesn’t seem like much when you’re packing up at the office, but it feels like an eternity when you know your child is waiting for you at the other end.

### **INTENTION 3 —**

## Eliminate the Stressors

Every Sunday evening around eight o’clock, Mary Ann would experience a heaviness descend upon her. She would feel pressure in the space between her shoulder blades creeping in on Sunday afternoon. As the day drew to a close her jaw would tighten at the prospect of another Monday morning. It wasn’t so much her work or going to the office that Mary Ann was dreading. She enjoyed her role as a controller for a professional services consulting firm. It was the

piles of paper, the incomplete projects, the stack of reading she'd put to one side, the unopened mail, the unfinished filing and the overdue billings that she found depressing. She wondered if she should find herself another job and added "Look for new position" to her to-do list.

Have you ever found yourself feeling this way about your workload? You enjoy the kind of work you do: it is challenging, stimulating and rewarding. It just feels like there's too much of it. Right-sizing, downsizing and technological advances have all contributed to ever-expanding responsibilities at the office. Having a long to-do list can definitely be stressful, but it's not the number of things on our list so much as it is the unfinished business and lack of organization that are the source of stress. Disorganization, clutter, incomplete tasks and tough conversations that we've put off are "stressors" in our already busy lives.

*Forty-eight percent of individuals employed in management-level jobs reported too many hours and demands as a source of workplace stress.*

—STATISTICS CANADA, 2003

Stressors, whether physical or emotional, consume a lot of space and energy. For example, if your office is a mess it probably distracts you. The reverse also applies: when your office is organized you probably feel happy and comfortable. As an added bonus, you can find what you need immediately without wasting precious time. When something has been on your list for quite a while, it probably induces lethargy each time you look at it. But when you can cross that thing off, the energy gain is almost palpable. Each time you ponder a project not yet completed or reading yet to be tackled, you're losing steam.

Tremendous amounts of energy are also wasted due to regret, guilt and dissatisfaction. If you've got that nagging feeling that your job doesn't really align with who you are (and you know you don't have time to think about that right now), putting that feeling aside adds to your stress. Avoiding a strained relationship with a colleague and sidestepping conversations that you would rather not have can diminish your effectiveness. And as for clutter, well, it just creates a state of confusion.

### *Stressors deplete your energy*

If you are putting up with numerous things at work, it won't matter how much positive energy you put into the rest of your life. You can concentrate on good nutrition, positive relationships or getting lots of exercise, but stressors leach energy from your personal power grid, leaving you feeling like you're running on empty. Imagine your body as a Styrofoam cup and your life energy as the water filling it up. When your energy level is high, the cup is full of water to the point of overflowing. When you are in this state you feel wonderful, your mind is clear and you have plenty of get-up-and-go to do all that you desire. Then along comes a stressor. Each one is like a

#### **Check Your Balance**

During the next few days, take a couple of minutes to honestly assess whether workplace stressors are draining your energy. If the answer is yes, consider bringing your journal into the office to support you in undertaking the four-S strategy—Sort it. Start it. Share it. Stuff it—to eliminate stressors. Here are three steps to get you started.

1. Take one lunch break and, in your journal, list some of the stressors

you are currently facing at work. If you are unsure where to start, take an objective look at your surroundings. Piles of paper or objects that elicit a sigh or pang of exasperation are most likely stressors for you. Jot them down. You might be able to reel off your stressors in a matter of minutes, or it might require more time. You may be able to identify three stressors or thirty-three. Quantity doesn't matter; it's the naming of the stressors that does.

sharp pencil tip stabbing a hole in the side of the cup—and out drips the water in a steady stream. The more annoyances you tolerate, the more power flows out of you. And if your energy is constantly seeping out, no matter how much you add, you will never reach a state of energetic abundance.

Mary Ann's cup was never full to the top, and when we began working together, one of the first things we tackled were those Sunday-evening blues. To begin, we took an inventory of all she was up against, including everything on, and not on, her to-do list. Nothing was left out, not even the discussion with her assistant she had been avoiding for six weeks. To come to terms with what was getting her down, she knew she had to stop following her cup of coffee around the office, stop looking at the piles of “must read someday” papers and professional magazines, stop feeling overwhelmed by incomplete client files, stop avoiding unanswered e-mails and stop analyzing where to start. It wasn't the work she was doing that was making her crazy; it was the work she wasn't doing.

Once she had taken inventory, I asked her to divide her list into five columns: client work, administration, human resources (those “tough conversations”), marketing and professional development. She further segmented her inventory

**2. Now that you have sorted them, for each of the stressors you have identified (begin with only three if there are many on your list), determine which of the remaining three S's—Start it, Share it, or Stuff it—you are going to apply. Once you've chosen the most appropriate S approach, then list the steps you will need to take to eliminate the stressor. Try to figure these steps out in detail. For example, if you have a pile of filing on your desk, your steps if**

**you've chosen the “Start it” strategy might be to review the files, sort them as active or inactive, determine if they need to be filed in your office or in the central system, determine a deadline for filing, then file them. On the other hand, if you chose the “Share it” strategy, you might collect all the files, recruit the support of colleagues or your assistant, and request they file them appropriately.**

and highlighted in different colors the following: 1) tasks she enjoyed; 2) things only she could do; 3) things she didn't like doing and could transfer to someone else; and 4) things she no longer needed or wanted to do. From this list she could clearly see which items she needed to take care of and which she could dispense with altogether or delegate to others. Mary Ann also gave herself permission to let go of the stacks of magazines and professional literature she'd been meaning to get to for months. She set a two-month limit on any reading material; if she hadn't read it by that time, it wasn't important enough to weigh her down.

Mary Ann found it difficult at first to recognize that she didn't have to accomplish everything on her list by herself. By delegating to her team and letting go of total control (more on control issues in Intention 9), Mary Ann was able to free up more time for the work she enjoyed and, equally important, to involve her co-workers in interesting and challenging work. Delegating some tasks also improved Mary Ann's communication with her colleagues. Her assistant told Mary Ann that she used to feel intimidated by her, but no longer felt that way since they started having regular team meetings to discuss projects and assign work. With less on her plate, Mary Ann

**3. It's often amazing how a task can be simplified by assigning it a deadline. Parkinson's Law states: "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." If you have only an hour to pack or an hour to prepare a report, chances are you will simplify the process in order to get the job done. You can use this approach to reduce your stressors. Commit in your journal to a completion date for three things you are putting**

**up with, large or small. Sometimes it is easiest to start with a small stressor that is easy to purge and build momentum from there. Be honest about the amount of time you think the task will take and respect that. If the stressor is an ongoing annoyance, such as dealing with a constant flow of reading material or a strained relationship with a co-worker, assess how you're doing with this task in three months' time and adjust your plans accordingly.**

was then able to tackle those things only she could do.

Working together, we developed a critical path that broke each task into smaller chunks. She then estimated the time required for completing the task and set some deadlines. She was beginning to see through the confusion and clutter by getting her thoughts about work commitments out of her head and onto paper. Mary Ann was able to get started and to stay on track with her workload. When she could see exactly how much work she had taken on, she was in a better position to delegate and even occasionally to say no to additional work (more on that in Intention 21).

It took Mary Ann several months of conscious effort and diligent simplification to significantly reduce her stressors. From our discussions, Mary Ann realized that she might never be rid of all her stressors and that having zero annoyances in her life was probably an unrealistic expectation. Yet she was still able to identify areas that she could readily work on and is feeling lighter and better organized. So much so that she no longer scans the employment section in the weekend papers.

## **Briefcase Moms Balance Zone**

### *Simplification has four S's*

If you feel that sense of being buried by all you have to do, it's likely stressors are lurking, depleting your energy and your enthusiasm. Think about using this four-S strategy to make your situation more manageable.

- 1. Sort it.** Take inventory.
- 2. Start it.** Stop procrastinating and do it.
- 3. Share it.** Delegate the task to someone else.
- 4. Stuff it.** Throw it away.