



PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA BROOKLYN

Balance

To Do: Rethink Your To-Do List

Follow these six simple steps and conquer the clutter in your life

By Victoria Scanlan Stefanakos

Renee Cliff is used to getting things done—as a director at the aerospace manufacturer where she works. But not as new mother to Michelle, age 8 months. “Baby-proofing my house has been ‘tomorrow’ on my list for weeks now,” she says. So is getting her baby a passport for a fast-approaching trip to Europe.

“The average number of items on my to-do list is thirty,” Renee says, laughing, “and they’re all things I have to do *now*.” Even after performing some multitask triage, she has only a few hours with Michelle each day. “I feel overwhelmed,” she says. So Renee has decided to take a radical approach. Inspired by a workshop she took recently, she is resolved to work smarter, not harder, by downsizing her to-do list. After all, why keep a

list of tasks you’re *never* going to get to?

To-do lists—long handwritten or PDA creations, or those less formal pocket-book and refrigerator scraps—litter the scenic trail of working motherhood. (Schedule well-baby checkup. Do performance review. Get oil changed. Eat. Sleep. Shower. Put off entire to-do list till 2005.) The trouble, say experts, is that the traditional to-do list actually sucks the productivity—not to mention the creativity—out of our lives.

Like Renee, many of us keep lists that run on for pages, making them either a tease, a lie or a tool for torture. Why? In part, because listing a task isn’t scheduling it. And if we do schedule, we don’t figure in the interruptions that pop up on the way from “5:00 a.m., pack lunches” to “1:00 p.m., sink into bed.”

Besides, the typical to-do list is a relic of an age when most people had more straightforward lives (work or stay home) and less technology (one landline, no email) and could count on someone else to handle little details like retirement (pension, not a 401[k]). With more things competing for your time and energy, no wonder you feel defeated before you start.

But there are ways to organize all that confronts you. (Even to write lists that work.) Here’s how to rethink the to-do:

Take inventory. Gather up all of your to-do lists by emptying journals and calendars, your desk and, most important, your mind. Making your brain into Post-it Note Central only saps energy. Capture it all (in *one* notebook or on a mini tape recorder, whatever works) and make that a habit. Remembering to remember is the hardest to-do of all.

Get real. You may love handcrafting valentines for all of your kids’ classmates. But if doilies aren’t your thing, and your kids are begging for Sponge-Bob, let it go. If you hate a task and it isn’t important to you, you’re doomed to dread—and ignore—it. Your first step in setting priorities is: Lose the judgment.

Supposed to be commentary, not reality. "The to-do list is designed to haunt us," Denver psychologist Gregory Lester complains. It becomes a nagging parent, hanging over our heads.

Instead, he counsels, be tough and pragmatic. What must you do now? What are you not doing now (but would like to)? What—if you're brutally honest—are you never going to do? If you look at the projects without the commentary (and toss plenty of them), says Susan Carberry, who runs workshops for the productivity-training firm Mission Control, you'll discover time and energy long lost amid the guilt.

Clock it—and calendar it. Identify the tasks that have deadlines, then those that are less pressing. Figure out how much time each will really take. With real-time

Don't let
mercenary
activities take
over your life.

—Veronique Vienne,
The Art of Doing Nothing

allocations, you might just find your way to the gym three times a week. (Okay, maybe two times.) Factor in repeat responsibilities, such as grocery shopping or switching to seasonal clothes.

Plan for the unplanned. Slot in an hour or two each day for interruptions—an impromptu meeting, a major sibling battle. That way, you aren't thrown off

course when they happen. If you schedule fewer things and leave room for more chaos, you'll get more done in the long run.

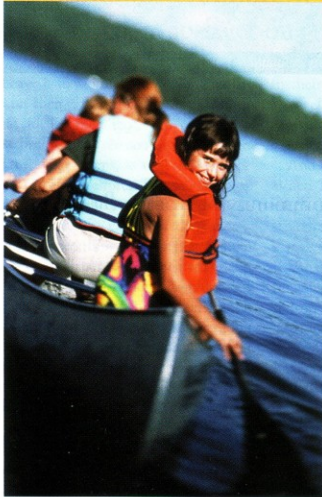
Weed regularly. Paperwork alone will bury you, and the bigger the pile, the more loath you'll be to attack it. "The subliminal pressure it exerts on you is huge," says David Allen, author of *Ready for Anything* (Viking).

Review and redo. Every week or two, review your list so you'll always know your commitments. And make sure it leaves you room to breathe. After all, too much to do is just that.

Renee Cliff has made huge progress simply by keeping her to-do list manageable. "I'm still plenty busy," she says. "I just don't worry anymore about what I'm not getting done." ■

LIGHTEN THE LOAD

TIPS AND TIME-SAVERS TO KEEP YOU SANE



Campfire Secrets

Peg Smith, executive director of the American Camping Association (ACA), gave herself a pat on the back last summer when her son, Dayton, returned from sleepaway camp for the first time and raved about how much fun it was. Even a pro like Smith knows it's not easy to match the right kid with the right camp. The first step: Talk to your child about the kind of experience he's hoping for this summer. When Smith's son told her that he wanted to try sleepaway camp, they researched places at informational websites like www.acacamps.org and www.kidscamps.com before deciding on a YMCA camp in their home state of Indiana. Smith visited it before registering Dayton and asked the director how many kids return each year—good camps, like good businesses, will have many repeat customers. If you can't squeeze in a visit, request a promotional video or ask about camp-sponsored open houses in your area. Also, make sure the camp is ACA accredited, which means it meets national safety standards. Once the prep is done, you and your child can count down to the fun part: a few sublime weeks of freedom for both of you.—Rachel Deahl