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*Women's Health* partnered with the daytime syndicated talk show *The Doctors* to conduct an exclusive survey that probed a problem many modern women face—not getting enough rest. Among the alarming discoveries: We're now so perpetually "on" that our bodies have forgotten how to relax, and that's driving us toward a dangerous type of exhaustion.

BY KRISSY BRADY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG CUTLER



**the**  
**restless**




FOR RESTLESS  
WOMEN, ZEN  
MOMENTS OFTEN  
GO UP IN FLAMES.

For as long as Stephanie Peterson, 25, can remember, she's lived in overdrive. The founder of a Colorado-based company that supports female entrepreneurs, she's go-go-go from morning to night, week to week, year to year. When she does get a break, she does what makes her most comfortable: She works some more.

Take her honeymoon to Antigua: The plan called for zip-lining, beach bumming, and candlelit dinners. The reality was Stephanie in her room on her laptop, overlooking the beach on which everyone else was relaxing.





Things weren't much different on a recent trip with friends to Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The group had splurged on a chalet, complete with glass elevator and hot tubs. But as everyone lounged around the living room, Stephanie kept sneaking off to her room to check e-mail. "There were a few nights where I just stayed there and didn't go back out," she says.

Some might call her a workaholic, but Stephanie contends that high gear is simply her normal speed. She's way more content being productive than sitting around "doing nothing." And she's certainly not alone: Nearly 63 percent of the women in the exclusive survey conducted by *Women's Health* and *The Doctors* said they rarely prioritize daily downtime. What's more, women spend less time on R&R than men do, and a whopping 91 percent of all millennials blow off the concept of relaxation altogether, according to Pew Research Center studies.

The trouble is, when chronically being "on" becomes normal, lulls in activity become *abnormal*, even uncomfortable, for the body and mind. The idea of getting some rest can, paradoxically, make women feel restless. "So many women now have a very difficult time stopping, relaxing, and getting centered," says Melissa McCreery, Ph.D., a

clinical psychologist and founder of [TooMuchOnHerPlate.com](http://TooMuchOnHerPlate.com). And that short-circuited capacity to unwind comes at a surprisingly unhealthy price—especially when it goes unrecognized or unchecked.

## The Growing Disquiet

The unwillingness-turned-inability to relax stems, in part, from shifting ambitions. Some 15 years ago, around 25 percent of women considered a high-paying career extremely important; today, 42 percent of women do. "But it's not necessarily all about the money," says Nicole Williams, author of *Girl on Top: Your Guide to Turning Dating Rules into Career Success*. Enter the 21st-century concept of "having it all," which feeds the mindset that every moment you take to decompress is a moment you could be using to get ahead.

Add an unstable job market to the mix, and women aren't just striving for success, says Williams. They're fighting for a competitive edge, working double time to learn as much as they can as fast as they can. This keep-up-or-else mentality blurs the line between personal and professional time, upending the notion of work-life balance, says Elisabeth Kelan,

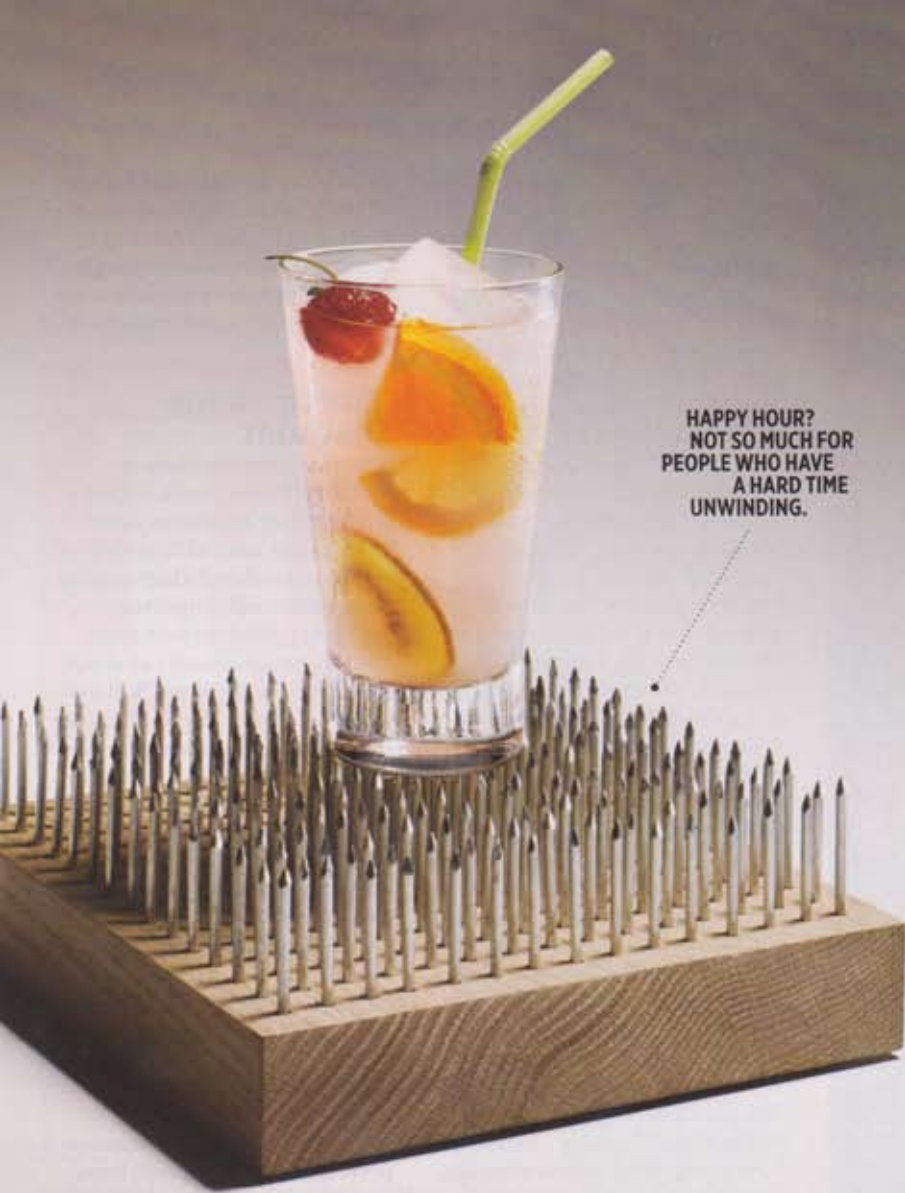
## Surviving Sans Rest

When relaxation avoidance goes extreme

Most people's angst grows with their to-do lists. Most people, that is, except those suffering from relaxation-induced anxiety (RIA), a restlessness-related condition that's on the rise, now affecting some 15 percent of young people.

"RIA can range from someone getting very antsy when made to do breathing exercises to someone having a full-blown panic attack about a beach vacation," says clinical psychologist Debra Kissen, Ph.D., director of the Light on Anxiety Treatment Center in Chicago. While it's not yet classified as a clinical disorder with specific criteria, RIA's hallmarks include getting overly wound up at the prospect of relaxing—and therefore avoiding downtime at any cost.

As with many mental-health challenges, if you think you suffer from RIA, the first step is recognizing it. ("The more you try to not have feelings, the stronger those feelings will be," says Kissen, who has her patients arrive 10 minutes early to sit in her waiting room, sans reading material, so they are forced to confront their anxiety.) Targeted counseling like cognitive behavioral therapy can help you relearn how to rest—so you can get back on that beach.



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Ph.D., author of *Rising Stars*. As such, downtime is falling further by the wayside, and those who are pressing pause are often racked with angst: Fifty-five percent of the women in our survey said they feel guilty about taking time to relax.

Fueling restlessness even more is the fact that women are rarely unplugged. Some 83 percent of young adults have slept with their cell phones, according to the Pew Research Center, and, per our survey, 30 percent of women consider their smartphones their lifelines. "Before smartphones and social media, you could only compare yourself to those around you," says Larissa Faw, a writer who covers millennial issues for EPM Communications. "Now you can see what the entire world is doing in real time, making you constantly feel as if you should be doing more."

Being perpetually too busy is also an übercommon way to push off tough life decisions, says Toronto-based psychotherapist Kimberly Moffit. "Women often avoid relaxing because they're subconsciously afraid that if they do, they'll come face-to-face with what's really bothering them," she explains. In other words, not having downtime equals not having to deal. But this kind of emotional evasion can be habit-forming, creating huge pileups of mental tension, warns clinical psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness*. The result: a spin cycle of can't-sit-still, can't-stop-now restlessness.

## Chilling Out, On the Go

The new concept of "active rest" lets you quiet your body and mind while still getting out and moving around.

It sounds counterintuitive, but relaxing doesn't have to be done off your feet. Decompressing isn't always about stillness and silence (restless women's nemeses). "Focusing on one specific task and blocking out intrusive, unsettling thoughts can induce a relaxation response," says Kathy J. Helzlsouer, M.D., of the Prevention and Research Center at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore.

The goal is to do one thing—and one thing *only*—by yourself, says Susan Ginsberg, of the Chicago-based Stop and Breathe program.

Look for simple actions that aren't taxing but still require your full attention. Easy bike rides are ideal for active rest because you need to concentrate—but not too hard—on pedaling, steering, and focusing on the road. Likewise, painting your nails requires a steady hand and uniform strokes. And hobbies like knitting or drawing force you to focus on rhythmic movements and patterns.

Here's the trick: You must choose an activity that matches your current mood and energy levels, says Melissa McCreery, Ph.D. So, if you feel physically antsy, go for a quiet nature walk. If your mind is racing but you're tired, get lost in a book. If your restlessness typically leads to something like stress eating, keep your hands and mind focused on a crossword puzzle.

In short, customize your active rest to suit you, not the other way around—otherwise, it won't work.

## A Broken "Off" Switch

Unlike Stephanie Peterson, Sharon Rosenblatt, 25, does remember a time when she felt less frantic. "I used to totally relax," she says, "and just sit in bed and watch movies." Now, however, after a few years at a busy I.T. consulting job in Silver Spring, Maryland, Sharon finds herself scheduling every minute of every day.

The handful of times she's tried to really unwind were short-lived: A soak in the tub lasted only minutes before restlessness

overcame her and she sprang up to tackle her to-do list. A recent massage was a relaxation disaster: "The masseuse told me twice I needed to stop talking because I was beginning to stress her out," she says. At night, her racing mind keeps her awake, but that's still preferable to totally decompressing, which, she admits, now seems even more daunting than keeping so busy.

Restlessness like Sharon's fires up the body's fight-or-flight stress response, and it exists on a sliding scale. Harnessing a moderate amount of it can "actually be valuable to help motivate you to get a job done and to do it well," says Travis Stork, M.D., an ER physician and cohost of *The Doctors*. "But if you never take the time to relax, you actually lose your ability to do so at all." Staying continuously restless means the body never returns to a calm baseline state—it's been rewired to be all stress response, all the time.

That means the adrenal glands are working 24-7, pumping out the stress hormone cortisol, consistently high levels of which have been linked to a bevy of woes such as indigestion and fatigue. The longer you go without relaxing, the bleaker the picture becomes: A new study found that a major side effect of restlessness is a reduction in vigor. (Vigor is defined as a combination of physical energy, mental acuity, and emotional well-being. Think of it as the polar opposite of burnout.)

"As their vigor falls, people can succumb to the detrimental effects of chronic cortisol overexposure," says study leader Shawn M. Talbott, Ph.D., author of *The Secret of Vigor: How to Overcome Burnout, Restore Metabolic Balance, and*

## THE DOCTORS

**TUNE IN** to the syndicated daytime talk show *The Doctors* this October (check local listings), when the hosts and *Women's Health* will discuss the results of their exclusive survey, plus how you can overcome the rising health threat of restlessness. Visit [thedoctors.com](http://thedoctors.com) for more information.

## BEING RESTLESS FIRES UP THE BODY'S FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE, SO IT'S ALL STRESS—ALL THE TIME.

*Reclaim Your Natural Energy.* Those include heightened risks for stress-related diseases like depression, anxiety, and heart disease. If left unchecked, restlessness can also lead to irritable-bowel syndrome and reduced sex drive.

What's more, in attempting to cope with chronic stress, women become vulnerable to destructive behaviors such as alcohol, drug, or food abuse, says Amanda Skowron, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist at the Casey Health Institute in Gaithersburg, Maryland. In fact, some women turn to bad habits like overeating *instead of* slowing down because they just can't figure out how to effectively relax, says McCreery.

### Reclaiming Calm

How can you tell if your own overdrive has become overkill? For starters, if you snag downtime

only by accident—say, if someone cancels a dinner date—or if you afford yourself fewer than 15 minutes a day to relax, you could be edging toward restlessness, says Lombardo. Other red flags: Like nearly 40 percent of the women in our survey, you fill up your rare free days with busywork or non-crucial errands. Or, like almost 30 percent of women, you don't start unwinding until day four of a vacation.

The good news is that just about anyone can learn to decompress. "Think of relaxation as a muscle you're gradually strengthening," says McCreery. You might not be graceful at it at first, but even awkward attempts to unwind will eventually segue into the real thing. Get started with the five tips below. If the process makes you feel uncomfortable or guilty, stick with it, says Stork. "Remember, it's doctor's orders."

### 1

#### Go Big—But Go Home

Use short bursts of restlessness to your advantage when tackling challenges. Your fight-or-flight response can help you get through anything that scares you a little (a work presentation, asking out a cute guy). However, adopt the habit of rewarding yourself with some R&R once you reach your goal. "I'm a huge advocate of using stress to motivate," says Shawn M. Talbott, Ph.D. "But you need to build in breaks for recovery and rejuvenation."

### 2

#### Cut Yourself Off

Avoid OMT, or "one more thing" syndrome, says Kathy J. Helzlsouer, M.D. Trying to squeeze in that last OMT before bed can lead to big-time restlessness (not to mention lots of sleeplessness). If you must power through a p.m. checklist, mark down unwinding as your final to-do item, says Helzlsouer. "If it needs to be written down for you to consider it acceptable, that's fine." Spend some time chilling out, then cross it off the list.

### 3

#### Listen Up to Shut Up

If sitting still makes you want to dig your nails into the chair, then you're probably nowhere near ready for silent meditation. Instead, buy a mind-body relaxation CD, on which a trained professional talks you through a guided meditation session. This will allow you to focus on something other than your own thoughts as you decompress, says Kristen Burris, an acupuncturist and women's-health expert in Eagle, Idaho.

### 4

#### Count Your Breaths

An ace way to manage restlessness, deep breathing can also improve your sleep quality and boost your energy levels, says Susan Ginsberg of Stop and Breathe. Beginners can try two-one breathing, in which you exhale for twice as long as you inhale, for 10 to 20 minutes. To help with stubborn sleep problems, go with 8-16-32 breathing right before bed: eight long belly breaths lying on your back, 16 on your right side, and 32 on your left.

### 5

#### Just Admit It

Sometimes the best way to fight restlessness is to acknowledge it's there. When you start feeling fidgety, take a moment to recognize what's going on, says psychotherapist Karen R. Koenig, L.C.S.W. "Remember that you don't have to act on the impulse to move around," she says. "You can even say out loud: 'I'm fine right now just as I am.'" Getting the hang of baby steps like these will encourage you to enact healthy changes. ■