

# BUSY BODIES

In a time when it's socially unacceptable to have loads of free time on your hands, OLIVIA STREN wonders why everyone wants to be so damn busy.

“HOW ARE YOU?” A BARISTA ASKED ME RECENTLY. “Super busy?” He was presumably too busy frothing almond milk for another customer to wait for my answer.

“Yeah. SO busy. Crazy!” I replied. And lied. I wasn't crazed that day (at least not from busyness). Granted, I was busy feeling guilty, a low-grade panic about not being busy enough. But I was hardly going to shame myself by revealing the vacancy of my calendar to my barista (especially as he was clearly too busy to care). I fetched my latte and proceeded to check my iPhone with a socially acceptable sigh of tension and frustration. (See George

Costanza in *Seinfeld*: “When you look annoyed all the time, people think that you're busy.”) Today, being busy is code for being important, successful and valid, and admitting to not being busy is admitting to hopeless loserdom.

Trying to plan a meal with a few friends invites an I'm-too-busy e-cyclone of rain checks and cancelled dates. In a culture that prizes multi-tasking and productivity, busyness serves as both a badge of honour and a fashionable catch-all excuse. I recently asked a friend if she could meet me for brunch on a Saturday. “Robbie's really busy that day,” she said. “He has Gymbo-ree and music class, and he's meeting some friends in the afternoon.” Robbie's her son; he's two.

Another friend (a lawyer for the federal government) told me that she was too busy at work to pee. “How awful! I'm sorry,” I said, imagining her catheterized in our nation's capital. But then I realized her I'm-too-busy-for-my-bladder confession was meant to inspire admiration, not pity—the message being that she is clearly too in-demand, too indispensable to take the time for banalities like visits to the ladies'.

Publishers, meanwhile, are cashing in on our pathology *du jour*, busily aiming books (most recently Brigid Schulte's *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*) at those too swamped to read them. Our collective addiction to being busy (along with our compulsion »



to complain about it) is hardly a new syndrome. “The whole issue of getting ramped up goes back at least 20 years,” says Dr. David Posen, author of four books, including last year’s *Is Work Killing You?* “There was the introduction of new technology, and there was also a big recession, which led to downsizing. Being busy at a time when so many people weren’t busy meant being successful. Busyness gave you bragging rights. It became a source of self-esteem: ‘If I’m busy, I’m needed, I’m worthwhile, I’m important.’”

In her 1985 essay “The Cult of Busyness,” American author Barbara Ehrenreich discussed how busyness was as much an ’80s status symbol as Armani power suits and Aston Martins. Ehrenreich argued that, in fact, not being busy was the key to success: “The secret of the truly successful, I believe, is that they learned very early in life how not to be busy.” Sir Isaac Newton, for example, likely would not have divined the law of gravity had he been busily replying to emails and crossing items off to-do lists in brow-crumpled, paper-rustling Costanza mode.

Canadian author Carl Honoré’s *The Slow Fix* (2013)—a kind of backlash against all this haste and busyness—is persuasive about our need for “slow thinking.” Busyness—and its fast-talking cronies Speed and Pressure—serves, in fact, to undermine creative thought. “When we are calm, unhurried and free from stress and distractions, the brain slips into a richer, more nuanced mode of thought,” writes Honoré. Posen, nicknamed Doc Calm, agrees: “You don’t get your best ideas when you’re busy. It’s like Archimedes

“The idea that percolation time is less valuable than doing time is a mistake in thinking,” says Posen.

(With that exhortation to digress, I will now take a time out to say that as I was working on this story, I attempted to interview Professor Scott Schieman, a sociologist at the University of Toronto and an expert on workplace busyness and its detrimental effects. Schieman conducted a national study and established that approximately one-third of Canadian workers are “often” or “very often” overwhelmed by work. However, after a couple of cancelled interviews—for valid reasons—it became obvious that Schieman was just too busy.)

Chronic stress, burnout and exhaustion are just a few of the potential health consequences of excessive, competitive busyness, Posen suggests. And, evidently, death. Last year, a 21-year-old German intern for Bank of America Merrill Lynch expired after working for 72 hours straight, and a 24-year-old Indonesian copywriter collapsed, dropped into a coma and died. Not long before that, she tweeted: “30 hours of work and still going strooong.”

If this extreme-sport level of busyness can be catastrophic, it can also provide consolation. Busyness escorts us into a cozy rabbit hole of engagements, to-do lists and emails, keeping us safe from the kind of Big Questions that bloom in an empty datebook. “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness. Obviously, your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day,” wrote essayist Tim

Kreider in his *New York Times* op-ed “The ‘Busy’ Trap.” Not being busy might, then, be more stressful than being busy.

“To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world,” said Oscar Wilde. I’d love to think this is true, as I’m fabulous at doing nothing. I’m terrible at multi-tasking; uni-tasking is challenge enough. I love it when my calendar is as barren as the Russian steppes.

The prospect of a date-less datebook is almost as festive to me as a cancellation. (As Larry David once told Jimmy Kimmel in an interview, a cancellation is a celebration.) I must be drowning in nitric oxide. I’m sorry to add that this does not mean I’m slaloming through a forest of inspirational lightning bolts (though—and I don’t mean to brag—I’m amazingly caught up on my CBS daytime storylines). If busyness spawned the hipster-approved affliction FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), I seem to have fast-tracked to its newer sister, JOMO (Joy Of Missing Out). This might just mean that I’m old. But on that point, the march of time, etc., I’d rather not dwell. I’m too busy. Crazy. □

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in the bathtub, or Alexander Graham Bell, who was sitting on the banks of the Grand River in Brantford when he conceived of his idea for the telephone. Ideas come when you take a break, go for a run or take a shower, or in the twilight haze of the night. It gives your brain a chance to noodle a problem subconsciously.”

Taking time out kindles the release of nitric oxide—a chemical that increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain charged with problem solving—according to Dr. Herbert Benson, professor at Harvard Medical School, founder of The Benson-Hendry Institute for Mind Body Medicine and author of several best-sellers.