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Ask Jill
By Jill Kanter

Perfectionism Takes Time

Dear Jill,

I've been struggling for years with too much to do in too little time. Even backlogged, I manage to exceed my clients' expectations. But, my responsibilities have just increased and I'm afraid I might drop one of the balls I'm juggling. Do you have any suggestions to help me stay on top of things?

Sincerely,
Ellen

Dear Ellen,

There's not a ball juggler out there who can't relate to your concern. It sounds like you want to save time without sacrificing high performance. I encourage you to contemplate the following question:

- As someone who consistently exceeds client expectations, are you bringing a level of perfection to certain tasks that don't warrant that degree of quality or the time required to achieve it?

One of my clients recently realized that she'd spent three hours developing the fourth draft of a report, when in all likelihood, her client would've been very pleased with the third. The same client's assistant once told me that she sometimes rewrites post-it notes to her manager three or four times, striving to achieve better wording and penmanship! (I wasn't surprised—a manager's perfectionism can filter down, diminishing the effectiveness of her whole group.)

I encourage you to develop a new habit:

- Monitor the level of quality that you try to achieve with each task—particularly those that seem to take too long.
- Then choose when to deem things “good enough,” before devoting unnecessary time and effort.

Many of my clients have found this one practice to greatly increase their productivity—and also reduce their stress!.

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Staying Fit When We're Busy

Dear Jill,

My job has gotten so busy, that I no longer have time to go to the gym. I also find myself feeling stressed and eating more junk food. Have you got any ideas on how to break these patterns?

Thank you,
Linda

Dear Linda,

It can be very difficult to find time for the gym in a fast-paced work environment. Just as exercise can reduce tension, its absence can lead to greater stress and cravings for high-calorie snacks.

Sometimes stress also leads to “all or nothing” thinking. Do either of these lines sound familiar?

“Since I ate two danishes for breakfast, I might as well have dessert at lunch—what the difference?”

“If I can't exercise for one hour four times a week, then why bother?”

I encourage you to focus on making healthy choices one by one throughout your day. Each healthy choice will strengthen your self-discipline and motivate you to continue choosing wisely.

For instance, it might take great discipline to choose nonfat yogurt over chocolate cake for a mid-afternoon snack, but this decision increases the likelihood that you'll eat a healthy dinner.

Try to bring healthy, tasty snacks to work—fruits, vegetables, low-fat yogurts and cheeses—so there's something “good for you” on hand when the urge to eat strikes. This requires a little planning and preparation, but is well worth the effort.

If you can't find time for a full gym workout, build in mini-periods of exercise during your day. Here are two of my favorites:

- Park further away from your building on your way to work or get off the train a stop early—10 minute brisk walks can help reduce stress.
- Take the stairs, rather than the elevator, whenever possible—just a few flights can make a big difference, particularly three or four times a day.

Try to set realistic expectations of yourself. It might be a great achievement to gain just a few pounds during a particularly stressful month rather than 10! Most important, if you make an unhealthy choice, be compassionate with yourself and bring your best effort to the next choice you make!

If you have a question about a leadership or team issue in the workplace, please write to AskJill@womenandbiz.com.

Jill Kanter is a management consultant, speaker and writer with expertise in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational change. She brings a strong practical approach and highly developed intuition to projects incorporating executive coaching, team development, workplace improvement and career empowerment.

Jill has worked extensively with clients in large, dynamic organizations in the financial services, hospital/healthcare, telecommunications and high-tech industries, as well as institutions of higher education and a variety of non-profits. She founded her firm in 1990, after earning her Ed.M. from Harvard University. You can reach Jill at 617-469-0100 or jdk@jillkanter.com. For more information about Jill Kanter, visit her website at www.jillkanter.com.