

Listen to Your Life

By Tony Stoltzfus

Afraid that if you get off the treadmill that your ministry will suffer? Actually, slowing down to lead a quality life can actually enhance your productivity. One recent study found that church planters who set aside adequate time for family grew their churches to several times the size of those who spent minimal time with their wife and kids. You don't need to sacrifice a great family life for ministry – in fact, taking good care of your family is taking good care of your ministry.

While working a long week every so often can be productive, over the long haul it may not be producing the results you think. Researchers compared individuals who worked a normal, 40 hour work week with those who worked 10 hours a week of overtime do see which group would accomplish the most. Surprisingly, they found that those who worked seven 50 hour weeks in a row *didn't accomplish any more than those who worked 40 hour weeks* over the same period. In other words, there comes a point where putting in more time no longer makes any difference at all. Finding your personal limits and consistently staying within them is the path to a productive life that really works.

So how do you know if you are pushing beyond your sustainable limits? Through coaching a lot of people toward a more balanced life, I've discovered that usually all we need is the courage to stop and listen:

1. Listen to Others

- What are the people around you saying? Do people expect you to be too busy to take on anything else on? Are they always commenting, "I know you are really busy..."
- What do your kids really think of your job? Do they feel like you're working all the time?
- What is your spouse saying? (If you already know what he or she would say but you've stopped listening, that's a real danger sign.)

2. Listen to Your Body

- Are you getting enough sleep to wake up refreshed? Or do cares and worries keep you up at night?
- Is it tough to motivate yourself to keep working in the afternoon? Is every day a grind?
- What is Monday morning (or the first day of your week) like? Do you have to drag yourself out of bed to get started?
- Are you finding it hard to maintain basic disciplines? For instance, are you shorter with people than you used to be, or do you find yourself wasting time on the internet or with computer games or TV? (When we don't allow ourselves enough down-time, we end up taking it anyway, just in unhealthy ways.)

3. Listen to Your Heart

- When you look at the future, do you just think about surviving the next few weeks or months "until things ease up?"
- Do you sometimes have strong feelings of just wanting out of your current life? Do you resent the demands on you?

- Do you have a life outside of work? If your job ended tomorrow, what would be left in your life?
- How many days in the last week did you really laugh out loud? How many days in the last week were “good days”?

4. Listen to Your Datebook

- When was the last time you regularly took a Sabbath? (A day of rest and recharging, where you do no work at all.)
- When was the last time you got together with a friend for an afternoon or evening just to have fun?
- If you decided take a whole afternoon off, how far ahead would you have to look in your date book before you could find a time where you could do it without rescheduling something else?

5. Listen to Your Legacy

- In ministry, like begets like. In other words, you tend to create followers who are like you. If your legacy was that everyone in your ministry imitated your lifestyle, (they had a schedule like you, friendships like you, a family life like you, took care of their bodies like you, and had a stress level like you), how would you feel about standing before God with that as your legacy?

If doing this little assessment is affirming, congratulations: go out and make disciples! On the other hand, if this exercise is painful or discouraging, it isn't that you *chose* to live a stressed-out life: most people who are too busy feel trapped by their circumstances and don't know how to get out. It often seems that making a change is another huge weight to life when you hardly have the energy to sustain what you are already doing.

So here's a first step out of the trap: find a friend, a mentor or a coach you trust, share with them where you are at and ask for help. The trap is that we can't see a way out with our own resources. But through the support, encouragement and resources of others God often provides the way of escape.

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