



TAKING THE FIRST STEP

overcoming excuses to get where you want to be

by merci miglino

They may be far more sophisticated than “the dog ate my homework” but not by much. Today they sound more like “I don’t have the time, money or energy” to exercise, eat right, read more, travel, meditate or whatever — even though such activities make us happier and healthier in the long run.

So what’s wrong with us? Nothing, say the experts, and we just need to come clean (excuses are lies), step back (focus on what you really want) and start over (take baby steps). According to life coach Linda Lubin of Ridgefield, excuses are “part of life for all of us” especially given the “busy-ness” of our schedules. Life becomes nothing more than an endless checklist. What we want to accomplish — such as better health or balance — keeps dropping to the bottom while our perceived “have-to’s” rise to the top.

“This vicious circle just adds to our excuses — we don’t achieve our goals because we have too much to do and not enough time to do it so we make more excuses; then we feel bad and eventually we just give up,” says Lubin. “To break this self-defeating pattern, we need to stop pushing ... step back and take a deep breath ... and get some perspective.”

In doing so, suggests Lubin, “you might realize you are doing a lot more than you think you are or be able to hear your body’s quiet messages ... those headaches, backaches, frequent colds ... saying take care of me!”

Taking caring of ourselves, however, goes beyond adequate rest and exercise. To free up our time, we need to take responsibility for our choices, Lubin says. She recommends learning to say no to requests, and to push back against a culture that says “you can do or have it all ... and you must do it the way ‘they’ do.”

“Suck it up and deal with the judgments of others,” says Lubin, who did just that when she refused to have her children “programmed to death” with extracurricular activities. This isn’t easy in a culture that believes this will make or break your children’s career. “Never mind what ‘they’ believe,” Lubin says. “What do you believe?”

Personal trainer Laura DeLallo of Norwalk also suggests changing the way we view the things we don’t do — such as eating right and exercising. The primary excuse, she says, is indeed a lack of time. Somehow the idea has been “ingrained in people that exercise is an extracurricular activity rather than the daily practice that it really is and should be,” says DeLallo, owner of Living Fit in Fairfield County. “Think about exercise as a daily necessity in the same vein as eating lunch, brushing your teeth or showing up at work, and in many ways, it’s more important than the latter two,” she says.

And don’t be afraid to bottom out, advises life coach Hilary Ben-Ami of Brookfield. If you are on the edge, own up to it since that’s where “we are most likely to see through our excuses and take responsibility for ourselves.

“Live to the future rather than falling back on the past,” adds Ben-Ami, a former award-winning teacher who now specializes in coaching students.

If you find yourself believing your own excuses, get some objective support urges Christine Brandt, former corporate HR professional turned career coach. Take a hard look at those “have-to’s” on your to-do list. Very few of them, contends Brandt, “are do or die items. Most of them are based on beliefs we think are true but are, in fact, false.

“We say, for example, ‘I have to do this or I’ll lose my job.’ Really? Is this really true? How do you know it’s true?” says



→ Think about exercise as a daily necessity in the same vein as eating lunch, brushing your teeth or showing up at work.

Brandt. “It’s our thinking or our thoughts about our circumstances that get in the way of finding the time, money or energy to do what we really want and need to do.”

Take the “bag it, barter it or better it” approach Brandt says, quoting her mentor Martha Beck, life coach and columnist for O Magazine. “If the task appears over and over again and we still haven’t gotten to it, bag it. It’s probably something you think you should do versus have to do. Barter with someone if the task is something you don’t enjoy or are miserable at. Ask a friend to do it for you and you’ll do something on her list that plays to your strengths and pleasures.”

And finally, consider “bettering” a task, or adding something enjoyable to a task you dislike. Using the example of a client who hated to grade papers, Brandt encouraged the professor to celebrate each paper she completed with a treat, reward or something enjoyable.

“It doesn’t have to be expensive,” she says. “It can be walking the dog, taking a nap or downloading music. Anything that makes the task go ‘better.’ Find your motivating treat; if your first one doesn’t work, don’t give up. Get creative. Look for alternatives.”

The same strategy, Brandt adds, can be applied to freeing up money or taking a look at your spending habits. Then make new choices that will get you that trip to Spain or gym membership. When you set your sights on something and take action, things seem to come more effortlessly. Brandt says you are now using a part of your brain called the Reticular Activating System — “an automatic goal-seeking mechanism which works to help you achieve your goals.”

As usual, Einstein was way ahead of us. “Nothing happens” he said, “until something moves.” All it takes to overcome inertia is to take the first step. **HL**

