

Comfortable Chaos

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Part I

Shifting to Comfortable Chaos

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Chapter 1

Comfortable Chaos: It's So Much More Than "Just Saying No"

The Pursuit of "Balance"

"Let me tell you what's going on in my world today," Marisa tries to explain to her friend. "I just found out my daughter doesn't have a place to live at college so I need to fly back east to find her a studio apartment. My 88-year-old mother is refusing to get on the plane in Louisiana because she thinks she is in Seattle and is waiting for me to pick her up. My son has soccer practice at 4:00 p.m., which is the same time I am supposed to pick up my husband at the airport and then get to my daughter's school." Marisa's friend pauses a moment and then says, "You have so much going on in your life — you just need to learn how to say no."

Wouldn't it be great if life were that simple? Anyone with multiple responsibilities understands that there is no magical solution that will make life calm and easy. Whether you are working and juggling family life, staying home full time, or doing something in between, it often feels like one constant race to get to the next commitment, only to barely regroup and do it again.

What happened to the pace of life? When did it get so bad that we sacrifice sleep, time to ourselves, and therapeutic sessions with friends? In the workplace, the major shift seemed to start around 1997 with the proliferation of e-mail and voicemail. Who knew that these very helpful tools would also dramatically increase the pace of work? Instead of receiving a memo and carefully crafting a reply that would be received days later, we are now susceptible to an unspoken expectation for an instant response. Add to this the effects of corporate downsizing that reduced the number of employees but not the workload, and it's no wonder people feel so overwhelmed.

The problem becomes even more challenging when you factor in any type of family responsibilities. In fact, 64 percent of Americans report that time pressures on working families are getting worse, not better. Not only is the stress higher at work, the responsibilities of home life continue to become more complex. A primary example is today's child-centric parenting style. Typical parents are very involved in raising, educating, and coordinating their child's activities — whether they are babies, school-aged, college-aged, or beyond. The drivers for this phenomenon are numerous but the bottom line is that parents face high expectations (their own and others) when it comes to raising their children. As a result, parents often feel torn between their many priorities and end up feeling guilty.

Dan, a senior aerospace engineer with two young children at home, summed it up by saying, "My biggest frustration is that when I'm at work, I'm always pushing myself to get the job done quickly so I can get home. And then when I try to spend quality time with my family at home, I'm often rushing through the routines with the kids so I can get some private time. It feels like I am always pushing the limit."

In addition to the challenges of parenting, many of us face elder care responsibilities. Even if you are not currently caring for your parents, there is a very good chance that you will be in the future. According to the Children of Aging Parents Organization (CAPS), in 1995 there were 33 million Americans older

than 65, and this number is projected to be almost 70 million by the year 2020. This translates into an estimated 22 million caregiving households nationwide. So if you thought that your days of juggling work and family would be over once your children are grown — think again. Whether you look after your parents in your home or manage their care across town or across the country, you will continue to need to find creative ways to keep the chaos comfortable.

Another factor contributing to the feeling of being overwhelmed is the vast number of choices we face in all walks of life. In today's workplace there is rarely a clear career path to follow. Instead, we need to individually design and implement a career plan. This could mean making lateral moves, changing industries, and nurturing relationships with a variety of mentors and peer organizations.

The choices involved in running a home and family are no less simple. More so than in our parents' generation, today, we make much more conscious decisions about where to live and the corresponding lifestyle choices such as what car to drive, commuting options, and services for our families. Heck, we don't even send our kids out to play in the yard without deciding if we will go outside to keep an eye on them or be hypervigilant by peering out the windows.

And then there's the issue of school. No longer do we simply send our children to the neighborhood school. Instead, we research schools and test scores before deciding on a school that best meets our children's individual needs. This is of course a good thing — but it's also a new thing. Our parents simply sent us off to school without any research because that was the norm of the time and they weren't exposed to the infinite options and possibilities available today, especially via the Internet. Today, choosing the right school is a common conversation topic among parents — just one example of how our culture and the vast availability of information make life so challenging. As you may know, once you have decided on a school, the decisions never stop. Simply emptying your child's backpack at the end of the day will produce a flood of flyers on activities, field trips, and school events that await your decisions!

We can certainly celebrate the fact that we have so many choices and that information is readily available. But it's also important to realize that these choices are a contributing factor to our chaos and that many of us are operating without clear role models of how to best create a life that combines work and family. It's not that previous generations didn't work hard, because they most certainly did. But they didn't have the wildly divergent priorities and possibilities that we are faced with today and that can overshadow our ability to create a rich and satisfying life.

So with the incredible pace at both work and at home, and the infinite number of choices, is there any hope for achieving peace of mind? The answer is a most definite yes! Comfortable Chaos is a realistic and attainable state of being. You no longer need to guilt trip yourself over the need to find "balance." This word seems to imply that you must get everything lined up just right and then stand on one foot, like a challenging yoga pose, to keep it there. While we will occasionally use the word "balance" in this book, we are not referring to the pursuit of perfection. It's time to throw out your preconceived notions of what your life is supposed to be like, and get ready to learn the techniques that will bring you to Comfortable Chaos.

Life As a White-Water Raft Trip

The concept of Comfortable Chaos is best explained by using a metaphor: Think of 21st-century life as a wild ride on a white-water raft. There are times when you are riding the rapids and feeling out of control. Instead of doing the impossible, like trying to tame the river, achieving Comfortable Chaos is about learning how to make the most of your trip:

- *Enjoy the thrills.* Making quick turns with the water rushing all around you is like multitasking with a paddle. The feeling can be exciting and invigorating when you are flying through your tasks, getting a sense of accomplishment, and enjoying your various roles. Comfortable Chaos teaches you how to enjoy the ride.

- *Avoid capsizing in the rapids.* Sometimes the pace of multi-tasking, along with a hole in your raft (like too little sleep or an overcommitted calendar), can cause you to tip right out of the boat. Since righting yourself in rapids can be very difficult, Comfortable Chaos teaches you how to keep your raft on a more even keel.
- *Paddle to a few pools of calm water.* A calm pool of water is a necessary change from the rushing of water. Without taking a break to relax and reflect, you lose your ability to paddle effectively in the rapids. Comfortable Chaos teaches you how to create your own pools of calm water and visit them frequently.

Comfortable Chaos is further explained by three concepts: *individual, imperfect, and inter-related*. We call these the three “I”s and will refer to them throughout the book.

The First I — Individual

The first I in Comfortable Chaos is *individual*. In our society, comparisons and the need to “keep up with the Joneses” are rampant and destructive. We compare our houses, our cars, our haircuts, our children’s accomplishments, and, not least of all, our work/life choices. Our research shows that women have clearly emerged as the worst gender at making disparaging comments about other women’s choices and lifestyles as a way to attempt to become more comfortable with their own.

We must put an end to the vicious cycle. Comparing your choices to others’ is never a winnable proposition. We firmly believe in what Socrates once said, “Know thyself.” The key to being comfortable with your own work/life choices, otherwise known as your “chaos,” is in knowing yourself and realizing that what works for one person does not necessarily work for another. Situations that are overwhelming for some people may be energizing and delightful for others. Likewise, what is tedious and boring to some of the population, may be perfectly enjoyable to the rest. Comparisons only create a false sense of superiority at best and make you feel discouraged and inferior at worst.

The *individual* in Comfortable Chaos means taking the time and energy to understand your own personal preferences and tolerances and honoring them regardless of the choices of others. The more you understand yourself, the better able you will be to make conscious, realistic choices that work for you. In the next chapter we offer several tools to help you to better understand yourself.

The Second I — Imperfect

The second I in Comfortable Chaos is *imperfect*. The concept of Comfortable Chaos recognizes and embraces the fact that nothing, and no one, is perfect. Of course you have heard this before but have you really accepted it and learned to live in imperfection? We will talk much more about the problems with being a perfectionist in Chapter 3 and give you some strategies to overcome this tendency.

One challenge of celebrating imperfection is rejecting the artificially high standards that are thrust upon us by the media. The magazine and television images of a glamorous kitchen with flowing granite counter tops and an impeccably dressed woman talking with her clean and happy children are not realistic. Don't let those images mess with your head! Real houses with real families have mail and toys on the counters, dings in the wall, and dog hair on the floor. And if you happen to have some friends who seem to live the life in the magazine, just keep in mind that the appearance they project when you are visiting is not necessarily the one they live every day. Even if by some chance it is, remember that everything has a cost. So get over the image of the perfect house, perfect children, and perfect work and begin to enjoy the life you have by using the techniques you will learn in this book.

The Third I — Inter-Related

The last I is *inter-related* and it means having a holistic or big picture approach to life. Instead of thinking of your life in its various pieces (such as work, parenting, relaxation, and housework), think of everything as being interconnected.

We like to poke fun at some of the traditional “get balance” advice that says things like “fit in some exercise or quiet time by getting up earlier in the morning.” Well, that might work if you are already getting enough or too much sleep. But if you are already shortchanged on rest, reducing it even further will most likely have negative consequences on your work, your parenting, your safety behind the wheel, and your ability to resist Krispy Kreme donuts.

A great example of the importance of a holistic approach comes from learning to fly an airplane. If you are working on getting your instrument rating, there is an exercise you go through to learn to rely solely on your instruments in inclement weather. You don a hood that allows you to see the instruments but not out the windshield or side windows of the plane. You are essentially flying with tunnel vision, without the ability to have a sense of perspective. Your instruments could be telling you that you are relatively level, but when you take off the hood you invariably realize that you are not oriented exactly as you thought you were to the horizon. This can produce quite a sense of dis-equilibrium because you had no perspective of the big picture. Once you are allowed to again view both the instruments and the sky and horizon outside the airplane, it becomes much easier. You may even decide that you don’t need to vomit after all!

Keep this in mind as you go through your day. Being able to see, and realizing how each thing is oriented in relation to other things, will keep you flying steady. Seeing the big picture is paramount for thriving in today’s world. You’ll learn some techniques for doing this in Chapter 4.

You now have a basic understanding of Comfortable Chaos, and it’s time to dig deeper into *individual*, the first I, by learning more about your preferences, priorities, and tolerance for chaos.