

Comfortable Chaos

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Contents

INTRODUCTION: CHATTING ACROSS THE DRIVEWAY	xvii
PART I: SHIFTING TO COMFORTABLE CHAOS	1
1 COMFORTABLE CHAOS: IT’S SO MUCH MORE THAN “JUST SAYING NO”	3
The Pursuit of “Balance”	3
Life As a White-Water Raft Trip	6
The First I — Individual	7
The Second I — Imperfect	8
The Third I — Inter-Related	8
2 YOUR COEFFICIENT FOR CHAOS	11
Determining How You Are Spending Your Time	12
Aligning Your Time with Your Treasures	15
Your Coefficient for Chaos	18
The high CFC style	21
The mid-range CFC style	21
The low CFC style	23
Is Your Chaos Working for You or Against You?	24
Tipping Out of the Raft	25
Recognizing the Warning Signs before Capsizing	26
3 TAKING CHARGE IN A HIGH-SPEED “SUCK YOU DRY” WORLD	29
Controlling the Corporate Beast	31
Worrying about the Beast, Not the Economy	32
Seven Keys to Controlling the Beast	33
Give up Perfectionism	34
Remember Your Priorities	35
Know Your Worth	36
Operate in Your “Want and Can” Area	37
Learn How to Let Some Balls Drop	42
Eliminate it	42

Redefine done	43
Delegate it	43
Create (and Keep) Your Boundaries	44
Get out of the passive/victim mentality	46
Diffuse the emotion	46
Follow the pain to the problem	46
Decide on a “trial boundary”	47
Create a boundary support system	47
Implement the “trial boundary” and then evaluate it in 30 days	47
Know How to Get Results	48
4 THE VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE	49
Self-Care Isn’t Selfish	50
Why Self-Care Needs a Place on Your To-Do List	52
You will get more done	52
You will be around longer for your family	53
You will be modeling life-enhancing behavior for your children	53
Using Transitions to Create Pools of Calm Water	56
Handling Anticipated Transitions	56
Envision the other side	57
Be conscious of the “one more thing syndrome”	58
Design the improved transition	59
Handling Unanticipated Transitions	60
Comfortable Chaos: A Noble and Pioneering Effort	63
Not All Pioneers Travel the Same Road	65
5 RECLAIMING, OR CHANGING, YOUR CHOICE	67
Determining What’s Working and What Isn’t	68
The Envy Decoder	69
Which Direction Are You Moving In?	72
Where to Next?	73

PART II: THRIVING ON FULL-TIME WORK WHILE STILL HAVING A LIFE	75
6 FULFILLED BY FULL TIME: HOW TO MAKE IT MANAGEABLE AND PROTECT YOUR PRIORITIES	77
Take a Dual-Centric Approach	78
Change Your Assignment	80
Change Your Alignment	84
Change Your Abutment	86
Moving Your CFC Along the Continuum	88
Maintain Your Boundaries	89
Ten Tips for Getting It All Done	90
Decide on your top priority projects	90
Use the 80/20 rule and plan	90
Use the “project of the week” concept	91
Get over the guilt of e-mail	91
Develop the need for speed	93
Avoid any meeting that doesn’t help you with one of your critical projects	93
Learn the tools that are pertinent for your job	94
Be highly organized and work “lean”	95
Think before you say “yes”	95
Surround yourself with capable and positive people	96
7 FLEXTIME, COMPRESSED WORKWEEKS, AND TELECOMMUTING: THREE WONDERFUL WAYS TO DISTRIBUTE FULL-TIME WORK	97
Flextime: Working When It Works for You	99
How much of my time is spent in cross- functional collaboration?	100
How will I accommodate communication among my direct reporting relationships?	100
Can I honestly sustain the schedule I am proposing?	101

Compressed Workweeks: How to Not Shove Ten Pounds in a Five-Pound Sack	101
Do I have the physical and mental stamina for a longer day?	103
Does my job realistically lend itself to my absence one day per week or every other week?	103
How will the work be covered on the days I am not in the office?	104
How will I communicate my schedule to others in order to reduce any possible resentment?	104
Telecommuting: Getting Beyond the Image of Working in Your Pajamas	105
How will my manager and I measure my deliverables?	106
How, and how often, will I communicate?	107
What equipment is needed and who will purchase it?	107
Does my work have confidentiality or security issues?	108
Am I clear on professional standards for telephone and e-mail etiquette?	108
What will I do to keep feeling like “part of the team”?	108
Will I feel isolated if I am working at home by myself?	108
Am I the type of person who procrastinates?	108
Do I have a workable child-care plan?	109
Telecommuting Light	109
The Common Elements of Three Wonderful Ways to Distribute Full-Time Work	110
Your Schedule As Part of the Bigger Picture	111
8 WORKING INDEPENDENTLY: HOW FREELANCING OR CONSULTING COULD BE RIGHT FOR YOU	113
Work Schedules and Boundaries	115

Where Is Your Chair? Working from Home, the Client's Office, or the Coffee Shop	117
Assessing If This Lifestyle Is a Good Fit for You	118
Are you willing to find work by networking, marketing, and selling?	118
Are you able to establish boundaries that fit your working style and support your goals?	120
Are you able to accurately assess potential clients and avoid potential problem clients?	121
Are you able to build positive relationships and develop client-specific networks?	122
Can you work independently and manage to a deadline?	124
Can you give up the traditional rewards of working in a corporate setting?	124
Can you cope financially and emotionally during the times you don't have work?	125
Staffing Agencies: Friend or Foe?	126
How staffing agencies bill	127
Co-employment and length of assignment	128
Choosing a staffing agency	129
The three phases of an assignment	131
A New Model: Using a Mixture of Different Employment Arrangements	133
Getting Started As an Independent Worker	135
Independent Workers: The Future of White-Collar Work?	137
PART III: LOVING LIFE AT HOME FULL TIME OR PART TIME	139
9 STAYING HOME FULL TIME: EMBRACING THE NEBULOUS NATURE OF IT ALL	141
Staying at Home Is Highly Individual	143
Staying at Home Is Definitely Imperfect	144
Staying at Home Is Intensely Inter-Related	144

Handling the Nebulous Nature of the Job	145
Design and create your own structure	146
Surrender to the fact that the work is never done and set boundaries	147
Recognize and embrace your many daily transitions in new ways	147
Creating a Sense of Accomplishment and Positive Feedback	148
Start viewing your home as your workplace	149
Put small, trivial-seeming tasks on your to-do list and check them off	149
Delegate even though you don't have employees	150
Give yourself a performance evaluation	150
Dealing with the 24/7 Experience	151
Look at what you're trying to control and why	151
Plan when to sit down and when to get out	152
Create that Friday feeling	153
Overcoming the Isolation	153
Hang out with "your people"	153
Make yourself do something stimulating or out of the box	154
Adjusting to the Lack of Pay and the Drop in Status	154
Work on your sense of intrinsic value and create your own rewards	155
Manage the money	155
Do some advocating	156
Allowing Time for the Transition	156
10 PART TIME: NOT JUST FOR RETAIL ANYMORE	157
Meet some Part-Timers	158
Nice Work If You Can Get It	159
Use your current employer	160
Create your own part-time work	161
Job hunt for part-time work	162
Do You Have the Right Personality for Part-Time Work?	163

Selecting the Right Ingredients for Success	165
Selecting the right type of assignment	166
Selecting the right type of boss	168
Selecting the right work environment	169
Successfully Managing Relationships	170
Productivity Power: You May Actually Get More Done in Less Time	172
Managing Your Time Off: How to Avoid “Full Time Creep”	173
“She Just Works Part Time” and Other Potential Perceptions	175
You still have a career and a real job	177
Flexibility about the exact schedule	177
The reality of occasional work on your days off	178
The financial balance of power	178
Managing expectations about your stay-at-home days	178
11 JOB SHARING: THE POWER OF A PARTNERSHIP HAS ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES	181
The Unique Benefits of Job Sharing	182
The Downside of Job Sharing	183
Is Job Sharing Right for You?	184
Schedules and Structure	185
Could Your Job Be Shared?	187
Can the work be divided or can an effective plan for managing the work be created?	187
Does the job have complex communication requirements?	187
Does the job require heavy travel?	188
If the job includes supervising people, can you develop a realistic plan for sharing management responsibilities?	188
Are there quantifiable benefits to sell to management?	189
Assessing Your Company’s Culture	190
Assessing Your Manager	191

Finding and Selecting the Right Partner	191
Which Job to Share?	195
The Importance of Being Seamless	196
Getting Started	198
PART IV: READY TO MAKE A MAJOR CHANGE?	
À LA CARTE HELP PROVIDED	199
12 THE ALL-IMPORTANT AFFORDABILITY QUESTION: CAN YOUR FINANCES SUPPORT YOUR DREAMS?	201
Gathering Your Financial Facts: The Critical First Step	202
Track your spending	203
Document your net worth	205
Assessing the Short- and Long-Term Impacts of Change	205
Meet current expenses	205
Meet future expenses	207
Medical and dental insurance	207
Life insurance and other company-provided benefits	208
Pension plans	208
401K plans	209
Stock options and bonuses	209
Social security	209
Creating a Financial Plan	210
Casting Your Votes Differently	210
Spending Plans: One Piece of the Financial Plan	213
Getting Professional Help	213
Financial planner	213
Investment manager	214
Stockbrokers	214
Personal bookkeepers	215
It's Worth the Effort	215

13 CREATIVE CHILD-CARE SOLUTIONS: HOW TO CREATE THE SUPPORT YOU NEED	217
Five Keys to Finding Creative Child Care	218
Networking, networking, networking	218
Get creative about your advertising sources	219
Don't be afraid to combine options	220
Know yourself and your children, and trust your instincts	221
Always be thinking about your next phase	222
Eleven Creative Child-Care Solutions	223
Daycare centers (full time)	224
Daycare centers (part time)	224
In-home daycare providers (full time)	225
In-home daycare providers (part time)	225
Nannies (full time)	226
Nannies (part time)	227
Nanny share	227
Relatives or family friends	228
Other parents	229
Babysitting co-ops	229
Coworkers with opposite schedules	229
Why Finding Great Child Care Is Only the Beginning	230
14 STRATEGIES FOR RE-ENTRY: HOW TO RETURN TO THE WORKFORCE AFTER A BREAK	233
Strategies for Returning to the Paid Workforce	236
Find the right volunteer position	236
Network with both new and former contacts	237
Find a full-time professional who is interested in job sharing	239
Take a class in your field or do something else to keep current	239
Read industry and general business/economic publications	240
Participate in professional associations	240

Evaluate your former industry and consider a new industry if the pace of change requires up-to-the-minute skills	240
Consider going back full time even if your preference is part time	241
View your transition as a time to reinvent yourself by finding your passion and identifying your skills	242
Combining Strategies	243
Résumé and Interview Tips	243
Make sure your prior work experience is strategically placed on your résumé and is specific and quantifiable	244
Don't try to hide your time out of the paid workforce	244
During the interview be the consummate professional	247
Avoid talking about your children unless specifically asked	247
Demonstrate your up-to-date knowledge of the industry	247

15 CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE WORK SCHEDULE: HOW TO THINK LIKE AN EMPLOYER AND PITCH YOUR PROPOSAL LIKE A PRO 249

Ten Elements of a Comprehensive Proposal	251
Introductory statement and needs analysis	251
Job title	252
Schedule specifics	252
Benefits to the company	253
Benefits for the employees in the job share	254
Cost benefit analysis	255
Successful precedents	259
Strategy for managing/allocating responsibilities	259
Detailed communication plan	261
Potential issues and solutions	262

Getting the Right Equation	263
Preparing for Possible Objections	265
Making the Presentation	265
PART V: LIVING IN COMFORTABLE CHAOS	267
16 YOUR EVER-CHANGING JOURNEY	269
EXERCISES	
1 Where Does My Time Go?	14
2 My Current Priorities	17
3 Determining Your Coefficient for Chaos	19
4 Determining Your “Want and Can” Area	42
5 My Self-Care Habit	55
6 Handling Your Worst Transition	61
7 Determining What’s Working and What Isn’t	69
8 Decoding Your Envy	71
9 Determining Your Direction	73
10 Tracking Your Spending	204
11 Documenting Your Net Worth	206
FIGURES	
1 Determining Your “Want and Can” Area	38
2 What Mike Wants to Control	39
3 What Paula Can Control	41
CHECKLIST	
1 Evaluating a Staffing Company	133
SAMPLE	
1 Skill-Based Résumé	245

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.