

“Overdoing it”

by Willemien Kruger © September 2014

This article is a testimony of my personal struggle with doing too much – which led to a season of depression which was quite difficult to identify and address. A new season has begun in my personal life and it is only now in looking back that I can try and share what has happened – at the time I did not understand what is happening or knew what to do about it, and mostly felt like doing nothing at all. I cannot say that I understand everything on this topic but I hope to help others by sharing what I have learnt.

I decided to call the article – Overdoing it...because I personally didn't think it was possible to do too much, but it is. And this is not related to the obvious being just too 'busy'...but you can be taking too much responsibility, doing too many things and even caring too much to the detriment of your own health and your sense of being. And this will catch up with you one way or the other....

I was always a busy person, and I actually took pride in the fact that I could manage my time so effectively that I can even do more....now it is not something that I boast about anymore. During one year I was very busy and productive, and managed to deliver many outcomes for projects in my personal business. However, at the end of that year I was really struggling with depression, disappointment and a deep sense of unfulfilment. I didn't really understand why I struggled with these emotions, and kept trying to tell myself that everything I did was worthwhile even though I doubted that it was true....I also was so tired of everything I did and still 'had to do' that I became really despondent. And there was one day where I just thought it may be easier to just die, because living is so much effort. Luckily God is good, and as I was reading His Word – this is what made sense to me in this state :

*Matt 11:28 “ Are you **tired** ? **Worn out** ? **Burned out** on religion ? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a **real** rest. Walk with Me and work with Me – watch how I do it. Learn the **unforced rhythms of grace**. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to **live freely and lightly**.” (Message)*

Oh how I just longed to learn these 'unforced rhythms of grace'..... Shortly after this, I was privileged to get away on a retreat of a few months with my children. This was such a blessing and time of grace, and I truly believe that it was a time of being able to just physically and emotionally rest well. Back home I read an interesting book called “Overdoing it” by Bryan Robinson, in which it became obvious that burnout is a reality many people struggle with in today's society. It was also very interesting that burnout is not so much a physical condition as a cover-up for very deep emotional issues, and often people struggling the most are those who are typically the busy productive types. And because our society rewards work and productivity, it is difficult to recognize or address burnout because you think you have failed.

Overdoing it can take many forms – work, sports, busyness and even overcaring for others. It has other names such as : *workaholic, busy holism, care aholism, fast track living, superman/woman* etc. As you can see some of these words have seemingly positive meanings. But whatever it is called it is about being unbalanced and out of control and the end will be self-destruction. It is interesting that modern technology has promised more leisure time, but brought about a change in the environment of work which makes it even more difficult to disconnect from work, so now you can work anywhere, all the time. And still people are still broken, ill and miserable. Overdoers tend to 'medicate' their fears and hurts by a need to be in control, impatience, irritability, hurrying and busyness. They overinvest, overcommit and overcompensate. *Looking good and putting up a front* are traits of overdoing individuals or families. Compulsive overdoers stay busy in order to fill an apparent 'void'.

Why do people tend to overdo things ? It is a form of trying to make your life matter; it is trying to count, to be meaningful. It is a deep search for meaning. And the only way overdoers know how to accomplish that is by doing more. Overdoers are therefore defined by what they DO but they don't know who they ARE. At core there is a lot of unfulfilled needs inside - a void, and doing more gives a feeling of satisfaction, and even more subtle, *hides the hurt*. Overdoers define their lives i.t.o. things

done, things accomplished. Usually they struggle with low self-esteem and relationships and flawed thinking started the negative cycle. Overdoers cannot distinguish between normal and excessive – so what others will not even consider, overdoers will just do as they lack clear boundaries. Overdoers just keep on doing especially what others expect, in turn neglecting themselves since they don't stand still long enough to think about their own needs or wants.

In Robinson's book he identified some typical negative thinking patterns overdoers tend to have :

- Telescopic thinking – this happens when you compare yourself with geniuses, and so set yourself up for failure because we will always fall short. Typical self-talk then include things like “that was so stupid” or “I just cannot do anything right”
- Blurred boundary thinking – the line between typical or normal and excessive are not clear, so you tend to take on more than you should. You tend to sacrifice your own needs for the sake of others, and so neglect yourself.
- People-pleasing thinking – The opinions of others determine your actions and your priorities, so you are overly agreeable and indecisive, and the approval of others becomes the driving force of decisions. In the end you will not know what you stand for, unless someone else tells you.
- Pessimistic thinking – This type of thinking filters out all positive feedback and only remembers the bad. Typical self-talk are “I just know that this will not work out” or “I will never be good enough”
- Catastrophic thinking – Because you feel inadequate or unworthy, you will expect some disaster, and often your self-fulfilling prophecy will help you sabotage your own success.
- Helpless thinking – in this type of thinking, all else is to blame for your situation and happiness, you are a victim, and don't feel able to do anything about your situation. You think the solutions to problems are outside of yourself, and that you cannot change anything.
- Resentful thinking – over time, bitterness and cynicism may build up in your thinking, causing you to explode in anger by complaining and blaming because you feel trapped.
- Resistance thinking – this type of thinking will let you see life as a struggle, and therefore you must push yourself harder, doing more, working more hours, and you have overcommitted in your schedule leaving no time for rest or spontaneity.
- Wishful thinking – in this type of thinking you are never satisfied or content with what you have and always want more, or want what you don't have, so it defines happiness only in what you lack or still need...and may lead to doing more in order to have more.
- Serious thinking – this is a way of thinking that is caused by learning life is serious business only. It is about survival, and there is no time for play. To relax and enjoy may actually be thought of as a foolish waste of time.
- Externalized thinking – in this kind of thinking, your worth is determined by what you produce and not on how you feel inside. One can actually create work just to stay busy in order to feel worthy.

With all these negative types of thinking an overdoer will continue until the self-neglect leads to the point of 'explosion' with resentment, or collapse with burnout. The book states that for overdoers this point is usually a big thing, and a shock, as they cannot believe they have reached a point where there are things they cannot do...and I can relate to this being not only a shock, but also something really new and scary. But it is also a good place if an overdoer can recognize that he/she needs to rethink his/her *priorities, values and thinking patterns in life*. Recovering from overdoing is not something that can be rushed, but it is possible to recover and fill the deep spiritual void hidden by overdoing. One form of overdoing which is even more dangerous because it can be so misleading is overcaring, where the assumption is that you think if you just give more, people will appreciate you more. As you discover that it is not true, and you are just taken for granted more, your motivation to care will just stop as you feel disillusioned by this act of giving. And without giving of yourself, you are even more discouraged because you feel the lack of meaning deeper – what should you then do now, you ask. I believe this happens because you have put your trust in man for your worth and not in God as it is supposed to be. (Ps118 :8) One can actually be separated from God if you are too dependent on people. In recovering from overdoing one will have to learn that you are loved not based on what you do or don't do, but based on God's character and the fact that you are His child, only.

Some tips on recovery (adapted from Overdoing it and added from experience):

- Admit your weakness and mistakes and ask for help from God.
- Believe that God exists and He wants to help you as stated in Matthew 11.
- Make a decision to turn over your life to the care of God.
- Develop a self-care plan by thinking about balance, and setting goals for all areas of your life, not only work.
- Set aside time for reflection and build margin into your life.
- Spent time building a relationship with God, which may include activities like prayer, reading, meditation, journaling etc.
- Decide on what are the most important things in life and do them first.
- Don't add new activities unless you can take away something else.
- Allow more time for activities than you used to, thus building margin into your life.
- Schedule times for play and fun and even doing nothing.
- Do one thing at a time.
- Work at a comfortable pace, and not in frenzy.
- Remain alert to people and situations that trigger stress or pressure in you – try and avoid those.
- Be more patient with yourself.
- Admit to people if you know you have hurt them, and try to make amends if possible.
- Forgive and be forgiven, readily and easily. This does not necessarily mean you must easily trust people again, but unforgiveness will strangle you and not the other person.

Finding and living a spiritual life nurture those deep inner needs. Your spiritual awakening will make you feel grounded and confident. I can personally testify that this is true, by what I have experienced through nearly a year. The value of *getting good positive input* can also not be overstated – during the two month retreat I had the opportunity to have enough time for good input, and I intentionally planned for this....so it wasn't a matter of boredom, as it was a matter of priorities – I just knew that I was running on empty for too long. Listening to good sermons, thinking about it, and discussing it with some others together with reading good books were very valuable. I have also *kept a journal* specifically during this time, and I often refer back to my own journal when thinking about things. Keeping a journal is a very easy and practical way to note how you experience what God is saying to you specifically.

But just getting input and journaling did not yet bring the breakthrough emotionally. Back home I said to my husband that I think it will help to be able to talk to somebody completely outside of my circle of influence – for some fresh perspective on life situations and for advice on what to do and not to do. So I visited some people, and only the third person 'worked' out for me, so the lesson I learnt was – don't give up after just one try. This 'life coach' really made an impression by truly bringing new perspectives on things, especially on situations where I thought I 'knew what to do'...and she then said suggested something else which made much more sense. So it was also very valuable to be able to *talk to someone separated from 'my life' to give a new perspective*. It was only after some visits to this life-coach that I started feeling hope again....and of course this was the important milestone, where on an emotional level things started changing from the inside out.

After this *emotional change*, and feeling better inside, my personal perspective on life, situations, relationships, work and even my own family improved. And of course, when your own glasses are a different color, everything you look at will have a different color, and therefore it was only a matter of time before things eventually started changing in situations for us personally. Even though there are still challenges, and not all the breakthroughs have happened yet, I do get up with a *different attitude* in the mornings, looking forward to a new day and thankful for surviving this depressing season. I can now look back and see how much spiritual growth has happened, especially if I read my own journal, and I even long for more growth now.

My hope is that by sharing my experience, you may either recognize and thus prevent a burnout or if you are already at a point of burnout, realize that there is hope and you can and will recover if you are willing and seek or ask for help.