

10 smart
things
women
can do
to build a better life

Donna Carter



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10 SMART THINGS WOMEN CAN DO TO BUILD A BETTER LIFE

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make space

*How can I organize my life so I have time, money,
and energy to focus on what's important?*

Have you ever had one of those days when you were 20 minutes late for a dinner engagement, because you were 15 minutes late picking your kids up from school, because you were 10 minutes late at the hairdresser, because you were 5 minutes late leaving the office?

Have you ever suffered the humiliation of having to leave some of your groceries at the checkout counter because you impulsively spent your grocery money on a really cute shirt?

Have you ever finished the day with no energy and yet you still had a ton of work to do before you could crash for the night?

Have you ever pretended you couldn't hear your child calling because you couldn't face one more demand?

Whether we're talking about time concerns, money management, or the crowding of our energy and emotions, we are really dealing with space issues. What do I mean? Occasionally, in my previous work as an interior designer, I had clients who were determined to use every good decorating idea they ever saw...all in one room. I had to explain an interesting principle: that over-decorating creates chaos out of what could be stunningly beautiful. Just because a space has been left unfilled *does not* mean it has been left undesigned.

Interior designers call strategically unfilled areas “negative space.” Negative space is very important. It contributes to the beauty of a room by creating a sense of order and restfulness. It allows the eye the freedom to find the elements in the room that really deserve attention: a beautiful sculpture, a cozy fireplace, a breathtaking view.

In today’s obsession with speed, chaos, and clutter, employing negative space in our lives can create order and peace. It also enables us to place priorities on the facets of our lives that really matter.

Drawing on Richard Swenson’s book *Margin* and Bill Hybels’ *Watching Your Gauges*, I’ve highlighted five major areas of life in which we all need space left empty by design. To assess how you are doing at making space in all the right places, imagine the control center of your life as a dashboard with five gauges on it. Women who check these gauges and stay out of the red zones dramatically reduce their daily stress levels, keep themselves out of serious trouble, and, in the long term, build better lives.

Your Time Gauge

My husband and I went to Malaysia a few years ago. We traveled through six airports going and six returning. An interesting fact we learned on our long journey is that airports are required by law to leave extra time between international flights. This is to accommodate the inevitable delays and complications of world travel. Missing a plane on our tight schedule would have put me right over the edge, so I was glad this was in place. Still, after 30 hours in planes and airports, a 4-hour wait in the Los Angeles airport in the middle of the night wasn’t my idea of a good time.

Contrast that experience to our trip home from the Dominican Republic last year. In Toronto we had a connection time that, although it fell within legal limits, was completely inadequate for clearing customs, traversing a huge airport, and waiting in security lines. Recognizing we were under time pressure, our trip coordinator bolted from the plane and secured a place in a customs line.

Then, as each one of our group emerged from the crowd, she waved us over and let us cut in. Needless to say, this did not endear us to the people already in line. We apologized to the grumbling travelers but held our ground. Once through customs, we grabbed our bags and sprinted through the corridors of Pearson International toward the security line.

Because we were a group of nine travelers, customs had taken extra time, and the same people who had complained about our line etiquette were now ahead of us in this line. We knew we still had a shuttle ride ahead of us and our next flight was leaving shortly. I boldly went to the front of the line and explained our situation to the security guard. He graciously waved us all to the front of the line.

Now, you have to realize how uncomfortable this was for a group of Canadians, who as a nation are known for being unfailingly (even ridiculously) polite. My husband, in offering another round of apologies to the same disgruntled passengers we had cut ahead of before, somehow got separated from the rest of the group. His instructions to me were, “Whether I make it or not, get on the plane.” So together with our daughters, Kendall and Kevann, I made a break for the shuttle. Once on the bus, we breathlessly pleaded with the driver to wait for my husband. A tall, broad shadow appeared behind the airport doors. I said, “I’m sure this is him now. Please wait.” The airport doors parted, and a large man emerged. He was not my husband. The doors closed. “Please wait just another minute,” I begged the driver. Another shadow appeared behind the doors. They parted and Randy appeared. The girls shouted, “Run, Daddy, run!” Randy sprinted to the shuttle. He pried the closing doors open and dragged himself inside. Everyone on the shuttle cheered. This trip was proving more stressful than the *Amazing Race*! Why would anyone willingly put themselves through that?

Unfortunately, we do similar things to ourselves all the time. We hustle and rush to make appointments, get to work, drop off

kids, and more. But we can bring a degree of sanity into our lives simply by making space in the way we plan our days. Instead of being stressed out because something took longer than it should have, we can anticipate that not everything will go as expected and plan accordingly.

Our Creator knows we need down time. God devised a law to allow negative space in our lives. It's called the Sabbath (observed by most Jews on Saturday and by most Christians on Sunday), and it's recorded in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-10):

Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any kind of work.

Now that may seem heavy-handed and restrictive, but in reality it is a gift. In giving it, God was saying to his people, "Let everyone

God wants us to take a day off. He created us and he knows we need it physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.

around you work themselves into the ground. I want a better life for you. I want to give you the gift of rest. Go ahead and work hard for six days, but then take a day off. Enjoy each other and celebrate me. In the end, you will be amazed at how much more productive you are."

Research from the business world confirms that God knew what he was doing (no

surprise there). Karen Hanna, a former vice president of Levi Strauss and currently a life coach, has determined that people are at peak effectiveness when they take 120 days off per year. This equates to two days off per week plus three weeks of vacation.

Interesting, isn't it, that keeping the Sabbath is the only one of the 10 suggestions...oops, I mean commandments...that we see as optional? We pretty much agree that murder, lying, and stealing are not good things, but taking a day off? Not so much. Stranger still is that we often feel guiltier for not working on Sunday in violation of our culture's values than we do when we do work on Sunday in violation of God's values.

Workaholism may be applauded and rewarded by the workaday world, and some would argue that it paves the path to success, but God says it's wrong, whether our work is in the home or outside. He wants us to take a day off. He created us, and he knows we need it physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. It's a commandment designed to make us more effective and available to the people around us and to help us build better lives.

You may be thinking, "Well, if I don't do the laundry on Sunday, when else can I possibly do it?" The answer is that you likely have more discretionary time than you think. Maybe you're lazy... Now you're thinking, *Okay, now I'm offended. Them's fightin' words.* But don't shoot me yet. Laziness, as it is defined in the Bible, refers not only to idleness but also to preoccupation with the insignificant. Does this seem more plausible? Here are some suggestions for combating potential time-wasters:

- ≈ Turn off the TV (the average person spends 20 to 30 hours per week watching)
- ≈ Learn how to say no to the things that should not be on your agenda at this time
- ≈ Get off the phone and off the Net (use them as tools, not as entertainment)
- ≈ Stay out of the mall

If we are monitoring our time gauge, we will deliberately create negative space in our schedules. That allows us time to nurture ourselves and our relationships, thus improving life for ourselves and everyone close to us.

Your Emotional Gauge

Several years ago my husband and I were on the summer staff of Green Bay Bible Camp, a first-class Christian camping resort located on Lake Okanagan in beautiful British Columbia. Our jobs were to be resources to the staff. This included spending every afternoon on the beach talking to people. Doesn't that sound rough? Basking in the sun while engaging in conversation? Physically it was wonderful. But emotionally it was hard. Really hard.

I remember taking off one afternoon to go out for lunch with a woman I know who lives near the camp. I was so looking forward to some light conversation and a good laugh after all the heavy issues and heart pain I had been dealing with. But we had barely sat down at the table when she began telling me how devastated she was because of all the terrible stuff going on in her life. I wanted to scream, "No! I don't want to hear your problems. I don't care if you're in pain. I want you to make me laugh. *NOW!*"

One way we know our emotional tank is empty is when we begin to resent people for having needs: our babies for being dependent, our parents for getting sick, our husbands for wanting intimacy. Unless we are constantly refilling our tank, we will frequently get to the place where we just don't have the emotional fuel to care for anyone or about anything else.

How do you refuel your emotional life? Figure out what replenishes you. For me it's walking in a park and drinking in the serenity of nature. For my husband it's anything that involves noise, speed, and smoke. Everyone is different. Figure out what you need and how often you need it—and then schedule it in.

My husband crashed at the end of that summer at Green Bay. A visit to the doctor confirmed that he was experiencing the inevitable result of no physical and emotional space: depression. I realize there are many ways into depression, and for some it is a very long and difficult path out. For Randy, it wasn't until he allowed himself some time in the bush on a motorbike with friends that he began to come out of it. It is not selfish to allow yourself space. It is necessary for your emotional health.

Your Energy Gauge

Our physical energy is dependant on a combination of the oxygen we breathe, the food we take in as fuel, the demands we make on our bodies, the opportunity for recovery through sleep, and our general level of physical fitness. With that in mind, envision the typical, time-challenged woman. She reluctantly starts her engine some time around six-thirty in the morning with a strong cup of coffee, which keeps her running smoothly enough to make herself presentable, get the kids out the door, and take herself to work. Her overcrowded morning is powered by a few more cups of bad office coffee or, if she is lucky, a latte from the corner cafe. By lunchtime her body is seriously dehydrated and vibrating from all the caffeine she's consumed. Her blood sugar has plummeted because it has taken in no actual fuel today (unless she was lucky enough to score a latte).

Ah, but that's where the Hostess Twinkies come in. Not having time for lunch and being the quintessential, harried-but-efficient woman, she has had the forethought to stock her desk drawer with them. An hour into the afternoon she has a headache and a deep longing to crawl under her desk for a nap. No time for that. Better have another cup of coffee instead.

By the time she gets home from work, she is short-tempered, frazzled, trembling noticeably...and ravenous. Far too hungry to delay eating until supper, she removes the boxes and cans that hold supper from the pantry while she snacks on handfuls of Oreos and random sugared cereal bits left on the counter from the kids' breakfasts.

By the time her canned and cardboard supper is served and consumed, homework and music or sports practicing rituals have been observed and enforced, and children are filed for the night, her fuel deficit becomes impossible to ignore. She spends the rest of the evening grazing on whatever she can get her lips around, going from one poor excuse for food to another. And because her body is demanding real nutrition, nothing is really satisfying her.

Tomorrow she will do it all again, all the while wondering why

she always seems to have a headache, has trouble sleeping, is edgy and irritable, and continues to gain weight. After all, she only eats one meal a day!

Okay, maybe most of us aren't that bad. But many of us can identify with those tendencies. It's amazing how little relationship most people see between their physical performance and what they consume for fuel. Many women keep the pace of an Olympic athlete, but instead of powering their aggressive approach to life with protein and complex carbohydrates, they survive on caffeine and complex schedules. And then they wonder why their physical energy gauge is constantly reading low.

In addition to being poorly nourished, we are sleep deprived. In the 1850s, adults were getting nine-and-a-half hours of sleep per night. Medical science tells us this is the optimum. When the lightbulb was invented, that amount of time began to decline. Today the average night's sleep is seven hours—and it's still decreasing. Maybe, just maybe, God knew what he was doing in making it dark all night.

Yes, we can schedule our time down to the millisecond, but if we don't manage our physical energy by allowing sufficient recovery time through sleep, we can't do our best work and we have nothing left to give to those we love. Another consequence is that vacations become, out of dire necessity, a time to recuperate instead of a time to play, which we also need. It turns out energy, not time, is our most precious resource.

Until his retirement, my dad worked as a corporate attorney. Lawyers are notorious workaholics. Yet even in an oil boomtown like Calgary, my dad rarely worked overtime. To say that choice put him in the minority of lawyers working in the oil and gas industry is something close to the understatement of the ages.

I didn't know until I had grown up and become acquainted with many other lawyers what an anomaly it was to have a dad in that profession who was available to his wife, his children, and his community on evenings and weekends. But understanding that

made some of his idiosyncrasies make sense. It had long been a family joke that Dad was preprogrammed to go to bed at eleven o'clock. We speculated on what would happen if my parents were hosting guests who stayed past eleven on a weeknight. Would Dad just disappear and go to bed whether the party raged on or not? We never found out.

We did know that if one of the board meetings he attended continued until late, Dad could be counted on to excuse himself at eleven. He was absolutely religious about it. But here's the thing: Because he knew how to manage his physical energy, he was extraordinarily productive for those eight or nine hours per day he spent at the office. And since he wasn't the least bit interested in keeping his chair warm simply to impress the oil baron brass, there was no reason to stay at the office any longer than that. Because he knew how much sleep he required to perform optimally in a demanding and vitally important position in his company, he considered it stealing from his employer to go to work sleep deprived.

Everything we do, think, and feel costs us energy. Certainly some chapters of life are much greedier with our physical resources than others. I remember feeling incredibly depleted after the death of a close friend. I had my own interior design consulting business at the time, and because I was working to finish a large retail store in another city in preparation for their grand opening event, I had little opportunity for down time to process my grief. I remember working the day after my friend died, during part of the day of her funeral, and for all the days in

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between. I felt confused about my exhaustion. I didn't understand the physical demands that grieving was placing on my body.

Any mother of preschoolers knows the physical cost of keeping up with little people day after day. Whoever decided it should always be the stay-at-home parent who gets up with children in the night because the "breadwinner" has to get up and go to *work* needs to refine their definition of work. If you've done both jobs, you no doubt agree that it's far more physically demanding to stay at home with small children than it is to go to an office and deal with adults.

Creating space in our physical energy means we balance times of high energy demand with a proportionate amount of rest. There are times for all of us when we have to put the pedal to the metal. Businesspeople and students have deadlines. Parents have periods of time when they don't get breaks because their partners are unavailable or they have no partners. But if we don't allow for space to recover from times of high demand, our bodies will eventually protest. Usually that revolt takes the form of a compromised immune system that becomes vulnerable to every virus or bacteria in the neighborhood. Over time that susceptibility can become much more serious and debilitating.

Even when we're sleeping enough and eating well, if we are not challenging our hearts, lungs, and muscles, we aren't giving ourselves enough space. I don't particularly enjoy exercising, and I don't really understand people who do enjoy it. There is a woman who exercises at the gym with me who loves working out. She really loves it! Personally, I think she needs counseling. I work out because I like the ways I benefit from it: My mood is elevated, my hormones regulated, my bones and muscles consolidated, my stress mitigated, and my fat incinerated.

Monitoring our physical energy gauge means we establish and maintain a lifestyle that includes a healthful diet and adequate sleep and exercise. The cost is outweighed by the benefit: increased energy and a greater sense of well-being.

Your Financial Gauge

Overspending has become the norm. Not only does the typical family crowd out all available space in their finances, they borrow space they don't have. According to American Consumer Credit Counseling, the average American carries a credit card debt load of \$8,562! On top of that mountain, people also assume debts for vehicles, furniture, vacations, and more. Often when we ask ourselves whether or not we can afford something, what we really mean is, "Can we afford the payments?"

This is a huge problem because when we have no unused space in our financial world, spending crowds out other areas of our lives.

Early in our marriage, Randy and I decided we would never make a major purchase without discussing it and sleeping on it. This has saved us countless mistakes. What seems like a bargain that's too-good-to-be-true while standing in a car lot, or a furniture store, or sitting eyeball to eyeball with a skilled salesperson, often reverts to an extravagance we can't really afford once reality sets in. I hate to think of the debt I would have brought on my family if my love of shopping and equal love of beautiful things were the only deciding factors in my spending.

Space in our finances enables us to invest generously in the lives of others whose needs are greater than our own. It also prepares us for a rainy day.

Impulse buying is often the main culprit in problem spending. We see something we want but can't really afford...so we buy it anyway. Then we have to work longer hours to pay off our credit cards. As a result, we are emotionally and physically exhausted. We're far too tired to exercise or build relationships.

Do you see where this is going? Into a downward spiral of excess.

We need to simplify our lives by buying less. We need to let our values—not our desire for status, or our lack of restraint, or even our income—determine our lifestyle. In his book *Little House on the Freeway*, Tim Kimmel writes:

There seems to be a direct relationship between a person's heart and his checkbook. When a couple decides to settle for a certain standard and stop chasing the Joneses all over town, they experience a rest in their work and in their home that no higher standard of living could supply.

It takes courage to make the choice to be satisfied. It takes courage to invest the excess in others when you could be indulging yourself. It takes courage to say no to wants that would only complicate your life. But the reward of inner rest is worth it.

Years ago I heard the story of a wealthy man's son who approached his dad for the money to buy a very expensive pair of jeans. The father denied the son's request. The son asked, "Why not, Dad? We can afford it." The father wisely answered, "Son, we can afford to buy not only those jeans, but also the store selling them and the mall where the store is located. That is not the point. The point is that we have chosen to spend conservatively on ourselves so that we can be generous with others."

That's value-driven spending. Space in our finances enables us to invest generously in the lives of others whose needs are greater than our own. It also prepares us for rainy days.

What is the worst thing that can happen if you continue to live with no financial space in your life? You'll be in debt up to your eyeballs but too busy, tired, and depressed to care. But worse than that, life will become all about going to work and spending money and digesting food and watching sitcoms and drifting into unconsciousness just in time to wake up and do it all over again. That's not living; that's existing.

Your Spiritual Gauge

What is the purpose of life? The Westminster Catechism answers that question when it states that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” In other words, we are on this planet to worship God and be his friends. If this is true, then to live without faith is to completely miss the point of being here.

We are physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual beings. If we ignore the spiritual aspect of our lives, we’re in for a rough ride. Study after study reports that people of faith are healthier, have happier marriages, and live longer. We were created to find fulfillment in relationship with our Creator. When we deny this reality, we lack ultimate purpose.

Some people describe this condition as a God-shaped hole that he has intentionally placed inside us. He wants us to long for him just as he longs for us. When we fill up our spiritual tank by pursuing a relationship with him, we find contentment that is unparalleled by anything else.

That God-shaped hole is filled by God’s own Spirit when we invite him into our lives. We keep the tank full by spending time talking to God through prayer, reading his love letter to us (the Bible), and learning about him from people who know him well. In applying what we learn to our lives, we live as our Creator designed us to live. We find out just how rich life can be!

From time to time we all visit red zones. But if any one of your gauges is in the red on a regular basis, you are spatially challenged. There’s no shame in that. These are complex issues. It’s hard to create and maintain negative space because it requires a lot of self-discipline and vigilant monitoring. But the sanity gained is well worth it.

Watching the gauges of our time, physical energy, emotional energy, and finances and taking action when necessary enable us to live with unfilled space in the first four areas of our lives. It ensures that we have the resources we need to get where we want

to go. Monitoring that final gauge of our spirit helps us determine where that is.

You can build a better life by watching your gauges and keeping out of the red. Enjoy the spaciousness and freedom that result!

— *Making Space* —

1. Are you a workaholic? Would your close friends, spouse, and kids agree with your answer?
2. Do you feel guiltier when you work on Sunday or when you don't?
3. In what ways are you "preoccupied with the insignificant"?
4. What recharges your emotional energy? How often do you do it?
5. Do you protect your physical energy? Brainstorm ways to stay balanced in this area.
6. Do you agree or disagree with the Tim Kimmel quote about the relationship between the heart and the checkbook (between financial space and satisfaction)? Why?
7. Are you on overload? What changes do you need to make in your time, emotional energy, physical energy, and finances?
8. How is your spiritual gauge reading these days?