



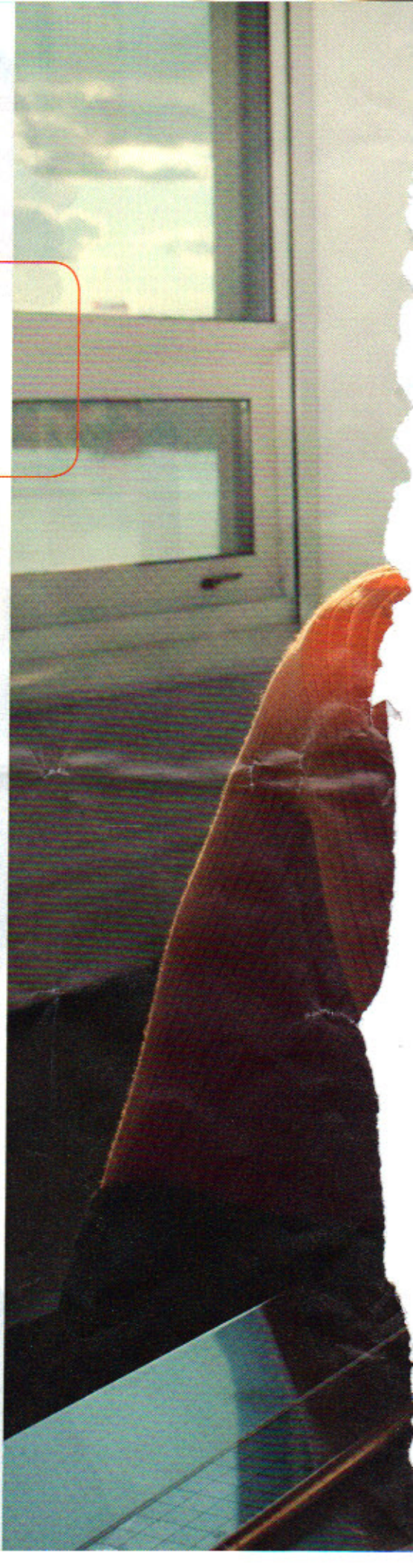
Exhausted?

YEAH.

**Isn't
Everyone?**

Most women are on the go-go-go from morning till night, tackling epic to-do lists while navigating one distraction after another. They have accepted fatigue as a fact of life, but being perpetually spent takes a big toll on health and happiness. Here's how to revive yourself.

By **Maura Rhodes**
Photograph by
Brian Finke



It's 6 a.m., and Alena Burley's alarm clock is screaming.

By 7:30, the 23-year-old from Tallahassee, Florida, has walked her dog, eaten an egg-white omelet, showered, dressed, and driven 30 minutes to her third-grade teaching job. By 4:30, her dog is back on its leash, then Alena sprints to the gym before her grad-school class, after which she rushes to her evening babysitting gig. Back home well past 10 p.m., totally beat, she grades papers and falls into bed—after setting her alarm... for 6 a.m.

"Sometimes I go so nonstop that I suddenly realize I've had to go to the bathroom for hours," says Alena. "I feel burned-out all the time, but when I look around, everyone I know is just as busy."

Of course, such a frenzied day-to-day is nothing new. Women have been run ragged for decades, especially after they entered the work force en masse, juggling

career and family responsibilities. But Alena's attitude exemplifies a novel and more worrisome psychological shift: Young women have accepted exhaustion as a normal state of being. But even youth is no defense against the health hazards that come with such grueling schedules.

Resisting a Rest

Last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention proclaimed insufficient sleep a public health epidemic. And an American Psychological Association survey showed a large gap between the level of stress people say they experience and what they think is healthy. But another survey found that when women are tired, 80 percent are at least somewhat likely to push right on through. "We live in a culture in which people accept lagging energy as a fact of life," confirms integrative medicine specialist Frank Lipman, M.D., author of *Revive: Stop Feeling Spent and Start Living Again*.

It's a mindset that starts early. "We're now primed to be fatigued from the get-go," says anesthesiologist Bradley Carpentier, M.D., who has studied causes of exhaustion. "Kids are loaded with after-school activities; high schoolers are busy getting into college, where they'll only get up earlier and stay up later. Then come careers, the iPhones and BlackBerrys, the 24-7 multitasking."

Yet many experts believe more is going on than just crammed calendars. They point to a need for validation that often drives women to never say no. "Women are caught up in the societal expectation that, in order to get ahead, a price must be paid—and that price is exhaustion," says sleep researcher Karin Olson, Ph.D., R.N., of the University of Alberta. Even those who step off the career track to start families

don't necessarily slow down. They just switch lanes, trading insane office hours for marathon mommying.

Women are also more prone than men to feel guilty if they can't fit it all in and are therefore less likely to challenge exhaustion acceptance, says Carol Landau, Ph.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry and medicine at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University. "We tell ourselves, *I can't go to bed now, because X, Y, and Z aren't done perfectly*," she says. Plus, social cues prime women to internalize the idea that family—and possibly friendships—are a priority, making them feel culpable for, say, spending extra hours at work.

The result? Women pile on more, accepting less rejuvenating time for themselves. "Some do feel a sense of helplessness about it," says Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness*. "But they feel they have no control, so they don't try to do anything about it."

Tired Without a Clue

Perhaps more alarming is that some women don't even realize they've accepted exhaustion—or that they're exhausted at all. With serious fatigue comes a continuous rush of the stress hormone cortisol, which can act as a mental and physical stimulant. And just as your brain rewards you for an awesome physical experience—an orgasm, for instance—it releases feel-good chemicals after a big score in your career or personal life. Because of this, says Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*, "highly charged women often don't sense that they're burning out. They get addicted to the high of accomplishment."

FIVE SNEAKY ENERGY SUCKERS Your extreme fatigue might be coming from hidden sources. Nixing these spirit-depleting factors from your life will automatically help reboot your verve. **By Ellana Osborn**

1

DEHYDRATION

It turns out that even moderate dehydration (which results in the loss of 3 percent of your body weight) can make you feel mentally sluggish and mess with your concentration. The next time you're feeling foggy or lightheaded, don't just assume you're in serious need of some food. Try downing a glass or two of water.

2

CELL PHONES

Checking your cell before bed amps up brain activity, making it harder to doze off. Plus, any electronic gadget's artificial blue light can suppress the sleep hormone melatonin. A 2011 poll by the National Sleep Foundation found that 20 percent of people ages 19 to 29 are awakened by a call, text, or e-mail at least a few nights a week. Power it down well before bedtime.

3

MEDICATION

Many drugs have veiled energy-sapping side effects. Chief among them are some classes of antidepressants and certain beta-blockers used to prevent migraines or treat high blood pressure. If you start a new med and feel more lethargic than usual, see your doctor for an alternative. (If there isn't one, take your dose right before bed.)

4

OVERTRAINING

While working out zaps the stress hormone cortisol, prolonged sweat sessions—like, for example, regularly running for more than 30 minutes at a steady rate—can actually rev cortisol production. Interval training (bursts of intense activity) combined with strength training (free-weight and body-weight moves) helps keep cortisol in check.

5

LOW IRON

The mineral shuttles oxygen around your body and removes waste from your cells. If you're not getting around 18 milligrams a day, your body struggles to function properly and you can feel worn out; low iron levels in your diet can cause iron deficiency anemia. If you feel sluggish, ask your doctor for a simple blood test to see if you should be taking a supplement.



Naps—
great in
small doses.

That high can override fatigue, allowing women to function while essentially flying at half-mast, says Lombardo. “You may not even realize how tired you are,” she says. “You may think, *Oh, this is just how I am.*” The problem is, no high lasts forever, and oftentimes when women come crashing down, they feel the need to build themselves up by augmenting their to-do lists, perpetuating the cycle.

“Women can get so used to feeling lousy that they don’t remember what it’s like to feel good,” says sleep medicine specialist Katherine Sharkey, M.D., Ph.D., of Rhode Island Hospital. “And studies show people aren’t good at gauging how impaired they are by exhaustion.” Therein lies a big issue: Being chronically fried leads to a laundry list of physical and psychological woes.

Ragged to Rejuvenated

As with most health conditions, the first step to reversing relentless fatigue is recognizing it—and recognizing that it’s bad for you. “Getting too little rest is like ingesting a toxin,” explains Robert J.

Hedaya, M.D., founder of The National Center for Whole Psychiatry in Chevy Chase, Maryland. “There isn’t a single bodily function that isn’t affected. Your nervous system becomes dysregulated. You can lose muscle mass. You lose sex drive.”

“Chronic tiredness also affects your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds,” adds Lombardo. “When you’re sleep deprived, you’re more likely to gain weight. And research has found that driving while exhausted can be as hazardous as driving drunk. Think about it: Sleep deprivation is used to torture prisoners in captivity, and yet we do it to ourselves on a regular basis.”

Still not convinced it’s time to own up to your exhaustion acceptance? “Many exhaustion features are also symptoms of depression,” says Olson. “A cardinal sign for both is the inability to experience feeling. I worry that some women are being diagnosed with depression when really they’re just worn out.”

Most of the signs of exhaustion are obvious: You’re likely well aware that

shunning shut-eye can make you look and feel like a zombie. You’ll also obviously have less energy, and you might find yourself being bitchy or overemotional, says Lombardo. Exhaustion can lead to arguments with your partner and the inability to finish projects at work. In other words, it puts you way off your game.

It’s time to make chilling out a priority. “Right now, we give ourselves medals for the number of hours we spend working and not sleeping,” says Lombardo. “Be proud of yourself for getting rest. Maybe that’s not something you’d brag about to your friends, but when you’re energized, everything changes.” Start by taking these easy steps:

Choose to snooze. Most adults should log seven to nine hours of sleep every night. Hit the sheets at around the same time each evening, says Sharkey. “If you vary your bedtime—even by 30 or 60 minutes—your circadian rhythms get out of whack and you’ll feel like you have jet lag every Monday morning,” she says.

Eat for energy. Kicking off the day with a meal that lacks nutritional value—ahem, that sugar-packed muffin and latte—puts a dent in your metabolism and sets you up for exhaustion later, says Hedaya. Make sure your breakfast includes around 20 grams of protein and some healthy fat, both of which help keep your energy up. Try some peanut butter or a handful of almonds stirred into low-fat yogurt.

Get your head out of the game. No, meditation is not a New Agey time waster. An a.m. om session can be highly relaxing and may straighten out taxing mental disarray. “Meditating in the morning can help clear your mind so that you can then do things faster and with more focus,” says Lipman. “You can actually end up with *more time.*” Aim for 20 minutes of quiet reflection before or after breakfast.

Be crafty. Remember that achievement high? You don’t need to log 18-hour days at work to find it. Outside hobbies and passions yield the same effect. “I call this creative compensation,” says Mandel. “It ends up being restorative, because you are accomplishing something that’s just for you.” Think about what’s appealing to you—cooking, writing, painting—and devote an hour or two to it each week. And try to surround yourself with pals who live more balanced lives and soak up their perspectives. Together, you can aim to ditch your exhaustion acceptance. ■