

Getting Off "Tilt"

By Mary Mitchell

"What's on your mind?" the doctor asked.

"That's the trouble, Doctor. There isn't anything on my mind. I haven't had any good ideas in a long time."

I didn't expect much. After all, "Dr. Julia" had just turned 6, and this was a make-believe visit. Nevertheless, she nailed my diagnosis: I was on tilt.

Good Medicine

The doctor's conclusion: "I think you probably just aren't getting enough sleep. You should go to bed early at night and sleep until really late.

"And," she added firmly, "you need to drink healthy drinks and eat lots of healthy foods — lots of water, vegetables and fruits. And you need to get more exercise, too."

Out of the mouths of babes... Dr. Julia's advice brought home a fundamental message that no woman can afford to forget: Self-respect and self-care must come before all else. Our strength depends on it.

Secure Your Mask

If you've ever taken your children on an airplane, you've been sternly instructed thus: In an emergency, you're to strap on your own oxygen mask first, then help the children.

Now, honestly: Isn't that the most counter-intuitive thing you have ever heard? Don't we picture ourselves shoving masks on every young person in sight while we turn blue?

Yet prevailing wisdom — and a mountain of hard research — shows the importance of donning our own life masks first.

Talking the Talk

The lesson here: If we do not treat ourselves and our bodies with respect and care, how can we respect and care for anyone else? How will we even know what that means, or how it feels?

Every woman alive knows the basics of physical, emotional and spiritual wellness: Honor our needs. Eat healthy. Drink healthy. Be active. Take time for ourselves. And for heaven's sake, get enough sleep. Yet we seldom give ourselves permission to do any of it. More than half of us say stress — from work, family issues and daily headlines — regularly robs us of sleep. Most of us take our car's care more seriously than our own!

We know what to do — and still don't do it. But here's the point: Successful people — whether homemakers, volunteers or CEOs — do what they know.

If you don't, you may find that you are getting fewer and fewer good ideas — and that you need an appointment with Dr. Julia.

Walking the Walk

Like many women, my brain always vaguely knew what I needed to remain balanced and healthy. But I never quite mobilized my schedule, my mind and my self-esteem to do it.

Then I got a cosmic whack in the head — a serious accident that left me with a spinal-cord injury, a year of unremitting pain, and a vision of a life spent in a wheelchair.

I could barely move, and barely work. Every woman — whether or not her labors draw a paycheck -- can appreciate how terrifying and demoralizing that was.

One day — frantic, angry and feeling sorry for myself — I railed about my guilt in getting so little done, my frustration with my pain, and the time consumed by doctor visits, various therapies and all the demands of my condition. My life, I declared, had become far too selfish and self-involved.

The Friend in the Mirror

"That's the way you see it," a colleague nodded. "But I see it a lot differently."

"The truth is, you have been more effective than ever because you only can do what is important; and you really have to take care of yourself now. A man in your shoes wouldn't feel selfish, guilty, or give it a second thought. All you're doing is being your own best friend."

It was a moment of blinding truth — the realization that of all the people in my life I have the privilege to love, only one will be with me from cradle to grave: me.

If I couldn't see my best friend in my mirror, everything else I did was pretty hollow. Feeling guilty over being kind to a friend, therefore, was absolutely ludicrous.

Breaking the Leash

We women need to create sanctuary for ourselves.

We shoulder unreasonable deadlines, put in 16-plus-hour days, and routinely skip breakfast, lunch and supper. We can't sleep. Our necks, eyes and hands hurt. Our glorious technology — phones, computers and pagers — tethers us to outside demands around the clock.

Is it any surprise when we end up feeling out of control? The answer must be resetting ourselves — reconnecting with our famous intuition within while the world clamors and yammers around us.

We need to recapture perspective — to remember that nothing in life can take the place of health, peace and love.

Whatever our mission in life, we must start with our own welfare. Unhealthy bodies, frantic spirits and exhausted brains cannot be effective — whether they're running a household or Fortune 500 company.

Stress Busters

Here are some ways to take the pressure off.

1. **Get well.** Ignore your body's needs and your mind and spirit will suffer. Use your body to soothe your mind. Mountains of research documents what you already know: Dragging around exhausted, overweight and ragged on caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and junk food is no way to meet the joys and challenges of life. So follow Dr. Julia's prescription to the letter — and repeat daily.
2. **Unplug.** Living mindfully begins with clearing the clutter and chatter from our minds. Plenty of researchers have documented links between relaxation and lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol and other demonstrable physical benefits. So be quiet. Tend the garden. Take a walk. Learn meditation, visualization — or at least, deep breathing. Work out. Listen to a book on tape. Do this every day. Twenty minutes — with all machines off — will do it. (Wouldn't you give your best friend 20 minutes if she needed them?)
3. **Stop being "sorry."** Sorry means "not very good," as in "a sorry sight." No woman is sorry . When appropriate, say, "I apologize." When you don't need to apologize (see No. 4), don't! It erodes self-respect.
4. **Take the offensive.** Be pleasant but firm. When Mrs. Windbag calls, shows up or demands that you join her committee, skip the "sorrys" and act fast. If the phone rings, jump in brightly: "Well, how super to hear your voice! I was just heading out. Is this something we can deal with quickly?" If it's another request: "It sounds great, but I just can't." Repeat unemotionally as often as necessary. No excuses, no defensiveness, no lies.
5. **Seek the positive.** A sincere compliment and smile can dismantle stress, lift a mood and improve a relationship in a heartbeat. When we are determined to find the positive, it finds us.