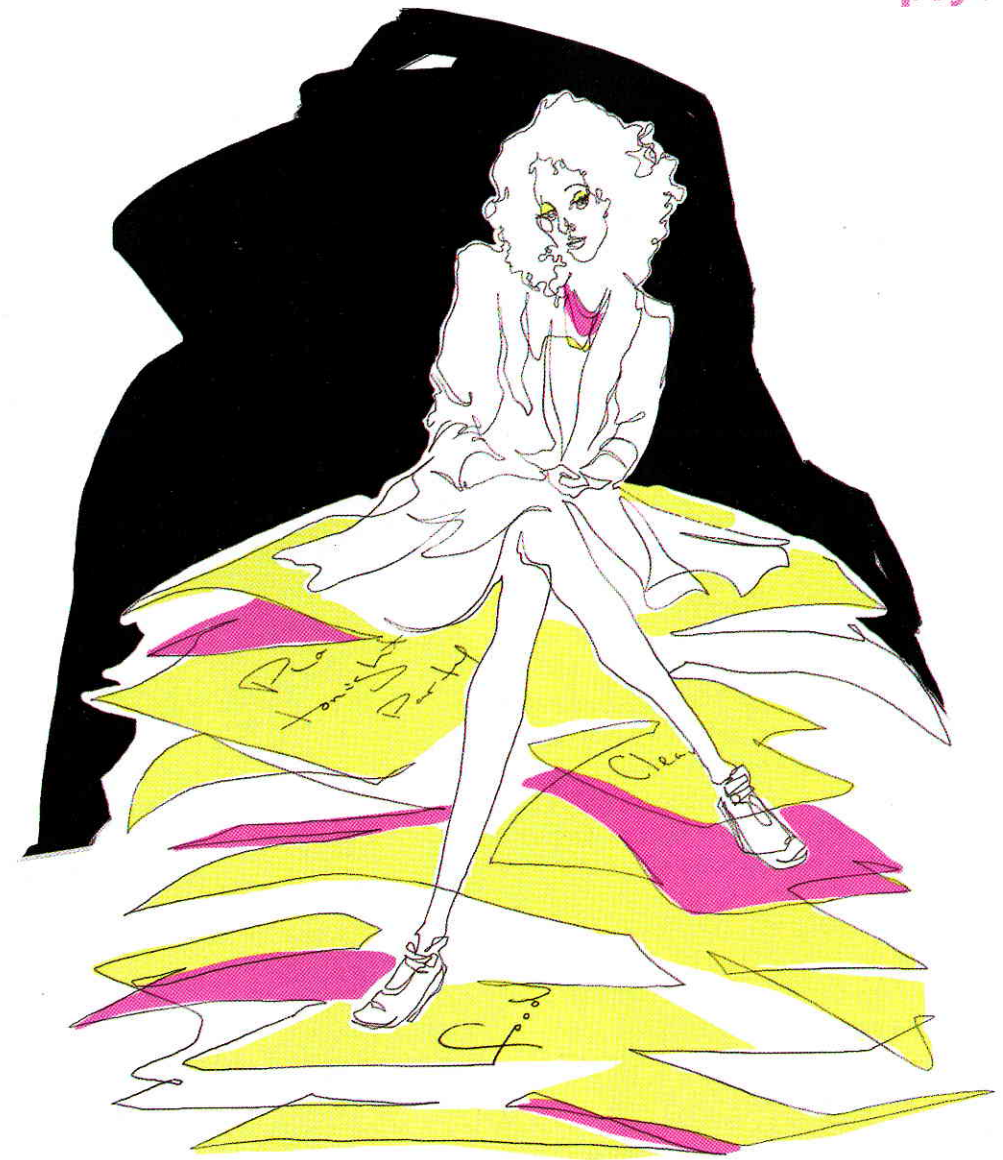


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## how busy are you?

If your life feels like an endless to-do list, we can help. It's time to pinpoint your style of busy behaviour and learn how to make it work for you.

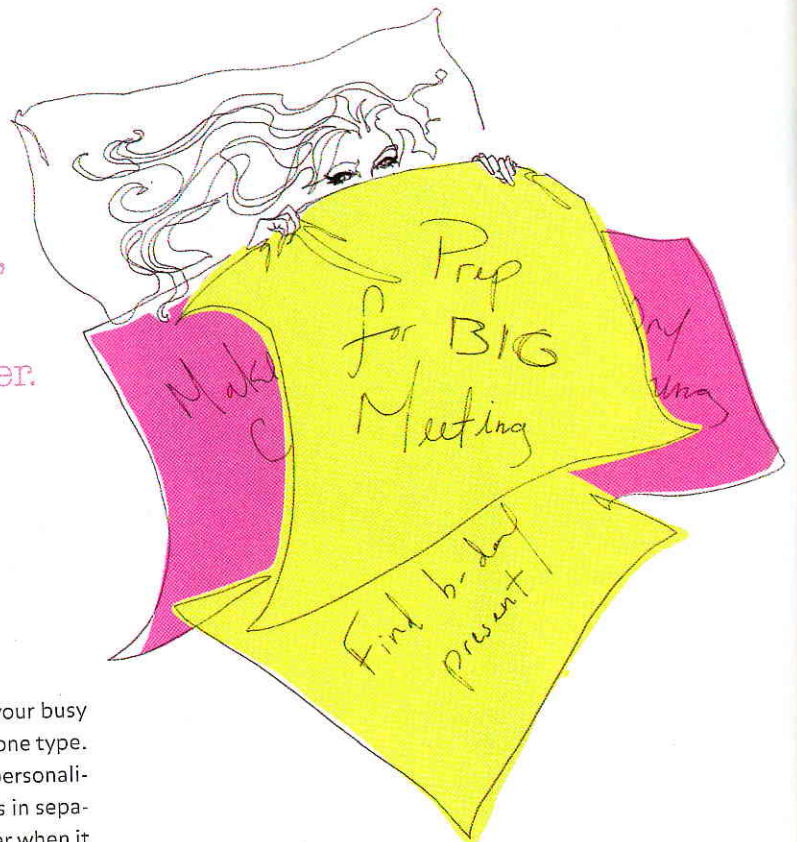
BY LIJA KRESOWATY ● ILLUSTRATIONS BY RACHEL ANN LINDSAY

Think back to your last social exchange, whether it was a phone call or catch-up coffee. Chances are, the phrase "I'm so busy" was dropped in the first 10 seconds. "Busy has become the status quo, and there's a perception that when you're not busy, there's something wrong with you," says Julia James, a life coach in Vancouver.

The paradox behind our whirlwind schedules is that we purposefully fill our time with tasks, even though we'd kill for a week

free of to-dos and deadlines. So, if we don't really enjoy being busy, why do so many of us live our lives this way? James believes that while we've come to take pride in being busy, we forget that it's not the same as using time productively. Understanding how your behaviour adds to you feeling so busy will help you take control of how you spend your day - and that's the key to making the most of your on-time and enjoying your off-time.

There are three types of “busy” personalities: The juggler, the procrastinator, and the panicker. Which one are you?



#### WHAT TYPE OF BUSY ARE YOU?

The following characteristics will help you get to know your busy style – don’t be surprised if you identify with more than one type. “These are patterns of thinking and behaviour, not set personalities,” says James. Many of us adopt different busy styles in separate areas of our lives. For example, you could be a juggler when it comes to family commitments, a procrastinator with your income taxes and a panicker at work.

#### THE JUGGLER

- You always have something on the go, and you dash from work to home to social commitments.
- You make mile-long to-do lists, knowing that you can’t possibly finish it all in one day.
- You spend most of your day dealing with short-term, urgent situations: You have to make cookies for your daughter’s class, you have to return a sweater at the mall and you have to finish the report that’s due at work. “It’s like putting out fires,” says James. “You don’t feel like you have the space to sit down and make long-term plans.”
- You find it difficult to delegate even simple tasks – from cleaning the bathroom to filing paperwork – because you don’t trust anyone to do the job as well as you or believe that it won’t get done at all if you don’t step up.

#### THE PROCRASTINATOR

- You put off doing important tasks (like making a doctor’s appointment) with other activities (like checking your email).
- You often miss work deadlines or end up paying late charges on cellphone bills or overdue library books.
- You feel anxious as a result of putting things off. “You may even do something well at the last minute but still feel guilty because you know you could have done better,” says Jane Burka, a psychologist based in California and co-author of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now* (De Capo Press, 2008).
- You think there’s just no point to starting a task if you know you’re not going to finish it all at once.

- You ignore the realities of time. “Many procrastinators will worry about a deadline but won’t know the specific date because they’ve deliberately ignored it,” says Burka.

#### THE PANICKER

- You feel mentally overwhelmed with responsibilities, regardless of your actual schedule.
- You often think, I can’t do all of this or I’m not up to this.
- You exaggerate the importance of every task. For example, you think you’ll be fired if a report isn’t perfect or that you’re a terrible girlfriend if you can’t make it to the housewarming party of your boyfriend’s sister.
- You find it difficult to focus on the task at hand because you’re always thinking several steps ahead. As a result, instead of putting all of your energy into brainstorming during a meeting, you’re already worrying about the calls you need to return.
- You are highly sensitive to stressors that may not bother others as much, like noise, sleep deprivation and caffeine.

#### BEAT THE BUSY

Now that you know your style, use these expert-approved plans to get on the free-time track.

#### THE JUGGLER TO-DO LIST

1. **Prioritize.** Write down your weekly to-do list and put everything into categories: “A” for your most important goals that must get done, “B” for things you would like to do and “C” for things that you can cut out. It might help you realize that it’s time to take your mom on that overdue shoe-shopping trip rather than attend yet another neighbourhood party. ▶

When you try to do five things at once, it creates stress and leads to mistakes, which just leads to more work.



**2. Gain some perspective.** If you have trouble cutting anything out, you may need to take a step back. "Imagine looking back at your current situation 20 years from now," asks James. "What do you wish you were spending more time on and what do you think is less important?" Would you prefer to be at dance class or doing volunteer work for another office fundraiser?

**3. Be proactive.** Schedule in proactive time before you start on your daily to-dos, suggests James. For example, spend 30 minutes on a big goal before you even check your email in the morning - this creates a window of opportunity before you get into reactive mode, she says.

**4. Use your off-time.** James recommends taking daily opportunities to slow down and relax. "Use a waiting period that would normally annoy you, like standing in a long checkout line or waiting on hold on the phone," she says. James also suggests choosing your recreation wisely. "If you take a walk, you may only need 30 minutes to feel recharged, but if you watch TV for three hours, you could still feel exhausted afterwards," she says.

#### THE PROCRASTINATOR TO-DO LIST

**1. Identify your fears.** "Even the worst procrastinators don't behave this way in every area," says Burka. So, determine where you procrastinate most. "You may be reluctant to start your income taxes because you are bad at math, don't want to face your financial realities or are disorganized and know that you won't find everything you need," says Burka. If you discover your primary source of anxiety, you can target that first.

**2. Recognize avoidance activities.** This can be tricky if your avoidance activity actually has to be done, such as housework. "If you say 'First I'll do dishes and then I'll balance my chequebook' and you believe that's going to happen, that's fine," says Burka, "but if you're dreading the second activity, it's procrastination."

**3. Break jobs down.** After you take that first small step toward your goal, you may find that your dread subsides. "It's not all or nothing," says Burka. "Fifteen minutes of work really is better than none at all."

**4. Reward yourself.** For every bit of time that you spend on your goal, give yourself a small reward. It could be as simple as running out to pick up your favourite sushi after you spend 15 minutes clearing out your home office.

#### THE PANICKER TO-DO LIST

**1. Talk yourself down.** When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed and starting to freak out, take a deep breath. Then try to consciously separate your emotions from the reality of the situation. "The most important thing for a panicky person to do is remind herself that the task itself is not impossible; it's just the anxiety that has kicked in," says Burka.

**2. Write it out.** Get everything out of your system by jotting it down in a journal or on a checklist. "Even if you never look at it again, it will help you mentally let go," says James.

**3. Focus on one thing.** Multi-tasking is never effective, says James. "When you try to do five things at once, it creates stress and leads to mistakes, which just leads to more work," she says. To help clear your mind, Burka suggests going back to your list of tasks. "Pick out only the most important or most urgent thing," she says. "Then break it down and start a separate list of what you need to do to complete that task and work from there."

**4. Eliminate your panic triggers.** If you know that noise and clutter can send you into panic mode, take time to deal with those distractions before you tackle a job. "Then there's less of a chance of the anxiety taking over," says Burka. ☺