

Though battling with hectic schedules, most people want to get back to basics. **Helen O'Callaghan** reports on the findings of a new work-life balance survey

CRAVING A SIMPLE LIFE?

ONE in four employees in Ireland are dissatisfied with their work-life balance, according to the newly-launched 2007 Work-Life Balance in Ireland study, undertaken at NUI, Galway, by Dr Alma McCarthy and Geraldine Grady.

The survey, involving 15 large companies, found employees tend to work more than their official working hours, particularly in the private sector where the average actual hours worked was 42 compared with 34.5 in

the public sector. When asked why they worked above their contracted hours, people cited temporary increase in the workload of the business, employees' own desire to get the job done, backlog of work and the necessity to cover staff shortages.

Against this backdrop of increased work demands, life doesn't get less complicated when you leave the office; there are the challenges of computer-addicted children, our growing carbon footprint and mounting

bills, to name but a few. Is it any wonder people are craving something simpler — that from beneath the clamour of busy lives comes a call to get back to basics? The Work-Life Balance In Ireland study found that a high percentage of respondents reported community as important to them, yet only 48% are involved in community activities. So how can we simplify things, travel lighter, respond to the essential cravings of our body, heart and spirit for a simpler, less burdened life?



LONGING — WORK MADE SIMPLE

MULTI-TASKING'S the buzzword of the new millennium. We do it as if our lives depended on it. Women congratulate themselves on being better at it than men. But experts are beginning to reconsider its merits. According to psychiatrist Dr Edward Hallowell, author of *Crazy Busy*, Overstretched, Overbooked and about to Snap, all this mania is bad news for us. "This state of constant frenzy saps your creativity, humanity and wellbeing," he says.

Thérèse Ryan, stress management consultant and health expert to RTE's *How Long Will You Live?*, also believes multi-tasking isn't all it's cracked out to be. "Multi-tasking means your concentration's diluted, so you make little mistakes. Then you're thinking, 'What's happening to me?' Many people don't give themselves space between business meetings. They're in one place, but their mind's in another, so they don't hear something vital."

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

Work smart. "Make a to-do list. Action it, one task at a time," says Ms Ryan. Counter an office culture that measures work quality by how many hours you spend at your desk. Don't be guilty of "presenteeism" — being so committed you don't realise when you're not effective, such as when you're ill. "Being over-committed is just as damaging to your career as being under-committed — you burn out fast." Maybe it's time to check out job-sharing.

TIPS:

- Sophie Rowan, psychologist and author of *Happy at Work: 10 Steps to Ultimate Job Satisfaction*, suggests:
 - Do a skills audit. Are certain tasks being duplicated across departments?
 - Share information. This builds links and creates collaboration.
 - Share skills. If you're brilliant at most of your job but one task stresses you out, find a colleague with complementary skills.

JUST THE JOB: Deal with one task at a time, advises stress management consultant Thérèse Ryan.



LONGING — FOR IDLENESS

WE associate idleness with dead time, forgetting that whiling away the hours can be incredibly good for health. Cases of mental illness are almost twice as likely in the US and Britain as on mainland Europe, where working days are shorter and work-life equation is more balanced.

"So often, I hear people saying: 'I need to put my wellies on and go back to the old farm' or 'I need to go for a walk on the beach — I need time on my own'," says Thérèse Ryan.

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

Studies have found we spend 10-15% of our lives day-dreaming. "But being in a high-stressed, time-driven job doesn't encourage downtime," says psychologist and author, Sophie Rowan. "Yet, research shows that during downtime — a little snooze at the desk, dawdling, losing yourself in idleness — is when creative juices flow. Whereas if you're constantly working towards a goal, you're only operating within rigid parameters."

TIPS:

- Get some respite at three/ four key points during the day. Get up, stretch your legs, leave your desk, go outside and get some fresh air.
- Take time out alone — not a lads' night or a girls' night, but time just for you. And don't feel guilty about it.
- Do something for the pleasure of the activity itself. Find an activity that feels like indulgence — even sitting daydreaming — and schedule it in your day.

THINK LOCAL: Buy locally-produced food and cut down on the air-miles your food takes to get to you, says Dr Philip Michael.

Picture: Denis Minihane

IDLE TALK: Sophie Rowan, psychologist and author says losing yourself in idleness is important. Picture: Billy Higgins



LONGING — FOR GREEN

DR PHILIP MICHAEL, chair of the Irish Doctors' Environmental Association, says it's well documented that we have 200-400 novel chemicals in our bodies — chemicals our grandparents didn't have. "There's plenty of evidence that our lifestyle isn't doing us any good. The planet can't contain our excesses, our energy-guzzling habits."

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

"It'll take small steps by everybody to correct the imbalance," says Dr Michael, who urges people to "get their fingers into the earth". Plant a garden. Grow some vegetables. "We import food from halfway around the globe. We have to get into the habit of buying locally, of supporting the country markets. Buy organic, so we can reduce the amount of chemicals going into the earth, the water, the food," he says.

TIPS:

- Grow your own. "At least something," says Darina Allen of Ballymaloe Cookery School. "Even a hanging basket — you can grow herbs very easily. Tomatoes will grow on a balcony. Potatoes are very easy, as are lettuce, spinach, radishes and beetroot."
- Talk to people in your area about creating an allotment. Prominent during World War II in Britain, these were vacant spaces where people grew their own vegetables. Now, they've become oversubscribed in Britain. Bantry in West Cork has one, while the towns of Clonakilty and Bandon are trying to organise them.
- Use the car less, think local, and why not holiday close by rather than rushing off to the West Indies or somewhere equally far-flung at every possible opportunity and polluting the planet en route," adds Dr Michael.



LONGING — FOR GOOD FOOD

WHILE there are about 120 food (farmers'/country) markets in Ireland, compared to around 10 a decade ago, Caroline Robinson, chair of the Irish Food Market Traders' Association, says she sometimes despairs that many people aren't making the connection between good food and health.

"I think we're catering for only two to three per cent: many people are eating rubbish and working under par — not feeling sick but not feeling good either."

Dismissing the notion that people simply don't have time to cook meals, she says: "We've been sold the idea that we're time-poor and cash-rich, so we buy ready-made meals. Yet look at the time we spend in front of the TV."

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

Check out the farmers' markets. Log onto www.bord-bia.ie for a list. Find out about the Slow Food Movement — there are now 14 groups in Ireland. Dianne Curtin, convivial leader of Slow Food West Cork, says Slow Food is a philosophy about clean fair food; food is produced in a good way, is clean in terms of having little environmental impact and producers get a fair price.

TIPS:

- Shop in farmers' markets rather than in the supermarket. Ask questions: Where does this come from? How was it grown? Is it in season? Seasonal food is cheaper and more nutritious. Link up with a local farmer. Some organic farmers will deliver to you weekly a box of in-season vegetables.
- The extra money you spend on a free-range chicken will pay you back in quality/flavour. Maximise every bit of it by using leftovers.



LONGING — FOR SLEEP

WHILE studies show we sleep an average of an hour less a night compared with 50 years ago, Dr Chris Idikowski, director of Edinburgh Sleep Centre, believes problem sleep conditions were always part of life.

"People have become more focused on whether they're sleeping okay. A lot of today's jobs require more acute mental functioning and reduced sleep impacts a lot on concentration and vigilance, so people are more aware if lost sleep is a problem."

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

Allow enough time for sleep, says Dr Idikowski. "Voluntary sleep restriction is happening more than actual insomnia. Life is too exciting, there's too much to do. You have to allow enough time for good sleep to happen."

TIPS:

- Wind down before going to bed. Follow routines/rituals you associate with sleep — listen to music or read for 15 minutes before turning out the light. A study of an elderly group found that having three hot baths a week improved sleep quality. Establish a regular time for going to bed and waking up.
- Keep the sleeping environment free of clutter. A bedside table piled high with books, diaries and crosswords sends distracting messages to your subconscious.
- Your bedroom needs to be comfortable — and cool. "Body temperature reduces during the night. If the room's too hot, it interferes with that. Yet the room also needs to be warm enough when going to bed to encourage sleep," says Dr Idikowski, who also advises getting the light right. "This can be tricky. We need darkness at the beginning of sleep, but we need dawn light to reset the body clock. Get blackout curtains to eliminate light and a dawn-simulator alarm clock," he says.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Caroline Robinson, far left, and Dianne Curtin say we are time-poor and cash-rich but to them good food and health go hand in hand.

Pictures: Denis Minihane



LONGING — FOR SEX

WOMEN have less sex today than women in the 1950s, according to US-based Kinsey Institute researchers, who found only 42% of cohabiting women — and a third of married women — have sex two/three times a week.

"People are trying to work, manage children, pay the mortgage. They feel something's wrong with them because they've lost their appetite for sex. I say no wonder, considering they're falling into bed exhausted at the end of the day — that's not very conducive to being sensual," says psychosexual therapist Mary Leonard.

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT:

It's important, says Ms Leonard, that people don't become alarmed if work and family commitments, and resulting lack of energy, have put sex in the back seat of their lives.

"It doesn't mean something's amiss in the fabric of your relationship. I encourage people to set aside time for intimacy — to be alone together, kiss and cuddle, lie there chatting, even if they don't have the energy for sex."

TIPS:

- Change negative thought patterns — 'Oh, no, not again!' or 'I'm not in the mood' — that have become associated with sex. These can become a habit.
- Tracey Cox, author of *The Sex Doctor*, advises women even if they're not feeling up for sex to try a little foreplay to see if it will get them in the mood. "Unlike men, who become aroused by just thinking about sex, women often need to start having sex before they get turned on, so we often enjoy it more once we get started."
- Mary Leonard points out that if sexual arousal doesn't occur on a regular basis, the nervous system literally forgets and shuts down. "You need to take a creative approach."

BODY TALK: Tracey Cox advises women to try a little foreplay, even if they're not up for sex.