

Model: Mimi Spencer

THE NEW

# stress solution



## » Downshifting to a less stressful lifestyle doesn't have to mean moving to the middle of nowhere. Meet medium-sizing – the new way to make more of your life...

Dreaming of swapping grey city streets for rolling fields dotted with sheep? You're not alone. From the number of TV programmes chronicling city-to-country life swaps, such as *Relocation*, *Relocation* and the upcoming *Jimmy's Farm*, it seems that just about every townie in the UK is planning on trading their urban life for a remote cottage, desperate to break for the border with just a hoe and a goat for company. Recently reported figures from the Prudential reveal that this year 'almost one million people aged 35 to 54 are making serious plans to take their foot off the gas, with 800,000 planning to downshift by 2006.'

Leaping from the one extreme of a madly busy city life to a totally isolated one in a cottage marooned in the middle of nowhere, however, can be a bit too much of a shock to the system and, thankfully, isn't the only option. Amid the passion for downsizing, a new middle way is emerging, with people starting to tap into the concept of 'medium-sizing' their lives. This means making lifestyle choices that allow them to work less but still have a fulfilling career, and which allow them the time to exercise plenty and eat well, but still afford them enough stimulation to stay healthy (recent research suggests that a modicum of stress is, in fact, healthier than none at all).

With 12 million of us in the UK on antidepressants, half of all British workers believing their job damages their health, and one-fifth saying they're too exhausted to have sex, it's not hard to see why people are medium-sizing in droves. The key, of course, is to get your work-life balance right, with the right amounts of up and down time thrown into the mix.

### finding the balance

Surprise, surprise – it's women rather than men who are driving this trend. Research by Catalyst, an advisory organisation for working women, found that 60% of middle-level US career women bail out of their jobs, proving that you don't have to have a celebrity-size bank balance to be able to do it. According to Susan Vinnicombe, professor of organisational behaviour at the Cranfield School Of Management, the number of UK women opting out could be even higher. Already, 26% of women and 18% of men work flexibly – and that's just the official figures. Clearly, producing babies encourages women to rethink their work-life balance. But children aren't a prerequisite for medium-sizing – some women simply want more time for themselves.

Tonia Nagle – a 32-year-old one-time dot-com entrepreneur, who left the stress of running her own start-up for a job with a pharmaceutical company based in Dublin – is the perfect example. 'I chose to move to

Ireland to improve my lifestyle,' she says. 'I now live in Dalkey, a small village 30 minutes from town. I watch the seals in the bay from my window before work and get home in time to go riding most days. I am fitter, happier and calmer than I've ever been. I still work hard, but I have more depth to my life.'

### one step at a time

And just to prove that you don't have to relocate to medium-size your life, Donna Hoath, 35, an associate in commercial litigation with Eversheds, a large law firm in Leeds, recently elected to work a four-day week following an epiphany that her life was out of kilter. 'I had no time to see my family, go to the gym or see my friends,' she says. 'My job is intense and deadline-driven, but I felt I could do it equally well in four days as I would have more energy, and that has proved to be the case. I am more effective because I have got my life back. I skip into the office now.'

So if you do go for it, what benefits can you expect to reap? Perhaps the biggest luxury is more time, which you can spend putting yourself and your needs first, whether you want to improve your diet, embark on a course or just see more of your family and friends. 'I haven't had a ready-meal since I made my move,' says Tonia Nagle. 'It has saved me a bomb and I feel much healthier for it.'

Then there's the head space you'll gain, which should give you the energy to pursue some long-held dreams – running a marathon, perhaps, organising that school reunion or setting up retreat holidays for others. 'Doing an expressive or creative activity that's important to you has a similar effect to meditation,' says life coach Rosie Walford. 'Whatever the

## CELEBRITY MEDIUM-SIZERS

They might seem to have it all, but even celebs crave a bit of time out now and again...



'I feel that my personal life comes first,' says **GWYNETH PALTROW**. 'I'm not saying I want to stop work, but I do really want to live an interesting life, rather than just working and feeding that machine.'



22-year-old pop princess **BRITNEY SPEARS** opted for time out from the stresses and strains of her whirlwind life in August 2002 to 'rejuvenate and just to play. I've got to a point

where I can really allow myself to relax – this break is important for me to reflect and spend time with my family,' she said at the time.



**MARTHA LANE FOX**, the co-founder of lastminute.com, is a classic example of the girl who had it all deciding she'd like to have, well, just a bit less. She's quit the day job, citing a desire to 'read and see my friends'.



After a decade starring in the world's most successful sitcom, **JENNIFER ANISTON** is ready to re-prioritise. 'I love any excuse to stay at home,' she says. 'I'm going to try not to work that much.'



Men can medium-size, too – Tony Blair's former press adviser, **ALASTAIR CAMPBELL**, left his mega-profile job in 2003, saying he wanted 'to get a life back for me and my family.' He now plans to write, broadcast, raise money for charity and be an after-dinner speaker.

activity, a little time off can release a lot of frustration.'

If all this sounds very attractive but you're unsure where to start, how do you set about getting that balance right? First, think medium-sized, not big! 'You don't have to sell everything and move to another country. Most people do it rather more modestly – they ask for a reduction in their hours or move to a less stressful post,' says Judy Jones, co-author of *Downshifting* (Hodder & Stoughton, £10.99). Next, believe in your ability to find a way to medium-size. 'I passionately believe that anyone can pare down,' says life coach Rosie Walford. 'I've seen lots of people who have worked out how to shrink their role into three days a week, so as to maintain mental stimulation but be with their children more;

urbanites who house-swap regularly with country friends; people who fund their charity work with a few high-paid days of consultancy in their former field. Increasingly, people find ways to balance multiple desires, rather than plumping for the either/or absolutism of self-sufficiency with goats. Rather than waiting in Never-Never Land for some epic reinvention, I help new-style life-shifters to make changes that are appropriate to their needs, medium-sized and actionable now.'

### no time like the present

For more hands-on guidance and advice, Rosie Walford's company, The Big Stretch, takes people away from their busy lives and into the Picos mountains of Spain to contemplate their path towards a better life balance. The

idea, says Walford, is to bridge 'the gap between where they are now and the dream – to hunt out areas where leverage lies. Even in a manic, troubled lifestyle, people always uncover elements that are working, clues to the ways forward, cracks in the insoluble – themes that could, with a little innovation, open the door to satisfying change.' Rosie herself is the consummate medium-sizer – she's taken a sabbatical and is currently volunteering for a charity in New Zealand for a month. 'Today, my day went like this,' she says. 'Got up, picked a peach off a tree in the garden, padded down for a naked, warm swim in the sea, took the ferry to city, mentored at Oxfam all day, went out for thoroughly cosmopolitan dinner, returned on ferry to island.'

Inspired? Excited? Raring to try medium-sizing yourself? You should be – because the true beauty of medium-sizing is that it's not scary or radical, or about turning your back on your old life. It's simply about taking the best elements of it with you and leaving the worst behind. What could be better? So go on – take a medium-sized step today! □

### FANCY A BIT OF MEDIUM-SIZING?

- 1 Look into flexi-time at work. Parents of children aged under six or disabled children aged under 18 have a legal right to apply to work flexibly and their employers have a duty to consider these requests.
- 2 Talk to a life coach to find leverage in your life. The next available spaces on The Big Stretch are on 15 May, 10 July and 11 September 2004. For details, visit [www.thebigstretch.com](http://www.thebigstretch.com), or call 01273 676712. Founder Rosie Walford suggests you make a list of all the things you 'want, need and wish for', in order to know which one to address first.
- 3 Get techy. A laptop and mobile that hook up to email and the internet can give you amazing freedom.
- 4 Fill your new-found free time wisely by pursuing your dream – whether it's becoming an alternative therapist or learning to surf. Doing something amazing will encourage you really to appreciate the benefits of medium-sizing – and stick to your resolution to work less!
- 5 Recognise that the world goes on without you running it. Delegate a little.

