

When did work change from something we did to meet our physical needs, so that our primary focus was on truly human pursuits, to an all-encompassing, yet unconscious, religion?

why are we always so exhausted?

Experts now say we're suffering from a modern exhaustion syndrome – even an epidemic. They say tiredness just ain't what it used to be. But what makes it different, and how can we make ourselves better?

WORDS RENATA HARPER

I go to bed exhausted and I wake up exhausted,' says Michelle (30), a self-employed health and beauty sales agent and student from Johannesburg. 'I can't concentrate, I have terrible mood swings, and I've started eating more junk food.' And despite once having had a fairly strong immune system, she has become prone to the latest bugs – recently she has suffered from constipation, migraines, flu-like symptoms and knee problems, as well as a loss of smell and taste that lasted 72 hours – and her energy levels remain alarmingly low. 'I'm only 30! Why am I so tired? What is happening to me?'

'Almost 75% of the people I treat are overwhelmed, exhausted and afflicted with this disorder that makes them feel decades older than their years,' says Frank Lipman, South African-born

doctor and author of *Spent: End Exhaustion and Feel Great Again* [Hay House]. Dr Lipman uses 'spent' to describe patients who are 'burnt out – physically, mentally, and spiritually'. Most of his patients are women in their 40s and 50s, although he is starting to see more women in their 30s, and even 20s. ('Men usually ignore [the symptoms], push through and present with more serious problems later,' he says.)

But haven't we always been exhausted? Well, to an extent, writes Lipman. But 'our "total load" – the total amount of physical, psychological and environmental stress we're subjected to – has quadrupled in the past 30 years,' he says. 'We have outpaced our biology.'

And because many of these modern stressors are integral to our lifestyles, 'their effect is usually unconscious, slow and pernicious,' says Dr Simon Whitesman, a GP who practices Integrative Medicine at the Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital, co-director

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of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme at Cape Town Medi-Clinic and chairperson of the Institute for Mindfulness in South Africa.

'Please, sir, I want some more...'

Naturally, the first thing that comes to mind when we hear 'exhaustion', is sleep – or rather, the lack thereof. But if the problem isn't quantity of sleep, it's often its quality. It's also true that many of us don't prioritise sleep for the essential role it plays in being a fully functioning, energised human being (one study mentions that most people would forego sleep to pursue a leisure activity).

What's more, writes Lipman, 'Most of us do not pay enough attention to getting ourselves ready for bed... We come home from work feeling exhausted, yet completely wound up from too much stimulation.' And what do we do next? We surf online, answer personal (or work) emails we haven't got round to, watch TV... all activities that rev up our already over-stimulated minds and bodies.

'Just like plants, many of us are photosensitive,' says Lipman. 'The bright light of a TV or computer may stop our melatonin levels from rising to induce sleep, because our body still thinks it's daytime.'

The one thing that never sleeps...

It used to be that the world more or less shut down when night fell. But now a 24/7 communication and information system – whether through our Blackberries, laptops, cellphones, or all of the above – means we're always connected, always available, always on high alert. 'There is no

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respite in energy and information influx,' says Whitesman. 'We are all flow and no ebb.'

'I know that I process too much in one day,' says Janet* (47), an account director in media communication in Cape Town. 'It's a constant stream of emails and people Tweeting or Facebooking me – and that doesn't take into account the people who actually want to talk to me in person, never mind on the phone.'

Modern technology, far from saving us time, seems to mean we're doing so much more. In an interview with *The Observer* a few years ago, historian Richard Hudson commented: 'Back in the Sixties ... everybody thought we would benefit from the invention of machines to carry out the more mundane tasks in our lives, leaving us far more time for leisure and relaxation.' Yet we're more stressed and exhausted, he says, 'because we have been liberated to do so much else'.

Add to that a culture of convenience – think late-night shopping and gym (more artificial lighting and over-stimulation...) – and there's always the opportunity to squeeze in the grocery shopping, or hunt down the double-strength adhesive glue for the school project. There's no excuse any more for us not to get things done.

'It's not that movement or activity are "wrong",' explains Whitesman, 'it's that our "doing" is so dislocated from our "being". We get so caught up in the momentum of "doing" that very often, when we eventually do slow down, we become overwhelmed with what we feel.'

How time flies...

Ever cursed the Internet because a page hasn't opened within five seconds? Or felt guilty for leaving an email unacknowledged for a few days?

The modern world is 'stuck in fast-forward', says Carl Honoré, author of *In Praise of Slowness* (HarperCollins), in a presentation for TED (see www.ted.com). Though speed is 'fun' and 'sexy', we often fail to notice the toll it takes on everything from our health to our relationships to the environment, he says.

He also questions the way the 'West' thinks about time – as linear, and thus a finite resource, rather than as cyclical [a theme common to both Hinduism and Buddhism]. And if time is seen as scarce, he concludes, it makes sense that we speed up and attempt to do 'more and more with less and less time'.

But we're already seeing kids SMSing and grasping new software programmes at the speed of light... surely we'll adapt to this new pace of life? Anthropologists Henry Harpending and Gregory Cochran believe so. In *The 10,000 Year Explosion* (Basic Books), they state that modern life's pressures are, in fact, speeding up human evolution (thereby disputing the conventional belief that evolution stopped 40 000 years ago).

But how can we slow down *and* keep up? 'People misunderstand "slow",' says Whitesman. 'It doesn't mean "passive", "inactive", or "less functional." It's about getting in touch with the part of you that's not rushing or pressured.' He uses the analogy of swimming crawl with less splashing – and thus greater efficiency and rhythm.

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I work, therefore I am

In an essay penned almost a decade ago, US author and somatic psycho-therapist Linda Marks asked: 'When did work change from something we did to meet our physical needs so that our primary focus was on truly human pursuits (raising children, spiritual practice, creative arts and community building) to an all-encompassing, yet unconscious, religion?'

Marks argues that our identities have become tied up in what we do, rather than in who we are; that work often answers the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?'

And though we work for various motives – to survive; to pay our debts; for creative or intellectual fulfilment; to pursue status, opportunities or freedom – do we really have to work *this* hard?

The answer often depends on your corporate culture. When an aggressively competitive workplace is coupled with background insecurities like the financial crisis, high unemployment and a less than ideal social security system, it's often fear that pushes us into overdrive. Janet, who, incidentally, enjoys her job, asked that we not use her real name 'because I would be ashamed to admit how tired I am, as I think people would take advantage of it. If I screwed something up at work, they'd all go, "Oh well, she can't cut it."' "

Body count

'Once you understand that food is "data" that the body uses to direct the

complex actions that keep us vibrantly alive, it is easy to understand that loading up on junk food is like taking the fast lane to a giant system failure,' writes Lipman.

He points to the usual culprits: sugar and artificial sweeteners, caffeine and processed foods (anything boxed, bagged, mixed, chopped or frozen). (See the book for more information and for Lipman's opinion on trans fats, factory-farmed meats, alcohol, soya, gluten, dairy and more.)

The victims of a poor diet are, in particular, our digestive and hormonal systems. Poor digestion inevitably weakens our immune system, he says (70–80% of our immune system is found in the digestive tract). Furthermore, no matter how healthily you eat, 'if your digestion does not work well, your food does not nourish you well.'

Similarly, when we overwhelm our

body with sugars or chemicals, our hormonal systems not only have to accomplish their usual tasks (governing our moods, metabolism and sex drive, among others), says Lipman, but they also carry the burden of restoring balance after the body has been attacked by what it sees as 'a toxic substance'.

There's something in the air...

'In the last 60 years we've introduced thousands of chemicals into our food, air, and water, without knowing how they'll react in our bodies, or what their cumulative effects might be,'

writes Lipman on spentmd.com (see www.drfranklipman.com). In his opinion, there is enough evidence to suggest that environmental pollutants are adversely affecting our health, and disrupting our hormonal systems in particular. He flags chlorine and the oft-debated fluoride as particularly toxic.

Lipman is also deeply concerned about the cumulative effect of long-term use of chemicals – like lead, mercury, parabens, fragrance ('a euphemism for nearly 4000 different ingredients') – found in beauty products. (See the website for the full list.) Because the skin has such a large and permeable surface area, much of what we apply to it ends up in our bloodstream, he explains. He also suggests some products may actually cause ageing.

Finally, although research is still being done into the long-term effects of electromagnetic frequencies (EMFs) from cellphones and wireless, the Environmental Working Group, a non-profit organisation dedicated to conducting independent research into the chemicals in our environment and daily products, feels there is sufficient evidence to warrant caution. (Visit www.ewg.org for safety tips and to check your phone's radiation levels.)

Of course, some of these stressors are more within our control than others.

We will always have deadlines, responsibilities and ambitions – but those of us who are constantly exhausted, or rushing through our lives, might want to ask ourselves: how much of how we live is by choice? It's also up to us to become discerning consumers, and disciplined users, of technology. 'Each person must navigate [the path] for themselves,' says Whitesman. This may involve either changing a few habits [see overleaf] or a complete ideological revolution, like opting out of the rat race, moving away from urban centres or lowering our expectations of ourselves...

**Names have been changed*

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How to 'unspent' yourself (read this slowly)

Pace yourself. 'If the tyres of your car are slashed, the engine disintegrating and you're almost out of petrol, sure, you'll get to your destination, but not with ease,' says Whitesman. Don't ignore those niggles (whether physical or intuitive) suggesting you slow down. **Get your kids to slow down.** 'It's in those moments of unstructured, quiet time, of boredom even, that kids learn how to look into themselves, how to think and be creative, how to socialise,' writes Honoré. And if they slowed down, we'd be a lot less stressed too. **Be where you are...** This is one of the guiding principle of mindfulness. 'Mindfulness allows us to manage the discord around us by tapping into that current that is unaffected by common freneticism, keeping us more aligned with what we are,' says Whitesman. For more info, and courses in your area, see www.mindfulness.org.za. **Disconnect...** '[it's] not easy, but it's very simple,' notes Whitesman. Ask yourself: 'In this moment, can I live without my cellphone/Blackberry/Internet?' 'Ideally, we should be using technology (and its advances) in ways that serve us and our communities, rather than being at its mercy.' **... and reconnect.** '[I]t is essential for all of us to know others and to be really known,' says Lipman. Though many of us are surrounded by people, we are not necessarily 'emotionally fed' by this kind of interaction, says Lipman. Prioritise time both with your loved ones and yourself. Giving back to your community can also be profoundly healing, says Lipman, 'especially if you work at a high-pressure job... or in a profession that doesn't feel meaningful.'

Meditate. 'Meditation can be anything you do with prolonged focused attention that helps you interrupt the usual ramble of worries, reflections, and projections in your head,' writes Lipman. '[Meditating] will actually create hours in the day because you'll be more relaxed, focused and energised...' **Don't multitask** – well, that's what Honoré advises. '[A]s soon as you have to engage the brain, you really need to focus on one activity at a time. Much of what passes for multitasking is nothing of the sort: it is sequential toggling between activities. And the research suggests that this flitting back and forth is actually very unproductive.' **Take your lunch,** take your leave and take regular breathing breaks. 'Quieting and slowing our breath stimulate what is called the parasympathetic response, which calms the body down – the perfect antidote to the overstressed state we are in,' writes Lipman. **'Have an electronic sun-down'**, says Lipman. Dim the lights by 8pm, and turn off all electronic gadgets (including the TV) by 10pm. 'Unwinding and relaxing tense muscles [especially the neck, back and shoulders] is [also] one of the best ways to help the body transition from racing around to restoring itself.' Sleep in complete darkness (to avoid interrupting melatonin production) and in a cool

room ('to reflect our body's own natural rhythm of cooling for sleep'). And maintain regular sleeping hours. **Celebrate the end of a deadline,** rather than moving immediately on to the next one. On payday, take a moment to congratulate yourself (no matter your salary!) for what you've achieved that month. **Don't impose 'shoulds' on yourself.** '[H]ealing from "spent" is also about learning not to use your mind as your personal drill sergeant,' writes Lipman. 'Should' thought patterns – I should earn more/be slimmer/go to both parties – burden us with more to do and think about, he says. Spend time doing things that you feel like doing. **Eat as close to nature as possible.** Stick to the outer aisles of the supermarket, where fresh produce is found, says Lipman. Where possible, eat seasonally, avoid processed foods, pick organic, grass-fed, free-range meat, eggs and poultry, and stick to low-mercury fish. (Visit www.ewg.org/safefishlist.) **Practice 'restorative exercise'.** 'Our bodies were not built to be sedentary or run marathons,' says Lipman. 'Exertion, rest and recovery are the body's essential natural rhythm for movement... By increasing the intensity for short bursts at a time, you'll increase your metabolism (and burn more calories) than if you worked at a steady pace.' **Reduce toxins in your house.** Lipman suggests getting a water filter; leaving shoes (a major source of toxins) at the front door; using green plants as natural air detoxifiers; keeping house dust to a minimum; and switching to natural cleaning products (visit www.drfranklipman.com to learn how to make your own). ♣
Dr Frank Lipman will be in Jo'burg on 9 March and in Cape Town on the 17th. For more info, call Hazel at (011) 280 5435.

HELPFUL WEBSITES TO VISIT

For a laugh, visit www.slowdownnow.org, home to The International Institute of Not Doing Much, for author and satirist Christopher Richards' take on slowing down. By the way, Richards considers multitasking 'a moral weakness (except for women, who have superior brain function).'

For more good tips on slowing down, visit www.slowmovement.com. The site covers everything from the established slow food, travel and cities movements to the emerging slow schools, books and money movements.