



FOUND: DEAD AT 25 CAUSE: OVERWHELM



IT WAS AROUND 9 O'CLOCK, two periods into a hockey game, when I noticed my friend Anna* struggling to keep her eyes open. A medical resident at a big Toronto hospital, she'd impressed me with her superhuman ability to pull off 26-hour shifts saving lives, while deftly planning her recent wedding and always looking perfectly put together. So you can imagine my surprise when she confided that if she weren't drowning in debt, she'd throw in her scrubs in a heartbeat.

"I hate what my job does to my life," she admitted.

I was floored. Anna seemed to love medicine, and at age 29, she'd spent more time in med school than working as a resident. Besides, aren't crazy hours in a pressure-cooker world just a predictable part of being a doctor? When I probed further for the roots of her premature burnout, I learned that although she's working like a

maniac to prove herself at the hospital, it doesn't mean she's letting things slide on the home front.

"Even though I know it's a partnership and we're not living in the 18th century anymore, I still feel pressure to have dinner on the table, to keep a nice home—to be there for my husband the way I feel a wife should be," she says.

Anna isn't alone in her inner tug-of-war between being Marissa Mayer (a.k.a. Yahoo's newly minted CEO) at work and Martha Stewart at home. And while the former has famously declared that she doesn't believe in burnout, the statistics suggest it's rampant. A 2012 U.S. survey published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* found that the under-34 set have the highest stress levels of any age group, and women—big surprise—consistently report more stress than men. Similarly, the American Psychological Association's latest >

Ready to call it quits when you've only just begun? Welcome to the club. JENNIFER GOLDBERG investigates
GENERATION BURNOUT

Women with demanding, high-stress jobs are nearly 40 percent more likely to have a heart attack or other cardiovascular problem than those with low-pressure positions

Source: New research published in the journal Plos One

Stress in America survey revealed that millennials (Gen Yers, born between 1980 and 1994) were the most likely—above all other generations—to say their stress had shot up over the past five years.

But beyond the stark stats, questions remain: *Why* are we more stressed out than ever, and what can we do about it? Experts point the finger at Gen Y's high ambitions and unrealistic expectations—at work and at home—combined with our reluctance to relax, despite the fact that there's a yoga studio on every corner. (It's interesting to note that *FLARE* columnist Hannah Sung, as she writes on page 134, only got over her perfectionism in her 30s.)

In her research, Linda Schweitzer, associate professor at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business in Ottawa, found that millennial women valued their "beta" priorities (work-life balance) more than the guys did—yet they were just as motivated to excel at the office, too. "They were no less likely to say, 'I want a good salary. I want to move up,'" she explains. In fact, according to a 2011 survey by Abacus Data, millennial women are the *only* generation of Canadian females to place having a successful career among their top life priorities—second only to a successful relationship.

As a millennial myself (though at 32, I'm on the cusp), I see my friends struggle with the idea that if they don't have a Facebook-profile-perfect life, they must be doing something wrong. I feel that way, too. But are we burning out on ambition, and paying the price with our health?

"There's this idea that the older workforce [has] more illnesses and missed time, but it's actually younger workers," says Michael P. Leiter, professor of psychology at Acadia University in Wolfville, N.S., and an expert on workplace burnout. Indeed, for otherwise healthy, young women, chronic stress could arguably be their biggest immediate health risk, affirms Tara Perrot, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, considering that it's thought to set the stage for virtually all the major killers—including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and possibly even certain cancers.

Of course, stress isn't all bad. It's based in our body's primal survival instincts: When we perceive a threat, our system readies us to hightail it to safer ground or fight for our lives. It speeds heart rate and unleashes a flood of hormones such as cortisol. Normally, those hormones taper off once danger's averted. The problem occurs when this "fight or flight" response lasts too long or repeats too often—when your body equates hellish deadlines with regularly scheduled bear attacks.

Cortisol has "vast effects on almost every organ system," explains Perrot. When there's too much cortisol, "it leads to cell death." Your stressed-out body also suppresses functions you wouldn't need in a dire emergency—such as your immune and reproductive systems. Hence the link to everything from heart failure to decreased fertility. And those super-sized zits that invariably sprout at the worst times? Credit stress, too. "Skin >

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is exquisitely sensitive to what's happening on an emotional front," says Ted A. Grossbart, a Boston-based psychologist specializing in skin issues.

The reason you freak out over deadlines while your equally busy co-worker takes it all in stride could come down to genetics. It might be that some people are born to lose their cool. Innate variations in brain chemistry play a big role in how we interpret high-pressure situations, says Perrot. If and when we engage the fight-or-flight response is also influenced by what we experienced in early life—perhaps as far back as the womb.

Not all Gen Y women are wiggled-out stress cases, of course. But many of us are struggling to keep up with our own grand expectations. We want it all, just like our moms did. The difference is we expect to get it *now*. Schweitzer says 35 percent of the millennials she surveyed thought they would be promoted within their first year of work—an idea our managers may find far-fetched. As famed feminist Gloria Steinem said about Gen Y at the 2011 TED x Women event: "I worry about your generation because you feel like you have to be successful before 30."

Some experts blame our parents for the pressure we put on ourselves to succeed. "With this particular generation, as a culture, we haven't done a great job of teaching them emotion-management skills in terms of how to deal with stress and failure," says Karyn Gordon, a Toronto relationship counsellor and expert on Gen Y in the workplace. Millennials grew up in the so-called "self-esteem movement"—an effort that took hold in the '80s to raise kids' confidence with endless praise. The outcome: We all think we're special. And when we don't live up to the idea that we can achieve anything, Gordon suggests, it's tough to cope. If unrealistic expectations are the problem, the obvious answer is to lower them. That's easier said than done, but Gordon insists it's vital to managing stress.

Equally key, trite as it sounds, is knowing what's most important to you. As Yahoo's Mayer, 37, argues,

"It can be worse, according to psychologists, to anticipate one kind of life and wake up in another."

Source: The upcoming book Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?

"Burnout is about resentment"—the feeling of having to sacrifice too much of your life for work. For Mayer, who used to clock 130 hours a week as a top Google executive, the key to averting that resentment is knowing what you need in your off-hours and getting it—no excuses. So if it's seeing your girls for Friday happy hour, set that as a priority.

Step two: Lose the guilt about it. Perhaps strangely, millennial women don't seem to value time to chill out. In the Abacus survey, Gen Y men rated having time to relax as their third most important life priority, but young women rated it sixth. "Stress and guilt are very closely connected; a lot of these women feel guilty for recharging," Gordon notes. "It's a lie that a lot of us tell ourselves: 'I have to be on all the time. I can't switch it off because of my job.'"

That's what Sarah*, 29, a Toronto-based finance executive, recently discovered. When she burned out from working as many hours as needed to get promoted quickly—regularly bailing on plans with friends in order to pull all-nighters—she made the choice to slow down. She decided to prioritize things such as yoga classes instead of overtime, even if it meant she'd take longer to move up. "I definitely try less hard and I'm so much happier now," she says.

And guess what? She still got a promotion. □