



The Disease of ‘Busyness’

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Busyness is anything but impressive, especially when coming from a leader.
- ▶ Sadly, busyness keeps nurse leaders from more worthwhile and important things in their lives, such as authentic, vulnerable relationships.
- ▶ Our collective busyness has become an offensive disease.
- ▶ We have the ability to change our lives internally and externally, professionally and personally.
- ▶ We have nothing to lose but stress and the voice of an unnecessary taskmaster who is continually demanding more and is never satisfied.
- ▶ We'll gain a sense of peace, purpose, health, mindful leadership, and a good dose of meaning and self-respect.



Kim Richards

“The trouble with being in the rat race is that even if we win, we’re still a rat.”

– Lily Tomlin

DOES THIS CONVERSATION sound familiar? “How are you?” “Oh, I’m so busy, just crazy busy, so busy! The more I do, the more behind I seem to get!”

Yes, that is true. The more tasks we *think* we can do simultaneously, the more we get behind and the more overwhelmed we become. Not only is this present hysteria no longer respectable, but when examined closely, much of it is self-inflicted. Despite the pervasive culture, being over-the-top “crazy busy” is not only an unnecessary, inevitable condition of being in health care, it’s actually detrimental to our health and the health of those we serve. “Busyness” is something we’ve chosen, if only by our acquiescence to it, the outside cultural pressure and feeling of being indispensable, and by how *normal* it now feels. Funny how we can take even the most distorted experience and somehow call it the “new normal.”

Busyness serves to create walls that prevent intimacy and starves any connection between us and others. It pulls us deeper into anxiety and guilt and is insatiably fueled by its evil twin, “Not Good Enough.” Sadly, busyness keeps nurse leaders from more

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worthwhile and important things in their lives, such as authentic, vulnerable relationships. Our collective busyness has become an offensive disease. For purposes of this article, let’s call our state of perpetual crazy busyness the Busyness Disease (BD).

The Message of Busyness

“I’m crazy busy” is code for “I’m overwhelmed, exhausted, on the brink of losing it and don’t know how to get my life back.” Think about the person on the other end of that exchange. How does the “crazy busy” message strike her? Maybe she’s impressed that we’re working on some amazing, important, cutting-edge initiatives, or maybe she’s concerned we’re condoning a work culture that encourages employees to say my life is in total free-fall and that’s ok as long as I’m productive. Is that the message we want to send about our organizational culture?

Our busyness is anything but impressive, especially when coming from a leader. A leader with BD often manifests in overreaction, miscommunication, confusion, poor teamwork, and ultimately a loss of leadership. Anyone in this state of BD is incapable of having any authentic human-to-human connection. In fact, in this fragile state, an attempt at a deeper connection can lead to a complete breakdown. Is that the kind of dark hole, negatively infectious, energy draining, anxiety-producing leader we want to be? Is this the kind of person we want on our team?

Kreider eloquently wrote, “Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice: it is indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body, and deprived of it we suffer a mental affliction as disfiguring as rickets” (2012, para. 10).

Often, leaders see technology, such as computers and cell phones, as their link to a reassurance of being busy. However, if we have BD, we don’t use time-saving technologies to actually save time, we use them to create more work, which allows us to be busier. Social media has replaced real socializing and real community with real friends. The result? We feel isolated and stressed out more than ever.

Quicksand

“Silence, deep listening, and non-doing are often very appropriate responses in particularly trying moments, not a turning away at all, but an opening toward things with clarity and good will, even toward ourselves.” – Jon Kabat-Zinn, *founding Director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, University of Massachusetts Medical School*

As crazy as it sounds, there is a perverse enjoyment that comes from complaining of being “crazy

busy” as it makes us feel important, sought-after, and put-upon. As a result, it can become very difficult to escape. Like quicksand, the more we struggle, the deeper we sink. We struggle for connection, community, and quiet, yet the urge to stay busy and isolated becomes an addiction of sorts. It is a safer place when our heads are spiraling out of control thinking about the past and the future, rarely being mindfully present in the now. If we suffer from BD, we may ask, “Well, why is being present so important anyhow?” Let’s look at this example of a nursing director driven by busyness.

As discussed earlier, BD creates completely ineffective leadership, leading to crisis management and, eventually, paralysis. I recently consulted with a nursing director who was experiencing major leadership turnover in her department. Having known this exceptional leader for years, I was shocked by her chaotic thinking and her inability to slow down long enough to tell me what could help her the most. While trying to handle three or four jobs and multiple projects at once, she had alienated her best support team as well as put herself in serious jeopardy of a total physical and mental breakdown. She was unable to articulate her need for leadership personnel even though she had ample warning of resignations. In the middle of one leadership search, another director resigned.

Her BD had created tremendous department turmoil and her fear of control caused her to overcompensate, trying to “take care of everything.” The loud and repelling message she was sending her support staff was, “I don’t trust you to do your job correctly so I will do it.” When she was asked by her staff to clarify her expectations, it sent her into an emotional orbit. She would ask, “How could they not know?”

During interviews with top-talented candidates, her chaotic BD was blatant and uncomfortably repelling. While the experienced candidates were understanding and willing to support the director, her unfocused energy, rigidity, and desperation only served to turn them off. They struggled to get direct answers from her regarding priorities. Several candidates tired of waiting on next steps and withdrew from the process as she became even more consumed with BD. Experienced candidates do not want to report to leaders infected with BD as they clearly understand that unless desired outcomes can be articulated, it’s a setup for failure.

Ironically, and in a most self-defeating manner, this leader was way too busy to have a meaningful conversation or exchange with people who could help lighten her load. In short time, the director found herself completely unsupported with several key vacancies at a critical time for her hospital and department. She had led her troops full force into disengagement and a culture of negativity, all the while careening into a brick wall. In the end, she spent an enormous amount of unproductive time and energy busily trying to handle *everything*, resulting in her alienation of anyone who could help her. Sadly, she

could not comprehend how this had happened.

The Big Picture

“Few things are more dangerous than a leader with an unexamined life.” – *John Maxwell*

Unfortunately, this type of dire situation and the dynamics they created happen all day, every day in hospitals and other businesses. As a veteran consultant, I cannot remember a time when people were more consumed with BD. A toxic trend, it particularly saddens me as I talk with talented but disengaged leaders and skilled clinicians working in survival mode, so busy they don’t leave time to truly reflect on the big picture and the sole reason they initially felt called to care deeply about healing and providing excellent care to *customers*.

The question arises, “Can a leader be effective without being in constant motion, putting out non-stop fires?” The answer is without a doubt, *yes!* In fact, just as BD makes a leader ineffectual, balanced engagement makes a leader effective.

Tips for Engagement

“For ‘full engagement’ and sustained performance, leaders need to be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused, and spiritually aligned.” – *Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz*

How many times has one of our team members said, “I know we are busy, but could we ...” Or perhaps we have said, “When things aren’t so busy, I really want to ...” Or my favorite, “I am *way* too busy to even think about taking care of myself.” At the risk of offending some, my response is always something like, “Really? Are we *so* busy that we are willing to sacrifice the quality and possibly the length of *our* lives?” Because that is exactly what we are doing in our self-imposed quest for that ever-elusive badge of honor. Only there is no honor to be had. Is that the legacy of leadership we wish to leave? What if we shifted our leadership style by setting an example for others and exerting our immense power and infinite influence to quell BD.

Kathy Harren, regional director, Nursing Institute, Providence Health and Services, Southern California, states: “The handling of multiple projects and demands in the context of self-care is balanced with ensuring these five priorities are in place: effective project planning organization tactics, appropriate delegation, optimized communications, establishment of realistic time frames for goal attainment, and flexibility for adjustment when needed” (K. Harren, personal communication, March 5, 2015).

Pat Patton, vice president, Nursing Operations, Catholic Health Initiatives, relates: “Life is full of ‘crazy busy’ times, especially when our work stream has many different avenues. When I am stressed during my ‘crazy busy’ times, I realize the physical and emotional feelings I have during that time and the

consequences the stress has on my mind and body. I stop, sit back in my chair, take a few deep breaths to clear my head and mindfully reset my focus on my top priorities and letting go of my efforts to multitask. Then I resume my work. If that doesn't seem to do the trick, I will take an intentional 15-minute break and walk either around the perimeter of our office space on our floor or I will go outside and walk around the building once or twice. One of those always seems to do the trick in order to get me out of 'crazy busy' and back to purposefully 'sane busy.' The work hasn't changed, but the way that I deal with it does! When I shift my perspective to 'I *choose* to be effective and sane busy' from, 'I'm completely out of control crazy busy,' I feel less stressed and more empowered" (P. Patton, personal communication, March 5, 2015).

As Pat discovered, when we're trying to busily multitask, each task requiring some level of consideration and attention, productivity falls apart and anxiety soars. Our brain just can't take in and process simultaneous, separate streams of information, encode them fully into short-term memory, and expect proficiency.

When information doesn't make it into short-term memory, it can't be transferred into long-term memory for recall later. If we can't recall it, we can't use it. And presumably, we are trying to learn something from whatever we are doing. Instead of actually helping us, busy multitasking works against us. It makes us less efficient, not more. Not only do we feel overwhelmed and always behind, but our energy infects those around us. Our vibe affects our tribe, so be careful.

Pat adds, "I also consistently plan and take time off to be with my loved ones on short, fun getaways as often as possible to allow me to relax and unplug. I never get so busy making a living that I forget to make a life."

Essentialist Antidote

There is an antidote to the undisciplined pursuit of more: the disciplined pursuit of less, but better. A growing number of people are making this shift. These people are called *Essentialists*.

Essentialists design their lives around what is truly essential and eliminate everything else. They take walks to ponder and think (without a cell phone!). They replace time on social media with picking up the phone to call their friends. They put intentional space on their calendars to get important work done instead of filling up every second. They feel comfortable saying no to activities they really don't want to do, instead of feeling guilty. They insist on techno-free zones in homes. They *talk* to their partners and their kids. They de-clutter closets, drawers, and garages of overstuffed "stuff," and focus attention of things that truly matter. They outsource as much as possible to other people, allowing them to free up more time for more important things.

While BD is a universal numbing strategy, Essentialists practice mindfulness, take vacations,

and leave someone else in charge. They also rest well to excel. Malcolm Gladwell (2008) found the second most highly correlated factor distinguishing the good from the great (the first factor was 10,000 hours of practice) was how much they sleep. The highest performers averaged 8.6 hours of sleep every night.

As University of Houston Professor Brené Brown, PhD, states in an interview with Lillian Cunningham (2012), "It's like those moving walkways at the airport — we've got to really pay attention when we get off them, because it's disorienting. And when we're standing still, we become very acutely aware of how we feel and what's going on in our surroundings. A lot of our lives are getting away from us while we're on that walkway" (para. 16).

Shed the Taskmaster

If we're ready to get off that walkway, hang up the yoke of BD, and not only become a more effective leader but reclaim our lives, we can take a page from the Essentialists. Find a colleague or friend to join us in creating a more mindful professional and personal life. Make a commitment to check in with our partner daily at first, maybe every other day as our patterns change. The buddy system is an effective support system for making lifestyle changes.

Select three things to change, give up, or add to our lives. (The addition must actually be a "subtraction" as in adding 5 minutes of reflective time daily, which can expand to 10 minutes and so on.) Write down this commitment and share it with your buddy. We may want to add taking a walk or add 10 minutes of exercise to our day. We may want to start our meetings by asking everyone in the room to take three deep breaths. See what happens.

See how life changes for us internally and externally, professionally and personally. We have nothing to lose but stress and the voice of an unnecessary taskmaster who is continually demanding more and is never satisfied. We'll gain a sense of peace, purpose, health, mindful leadership, and a good dose of meaning and self-respect. Sound worth it? \$

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