

GET YOUR ENERGY EDGE BACK

What to Do When Life Seems to Suck You Dry

By Joan Borysenko, *Prevention Magazine* October-2004

One winter, I was teaching a personal-growth course on the stunning Caribbean island of St. John. Despite the lush vegetation, aquamarine waters, and postcard sunsets, I was barely there. Months of intense travel—followed by the sudden defection of a key employee—had exhausted my coping reserves. I was a crispy critter, bone tired, and disheartened. By failing to keep track of my energy reserves, I had allowed them to fall perilously low.

Enter Donna Goldstein, a vivacious redhead who was taking my course. We were sitting on a sailboat one afternoon, getting ready to snorkel, when she did what women do best: She spoke from her heart. "You're not looking so good," she told me with sweet concern. "The sparkle, the life force, is gone from your eyes. What's wrong?"

A few minutes of honest conversation uncorked tears of grief and frustration. The frustration was about letting life get so out of hand that I was a basket case. Relief came from telling my story to an affirming and insightful woman. My energy was being sapped not only by a relentless travel schedule but also by a difficult marriage that was a perpetual emotional drain. By trying to sweep it under the rug, I was hemorrhaging energy. The cost of denial – when you lie to yourself to avoid a painful truth – is always exorbitant. Energy is the life force itself. It's like the power in your batteries that keeps your body, mind, and spirit running. Cutting off emotions creates chronic stress, which can lead to adrenal exhaustion, depression, and burnout.

The woman I call Dr. Donna, who is a corporate consultant and coach, became my ally in energy recovery. She explained that many things can deplete a woman's energy. I'd focused on my hectic travel schedule and failing marriage, but as we talked, I realized that other factors were part of the picture, too. For example, I wasn't exercising as much as I had in the past, and restaurant meals were adding unhealthy fats to my diet. And, yes (I know I've covered this topic before, but it bears repeating), my chronic inability to say no scattered my energy in too many directions. These were important insights, but Dr. Donna had some great tricks up her sleeve that helped me go beyond insight to change. One of the invaluable things she taught me – and that I want to teach you – is elegant in its simplicity. She calls it the *well scale*.

Here's how she introduced me to this powerful method of tracking one's energy reserves. That day on the boat, she leaned over and took my hand. With a look of pure compassion, she asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is full and 1 is empty, how full is your well?"

"I'm sucking mud," I groaned, "somewhere below a 1." This was an embarrassing revelation. After all, I'm a mind-body scientist and a stress expert. I knew that my immune system was starting to falter, my sleep quality was poor, and my body felt off-kilter. I was cruising for a bruising. But I needed a little dose of my own medicine to get back to center. Sometimes even the coach needs a coach.

I worked with Dr. Donna for the next year, learning to take better care of myself. The well scale—which I checked several times a day—was an important key to the recovery process. I quickly learned that if the level in the well dropped below a 7, it was a rapid downhill slide to empty, so I'd have to do something restorative in a hurry.



Dr. Donna helped me re-evaluate my priorities, helping me re-energize and refocus my life, resulting in the completion of a successful PBS Special and a new book.

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Dr. Donna and I worked together weekly, then monthly, on the phone. The meetings kept me focused on what drained my energy and what filled my well. I discovered that well-filling activities fall into two categories: things you can do immediately to bring up your energy level, such as drinking water or taking a walk, and long-term life strategies for better health and well-being, like quitting a demeaning job.

The meetings also kept me honest so that I couldn't backslide into denial about how my life was going. Being unconscious is harder when someone is routinely asking you about your life. I'd call Dr. Donna one week and say something like, "The well's an 8 right now, and I'm feeling pretty frisky." But some weeks I might report, "I did my best, but I'm fried today. The well is down to a 3. "

Dr. Donna suggested three more scales to help streamline my work life. For example, I used to take almost every speaking offer that came in, and I was burning out fast. I needed a way to help me decide which engagements to take and which to turn down. The schlep scale measures physical wear and tear. Giving a lecture 2 hours away is a 10. Going to India is a 1. The service scale measures meaning and helpfulness. Speaking to cancer survivors is a 10, while hyping cosmetics is a 1. Finally, there's the pay scale. A lucrative job is a 10, while a pro bono talk is a 1. The more points a job gets, the more reason I have to take it.

With a little creative thinking, you can customize these scales to get a handle on how to use your own precious energy reserves. For example, on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is a lot and 10 is a little), what's the energy cost to you of schlepping Junior to Little League? On the service scale, what's the benefit to his growth and development? If he has lots of other activities, it may be minimal, but if Little League is a source of positive self-esteem and camaraderie, that may offset some of the schlep factor. Is the total of the two scales higher than the value of spending time at home with your child?

The idea of using scales isn't about their being infallible if you reach certain numbers. Their value is in making you more aware of your choices—and their

energetic costs and consequences. Here's a rule of thumb, though: If the very thought of a certain activity or person drains your well, you need to make another choice. Remember, our energy is our life, a vastly beautiful gift that we want to use with joy and in service. Don't waste it.

Keep Your Energy Level High. These 3 simple tips will give you a boost:

- ◆ Use a notebook to keep a daily "How full is my well?" energy inventory for 1 week. Make seven entries, noting your energy level from 1 to 10. At the end of the week, tally up your daily figures and divide by 7. If your weekly average is less than 7, fill your well with exercise, prayer, a drink of water, or a change of pace.
- ◆ Identify and commit to at least one long-range energy booster, such as exercise, that you can integrate into your life.
- ◆ Get an energy ally (a coach or a friend) so you can do some reciprocal coaching. Make an appointment and review your energy goals together.



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