

Mindfully Tuning Out the Tyranny of the Active



Have you ever seen social media accounts of people who are super-busy, who seem to be moving, networking and taking pics of every glorious moment of every day? As I scroll through Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, I often wonder when our culture decided that being perpetually on-the-go and always clutching a long to-do list are quintessentially American values.

It doesn't seem to matter what form this flurry of activity takes. It can be anything from a gym workout, a 20-mile bike ride on a lovely trail, a hiking or kayaking excursion amid vivid scenery, images taken from the stands at a children's event or game, attending a Pinterest-perfect party, or visiting the new, artisanal, farm-to-table restaurant during its opening week. The pressure is on to keep yourself busy, busy, busy.

If you're not able to be super-busy - particularly when you have a chronic illness like MS where fatigue is a hallmark symptom - this can be a hard message to absorb.

I recently read an article about a workplace whose slogan is, "Doing Things Is Better Than Not Doing Things." The article detailed how employees attending meetings are sometimes asked to stop talking and to do jumping jacks in the conference room. As I read about the company ethos regarding business and physical fitness, all I kept thinking about was how someone like me could never work there.

I have nothing against physical fitness, being outside, or being generally out and about in the world - in fact, I think it's great. However, for those of us who have health issues which inhibit

such nonstop activeness, those for whom completing a relatively short to-do list sucks up every last lick of energy we have, we can't live a go-go-go lifestyle, but that doesn't mean we're not "doing things." It feels as though culture is dominated by the tyranny of the physically able-bodied for whom vigorous activity is good, and less vigorous activity is considered bad.

When I'm walking at my slow pace around the college campus where I teach journalism – conserving my energy so I'll be able to teach my classes and then battle traffic during my hour-long commute home – I feel conspicuous, worried that those super-active folks are judging me for inching my way along. Same thing goes for when I have to take many breaks after I've been walking for a long time, say, visiting a touristy area, and I wind up feeling badly because I'm not as active as my spouse.

And these are times when I'm out of the house and active.

When I'm reading newspapers, books, magazines, and online pieces, when I'm grading student papers or writing, I am actually **doing** something. The activity is cerebral, not in the form of leg lifts and ab crunches. But this kind of activity is discounted when you're surrounded by the super-active; it doesn't count as "doing things."

So, what do I do about living in a culture that lauds booking one's day down to the nanosecond and considers that evidence of a life well lived? I'm trying my best to tune it all out.

Now that I have limits on how much I can do in a day and still remain functional, I have to make peace with my dialed-back life and refrain from overscheduling myself. I'm trying to be mindful and to take life at a slower pace. I haven't arrived at a Zen place yet; I'm working on it.

But even if someone waved a magic wand to miraculously cure my relapsing remitting MS and return me my previous energy levels, you **still** would never find me doing jumping jacks during a meeting.