

BLITZING

Can you get through “Crunch Times” without getting squeezed?

I'll never forget the summer of 2002. My twin sister and I were celebrating a milestone birthday on August 20th. In mid-June, I decided to make her a special gift to mark the occasion. That decision took over my life for the next two months!

My sister and I have always been close. For one of our special birthdays (the ones that end with zero) I made her a photo album of her entire life. For the next round number birthday, I made her a music “album” – 50 songs, from the time we were kids to her latest favorites. That left only one option for the next big birthday: a video album of her life. I knew this was a major undertaking – and I'd left it a tad late – but I was determined to see it through.

The summer was a blur. I looked up old friends to reminisce about school days and summer camps. I took pictures of houses we lived in, schools we attended and landmark buildings from our childhood. To make matters worse, I was going all over Toronto in the middle of the Pope's visit – so there were road closures and other complications. It was hot and muggy and I was schlepping my camera equipment around town on public transit and on foot. Then there was the massive job of editing, adding music and special effects. Fortunately, I had help from a brilliant collaborator named Mark Woollard.

There are times when we have momentous tasks ahead of us. Some of these are work-related: accountants at tax season; doctors during flu season; retailers before Christmas; corporate year-end and annual general meetings; starting a new business. Other examples include studying for final exams; building a deck; moving into your first house; preparing a major art exhibit or stage play; writing a university thesis or working on a political campaign. They all involve a tremendous amount of time, effort and energy compressed into a finite period of time. I call it “Blitzing”.

Here are some suggestions to help you handle these intense situations, allowing you to operate effectively but still keep your stress level down.

Think three words: Pacing, Perspective and Permission.

PACING

- Plan the project in advance. Write out a schedule with times for each part.
- Clear the decks. Set aside all discretionary work that is not related to the major task. Make this project your sole priority.
- Assemble the resources you'll need. Arrange for help as needed.
- Take time outs. No one can do high concentration or physically demanding work for hours on end. Regular breaks of even 5-10 minutes will help clear your head, reduce your stress and restore your energy.
- Avoid long hours. 12 and 14-hour days lead to exhaustion and inefficiency. 9 or 10 hours of solid work will serve you better. Sometimes less is more.
- Take at least 1 day off each week for diversion, distraction and decompression.

PERSPECTIVE

- Remind yourself that you're here by choice – i.e. you picked this project or line of work. Blitz times go with the territory.
- You're not alone. Your colleagues, classmates, family members, etc., are in the same boat.
- It's time-limited – most of the stress will end at a defined point in time, (for example, accountants at tax season circle that delicious date in April when life returns to normal.)
- I remind accountants that April is a good month to kiss away on work – it's too late to ski and too wet for golf. You have all spring and summer to enjoy yourself. Adapt this concept to your own season and situation.

PERMISSION

- Give yourself permission to take care of yourself.
- Get adequate sleep. It's vital. All the symptoms of sleep deprivation (fatigue, decreased concentration, reduced short-term memory, irritability, depression) are all also symptoms of stress. Lack of sleep impairs your efficiency, leading to mistakes in accuracy and judgement. And the work takes longer.
- Maintain regular meals.
- Daily exercise is a great stress reliever. Even though basic health habits are mundane and seem dispensable, they're actually more important when you're under pressure.
- Stay away from caffeine and other artificial stimulants – or use them in moderation.

TWO OTHER TIPS

- Plan a vacation or something special to reward yourself after this grueling marathon.
- Start earlier next time so you can avoid the last minute sprint to the finish.

We still enjoy watching my sister's video. It's a priceless memento that was, for me, a labor of love. But for our next milestone birthday, I think we'll all just go on a cruise and leave the work at home!

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