VACATION TIME IS HERE – SO WHY IS *THAT* STRESSFUL?

You know you're in trouble when it seems easier to stay home!

Going on vacation. What could be more inviting? Sun, sand and surf. Cycling, canoeing and sailing or just relaxing on the beach with a good book. This is what people used to live for. How did it ever become a source of *stress*?

Two stories stand out in my mind. The first occurred early in my marriage. We were going on holiday and I had a ton of work to finish before we left. I went to my office after dinner and told my wife I'd be late. At about 2:30 A.M. my office phone rang. My wife said, "Where are you? It's the middle of the night!" I replied, "Isn't it nice that you knew where to find me? Aren't you glad I wasn't somewhere else?" We both laughed. But that all-nighter wasn't the first time I'd worked right up to the last minute to get ready to go away. However, it *was* one of the last.

The other scenario that remains vividly etched in my mind involved an early flight to Florida. The plane left at eight A.M. We were told to be at the airport by six, which meant we had to be up before five. We dragged our weary bodies to the airport, arriving closer to six-thirty. There was an endless line of zombies at the passenger check-in. They didn't look much like exuberant travelers going on vacation. There were only two ticket agents, both working very slowly (I'd love to tell you which airline….but I won't). By 7:30 we were nowhere near the counter and I was getting antsy. People were grumbling, some rather loudly, but the line only moved by inches. When we finally checked in, I grabbed my ticket and bolted for the gate, telling my wife I'd hold the plane.

Wishful thinking. I ran past the check-in gate and down the ramp. Whew, the plane was still there. But the door was closed. I knocked. Nothing. I knocked louder. Nothing. Just then, the plane started to move, ever so slightly. I banged louder. No response. As if in slow motion, our conveyance to Florida moved slowly forward and out of sight, headed for the sunshine while I stood dumbfounded. It was surreal. I'd never seen a plane pull away leaving stranded passengers touching the side of the fuselage.

What did I learn? Well, a few things. One is that vacations can generate stress. Two, preparing for a getaway is hard work. Three, starting a holiday in a state of exhaustion is a bad idea. And four, the plane really *will* leave without you!

In today's busy work world, there are many issues that make vacations difficult:

- finding time to get away from work;
- coordinating your vacation schedule with friends or even your working spouse;
- fear of things falling apart while you're gone;
- fear they'll do fine without you;
- feeling you have to take work away with you;
- feeling you have to check in to the office regularly or to be electronically available;
- dread of the mountain of work and e-mails to plow through when you get back;
- deciding where to go – and how you'll pay for it.

I think it was simpler in my father's day.

Here are some helpful guidelines to ease the stress of vacations:

- Decide what kind of vacation you want: restful, relaxing? active and energetic? adventurous and exciting?
- Keep it simple: Don't make elaborate plans with complex itineraries unless you've got lots of time.
- Start early with preparation. List the work that has to be finished and a plan for completion.
- Leave a buffer day before your departure for last minute cleanups. Don't work until the last minute.
- Delegate tasks or ask for help if needed.
- Arrange for someone to look after your responsibilities and deal with urgent issues while you're gone.
- Prioritize the tasks that really *have* to be done before you leave and which can wait. As you get closer to the deadline, reprioritize if you see you can't get it all done.
- Use checklists: reservations; tickets; passport; what to pack; stop newspaper delivery; ask someone to get your mail.
- Don't tell your office how to find you nor encourage them to do so. Make this a clean break.
- Avoid early-morning departures that require you to get up at an ungodly hour.
- Pace yourself while on vacation. Don't over-schedule. Leave some down time to relax and regroup. Plan an occasional early night.
- Don't take work with you (reading, reports, projects, laptops, etc.)
- Do take enjoyable things – a novel or light reading, crossword puzzles, tennis racquet, playing cards, games.
- Don't call the office to "check in" -- or to see if you're being missed!
- Come back a day early to gear up mentally and prepare yourself for work. Ease back into your routine.
- Plan the first day back as a catch-up day. Don't try to hit the ground running. Leave a buffer day for emails, messages, sorting through material that came in while you were gone. Don't plan meetings or intensive work on Day One.

"Vacation" is defined in Webster's as "being free from a duty or service; an intermission; a period of rest and recreation; a holiday." It comes from the root "vacare" which means "to be empty." Used optimally, vacations can be the stress reliever they were meant to be – and a time to practice *living* again.

Enjoy your summer.