

## MARGIN, LIMITS, AND OVERLOAD

from Dr. Richard Swenson

“Margin is the space that once existed between our load and our limits. Margin is the space between vitality and exhaustion. It is our breathing room, our reserves, our leeway. Margin is the opposite of overload, and therefore the antidote for that vexatious condition. We need more time. We need more space. We need more reserves. We need more buffer. We need, in short, more margin. Yet overload has recently become the majority of American experience. Because of the rapidly changing conditions of modern living—largely due to progress always giving us more and more of everything faster and faster—we are exceeding our limits in scores of areas at the same time. From activity overload to choice overload to debt overload to expectation overload to information overload to work overload, we are a piled-on, marginless society.”

“The contemporary American axiom is to MAXIMIZE EVERYTHING. We push the limits as far as possible. Then we push some more. We work hard, play hard, crash hard. For many of us, that once popular axiom is no longer working. It is time to consider replacing it with a new axiom: LEAVE A MARGIN. Most of us need some time in which to rest and some space to heal. Our relationships desperately need some margin in which to be revitalized. What about limits? Do we have them? All of us? Of course we do. Every person has limits—no exceptions. We see limits everywhere we look. One could even say there is a law of limits, both in our human experience and in the physical universe. We are so accustomed to pushing the limits—even exalting that push—that we often completely skip over the fact that we do have limits. We all do. It is undeniable.”

“There are two generalizations we can make about this topic: 1) Everyone is different—God created us wonderfully and extraordinarily diverse, with endless variations. 2) Everyone is the same. All people on earth are the same in one important dimension—we all have limits, although they vary tremendously from one person to another. For every limit, there is a threshold, and for each person we can draw a line that represents the threshold of his or her personal limits. For each person that line will be drawn at a different place, but when it is crossed, overload results. If we have limits, where did they come from? Are limits the result of the Fall or were they God's idea? Limits were God's intention from the beginning. It was His way of preempting any ambiguity about who is God and who is not. He is the Creator—the One without limits. We are the created—the ones with limits.”

“Many people of great faith assume that God gives them a special exemption to stress overload and burnout. It therefore comes as a great surprise when they too hit the wall. ‘How could this happen to me,’ they ask. ‘I must not have had enough faith.’ Actually, overload, just like influenza, is a nonsectarian pathogen. It strikes indiscriminately. Believers experience overload just like we experience the flu when it comes to town. We have the same limits and susceptibilities as everyone else. As it turns out, salvation solves the lostness problem—of incalculable value. But it does little to solve the overload problem. Sorting through the broad applications of the stress—limits—overload issues takes time. Unfortunately, our practicality and theology have not yet had the opportunity to

catch up to the rapid change around us. We are still trying to figure out where to draw the line between faith and presumption. It is a very important line. Beware of the presumption of overextending.”

“As the author of limits, God put them within us for our protection. We violate them at our peril. God is under no moral obligation to bail us out of our pain if we attempt to do more than He asks. For some, to say that we have limits seems to limit God. But saying that WE have limits in no way suggests that GOD has limits. Far from dishonoring God by acknowledging human limits, it dishonors Him to deny limits. It insults His creation wisdom. It is, after all, His world, His work, and His power. ‘But we have this treasure in jars of clay,’ explained the apostle Paul, ‘to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not us.’ 2 Cor. 4:7 Chronic overloading is not a spiritual prerequisite for authentic Christianity. Quite the contrary, overloading is often what we do when we forget who God is.”

“The fact is, we often get into all kinds of trouble by inflating our role in the drama of life. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why God created limits. He knew that without limits, we would overreach, swell with pride, and become independent. When we are overloaded, how can we tell? Often the first sign we have is pain. Joy has a tendency to disappear. We might develop a variety of physical symptoms. We become self-protective and begin resenting people for needing our help. Irritability, often directed at those we love the most, further damages our attitude and relationships. Overload reminds us of two important truths: 1. We are only human. It is best not to forget it. 2. God, the Author of our limits, will use these same limits freely to remind us that we have need of Him.”

“Since God is the Author and Creator of my limits, then it is probably okay with Him that I have limits. He probably does not expect me to be infinite and is a little surprised when I try. It is okay with Him if I am not all things to all people all the time all by myself. As a matter of fact, it is probably NOT okay with Him if I assume otherwise. You see, it is okay for me to have limits—God doesn't. It is okay to get a good night's sleep—God doesn't sleep. It is okay for me to rest—God doesn't need to. It is probably even okay to be depressed—because God isn't. We do not know a lot about what Heaven looks like, but this much we know: God is not pacing the throne room anxious and depressed because of the condition of the world. He knows, He is not surprised, and He is sovereign. It is okay if we have limits. He is able.”

## **RELIEVING CONTEMPORARY OVERLOADS**

**ACCESSIBILITY:** *Prescriptions for Restoring Privacy to Over-Accessed Lives*

1. Be discerning.
2. Set boundaries.
3. Control interruptions.
4. Tame the telephone.
5. *Disconnect* the telephone daily during the dinner/story hour to protect precious family time.
6. Refuse telephone solicitation.
7. Remove your name from telemarketing and direct mail lists.

8. Avoid cell phones and pagers to protect family boundaries and privacy.
9. Plan a periodic getaway for restoration and healing, even just for the day.
10. Seek solitude in your own environment regularly to build a deeper relationship with God.

**ACTIVITY AND COMMITMENT:** *Prescriptions for Calming the Activity Storm*

1. Reestablish control of your life and schedule.
2. Prioritize activities and commitments.
3. Practice saying "NO" to good things.
4. Consider doing LESS, not more.
5. Protect open spaces in your schedule, and carefully guard the dinner/story hour.
6. Regularly prune extra activities and have a periodic one-week activity fast—total shutdown from activities.
7. Limit long-term commitments.
8. Examine your life regularly and maintain balance in all areas.
9. Restore the practice of Sabbath rest.
10. Trust in God more and do less.

**CHANGE AND STRESS:** *Prescriptions for Controlling Change and Blunting Stress*

1. Slow the rate of change in your home environment.
2. Move less often.
3. Ignore fashions, styles, and trends and don't overvalue newness.
4. Establish stability zones that are "safe havens" where change is minimized.
5. Take responsibility for your own actions and learn to have a Godly response to negative events.
6. Remember that E (Event) + R (Response) = O (Outcome)
7. Develop a network of like-minded, caring friends.
8. Spread goodwill and learn to laugh.
9. Limit your time with negative people.
10. Play Godly music to alleviate stress and decrease tension in the home.
11. Exercise daily.
12. Practice deep breathing skills.
13. Get proper rest.
14. Don't worry—pray instead.
15. Realize that God is in control and set your heart on things above.

**CHOICE AND DECISION:** *Prescriptions for Easing Choice Overload and Decision Stress*

1. Simplify your decision-making.
2. Simplify meal choices.
3. Develop enjoyable routines.
4. Practice contentment.
5. Pray for wisdom in decision-making.
6. Make decisions with the future and eternity in mind.
7. Make decisions and stick with them.

8. Take responsibility for your own choices and decisions.
9. Ignore advertising and marketing gimmicks.
10. Daily rechoose the things of God, remembering that our time and money belong to God. So do our careers and possessions. We belong to God, as well as our family and our future. Only the CHOICE belongs to us.

**DEBT:** *Prescriptions for Defeating Debt Overload*

1. Commit to a budget.
2. Avoid future debt.
3. Pay off debts systematically.
4. Dispose of credit cards or greatly limit their use.
5. Examine your motives for spending.
6. Make spending need-based.
7. Develop an accountability network for spending.
8. Develop self-sufficiency.
9. Simplify your lifestyle and practice contentment.
10. Simplify your meals and eat out less.
11. Let appliances “die in your arms” and stop venerating automobiles.
12. Shop for good deals and enjoy free activities.
13. Simplify Christmas and birthday celebrations.
14. Use debt as an opportunity for spiritual growth.
15. Change your measuring stick for wealth from money to relationships.

**EXPECTATIONS:** *Prescriptions for Correcting Our Expectation Inflation*

1. Realize your personal limits and humbly accept them.
2. Lower your expectations in each aspect of life.
3. Redefine “enough” and concentrate on needs, not wants.
4. Consider the less fortunate and count your blessings.
5. Beware of the rising expectations that accompany success.
6. Tune out ads, most of which breed discontent and create “needs” for new products.
7. Ignore fashions and buy clothes for modesty, practicality and usefulness, rather than status.
8. Simplify holidays, ceremonies, and rituals.
9. Resist inflated house expectations and stop “keeping up with the Joneses.”
10. Free others, especially your spouse, family members, and pastor from your expectations.
11. Yield your rights and expectations up to God.
12. Refuse to serve “life” to your children on a silver platter. Teach them the secret of Biblical contentment, rather than elevating their materialistic appetites and expectations.
13. Free yourself from the opinions of others. If you please God, it doesn't matter whom you displease. If you displease God, it doesn't matter whom you please.
14. Love unconditionally.
15. Practice self-denial and focus on what matters most in the long run and for eternity.

**HURRY AND FATIGUE:** *Prescriptions for Healing the Hurry Sickness*

1. Consciously slow the pace of life.
2. Make technology work FOR you, not against you.
3. Repent of the pride of busyness and concentrate on loving others instead.
4. Ruthlessly eliminate hurry.
5. Slow down and take your time, remembering that persistence is more important than speed.
6. Set an earlier ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) and adjust your ETD (Estimated Time of Departure) accordingly.
7. "Turn back" the clock and have an old-fashioned day occasionally, living life as our ancestors did.
8. Understand the difference between kairos (significant, meaningful, quality time) and chronos (linear, simple, measurable time), and concentrate on kairos in all your relationships.
9. Schedule time to build and rebuild relationships.
10. Develop consistent and healthy sleep habits.
11. Set up a reasonable exercise program 34 times per week and stick with it.
12. Schedule margin time—that space between our load and our limits.
13. Use margin to tame hurry and fatigue, and to focus on the divine appointments God sends your way.
14. Seek to understand the ways and will of God.
15. Rest in the Lord, and rediscover the discipline of patient waiting. "In acceptance lieth peace."

**INFORMATION AND EDUCATION:** *Prescription Antidotes for Datacide*

1. Increase your information selectivity.
2. Use interest as a criteria for sorting and learning new information.
3. Realize it is okay NOT to know everything and it is okay to be finite.
4. Pitch the pile of unread journals, magazines, newspapers, etc.
5. Clear off your desk and file your important papers in a simple filing system, not as stacks and piles.
6. Use the "OHIO" motto for papers whenever possible—Only Handle It Once.
7. Be humble and stay teachable.
8. Don't expect Truth from information; Truth comes only from God's Word.
9. Study God's Word and apply His commands and wisdom to every circumstance of life.
10. Don't neglect education of the heart. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

**POSSESSIONS:** *Prescriptions for Curbing the Clutter*

1. See owning as a liability rather than an asset.
2. Unclutter your home and life periodically.
3. Forget the Joneses!
4. Look, with compassion, at the poor and ill. To do so will deliver us from the bondage of envy.
5. Resist the consumptive, materialistic lifestyle of our culture and reinforce the simple lifestyle through fellowship with likeminded friends.
6. Shop with lists, stick to your list, and avoid window-shopping and impulse buying.

7. Use creativity and resourcefulness to solve problems, rather than money.
8. Stay off the “work and spend” treadmill.
9. Don't conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, through God's Word.
10. Build a spirit of unity within the community by sharing equipment and tools.
11. Adjust your value system to make PEOPLE more important than things.
12. Change your lifestyle to cultivate spiritual growth, instead of concentrating on possessions.
13. Stop measuring success with a “thingometer” and decide on a possession endpoint.
14. Separate “needs” from “wants” and practice contentment.
15. Make room in your life for what matters most: God's Word and relationships. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

**WORK:** *Prescriptions for Averting Work Dread*

1. Ask the “How much work is enough?” question.
2. Rethink the work ethic, put it in a Biblical perspective, and separate it from the success ethic, which is opposed to Godliness.
3. Avoid the extremes of work avoidance and workaholism.
4. Define your identity in terms other than work, making sure work is part of your life, but not the essence of it.
5. Realize that ultimately your identity comes from God, not your job.
6. Take personal responsibility for your choices regarding work and schedules, rather than blaming others.
7. Be cautious of promotions; evaluate positive versus negative consequences.
8. Defend family boundaries and resist unrealistic work demands.
9. Balance family with work and place a high priority on the family.
10. Value Mom and keep her home! If the domestic work of motherhood is lifted up and esteemed, both the family and society benefits.
11. Keep work at work and home at home; don't use work as an escape for problems at home.
12. Consider working fewer hours or making a job change if the stress is too high.
13. Increase work flexibility and decrease work pressure through simplicity. Remember, overspending leads to overworking, in order to pay bills. Simplicity and contentment frees us up.
14. Leave a financial margin between earning and spending, and learn to be content with less.
15. Bring the Kingdom of God to bear in every situation—relating to others in Christian love, not as with the “wisdom of the world,” which is foolishness in God's sight.