

What do you think of when you hear the term “Super Woman?” Give me some feedback.

- She has it all together
- She balances work, motherhood, running a home, being a good wife
- She fulfills her potential
- She is happy doing it all

We get the picture of a juggler with a lot of balls in the air, or with spinning plates teetering on the brink of a great crash. Heaven forbid if anyone were to add one more ball, or grab her leg or fail to keep up as she moves to the next thing.

I. **What is the Super Woman Syndrome?**

It is an inner motivation that drives a woman to fulfill all the responsibilities and enjoy all the pleasures of the various hats she wears – individual, wife, mother, daughter, career woman, homemaker, and so on. It is thinking that if she just keeps trying she will get it right, everything will align and her life will be balanced.

It is a myth. It will never happen, but we think that every other woman out there is getting it right. Every other woman is calmly, competently, and with good cheer pulling off the balancing act.

Syndrome—any set of characteristics regarded as identifying a certain type or condition.

So, what are the characteristics that identify the super woman?

I am going to give you some statements and as I read them I want you to give yourself a rating from 1-5, 5 being "That is so me, I do that all the time," to 1 being "I rarely if ever think or do that."

1. You struggle with feeling overwhelmed, stressed, behind, or frantic.
2. You typically run out of hours in your day to get the things done that are on your to-do list.
3. You feel guilty because you are not doing more, or spending more time with the important people in your life.
4. Feeling worn out and exhausted seems normal.
5. You are a squeeze-as-much-into-your-day kind of woman.
6. You find yourself getting irritable and impatient over little things, or things that take longer than planned.
7. You are doing things because you feel the pressure to measure up to what others are doing.
8. You have stopped enjoying life.
9. You feel the need to prove yourself to others --your mom, your in-laws, your friends, your husband, or yourself.
10. Your schedule is so packed that there is no room for an emergency, an interruption, or even a great opportunity.

Now add up your points.

40-50 pts – (Get your cape-you're a super woman) You are about to crash and burn, desperate help needed.

30-40 pts – You need to do some evaluation of your life and make some changes. (Avoid adding "Get fitted for a cape" to your to-do list.)

20-30 pts – Look at the areas where you rated yourself high and make some changes before you get caught in the SWS.

I don't think any of us start out thinking we want to be a super woman. We just want to do what needs to be done and we want to do the best that we can. Most women put a lot of effort into their work, their relationships, and their children, because they care. But along the way something happens. The Super Woman Syndrome kicks in. We become a woman who is driven to do more, do it better, or try harder.

II. How did we get here?

A. A changing society

We live in a society that over the past 3-4 decades has placed increasing demands on women. Women are more educated, better equipped and capable of being excellent career women, and are more independent financially and emotionally. A lot of this change has been brought to us by women for the good of women. These changes have not only been adding possibilities and opportunities to our lives, they have also been adding new responsibilities and added stress to our lives. Not only can we do more, there is the added expectation that we should do more.

Economically women are able to contribute to a family's well-being, and even stand on her own, in a way that women have never been able to in the past.

Today our American culture is:

- Performance driven – a person's worth is determined by how well she performs, how well she looks
- Fast paced - Our world is so fast-paced that we have this fear that if we don't jump on the roller-coaster we will completely miss the boat – how do you like that for mixed metaphors.
- Fulfillment-oriented – We need to live up to our potential – pursue a career and strive for success. This is your best, most productive time of life, don't waste it.

B. Time deception

We think that we have more time to do things because we have modern conveniences. We have dishwashers, washing machines, fast food, already cooked meals available at the grocery store, instant messaging, fax machines, etc. Unfortunately what these time-saving conveniences have done is give us more time to work or to fill up with activity. And now we have to make instant and quick decisions, or we may lose the opportunity.

We have a fear of time being lost. "I've got to do it now or I'll miss my window." This goes for fulfilling career dreams and family dreams. "My biological clock is ticking." We feel like we have to take advantage of our opportunities now, or we will miss them.

C. Increased number of choices

The opportunities available to women have exploded. We can have a career, be in a tennis league, join a gym, be involved in the PTA, the library board, volunteer at church, and the list goes on.

The choices we have for our children is also overwhelming. We can home school, or put them in private school or public school. We can sign them up for acting lessons, music lessons, French lessons, baseball teams, hockey teams, dance teams, and cheerleading teams. The list goes on.

And we feel guilty if we don't maximize our opportunities, and do what we can to fulfill our potential and our children's potential. We want our children to experience every opportunity. We have this feeling that we owe it to them.

D. Explosion of voices

Women are feeling the pressure of the expectations of others.

Not only are our mothers opinionated about what we should be doing with our lives, our friends are telling us what they think we should do.

Then there is the media--it bombards women with expectations. Just look at a magazine rack and peruse the headlines, or click through infomercials, or the current talk shows. We should be sexier, thinner, have

firmer abs, be sure we are including anti-oxidants in our diet, have the latest fashions, and get botox injections to get rid of the worry lines and other wrinkles.

And of course, we have our own yearnings to make something of our lives – to go back to college, to start a new business, to develop our gifts and abilities, to take time out for ourselves, go to the spa, get a massage, etc., etc. -- and the voices around us are telling us we have the right to do those things or should do those things.

E. The traditional roles of wife, mother and homemaker

We add to all of the above the traditional roles of wife, mother, and homemaker—you know, the wife who lovingly cares for, respects and encourages her husband, fixes his meals, shows him affection, sits with him while he watches football, and passionately loves him. And there's the mom, who has time to read to her kids, is there after school, helps out in the classroom, lets their friends come over, and makes chocolate chip cookies. And she's the homemaker who joyfully does her household chores like laundry, cleaning the house, planning the meals, cooking, and organizing.

There does not seem to be room in life to do all the things that are expected of women in 2008. If we are trying to do it all, there is a price to be paid. Something has got to give.

III. Problems and Consequences

A. Stress related problems

Stress is becoming the number one threat to a person's health and well-being in today's world. The levels of stress are on the increase in our society and the effects of chronic stress are broad and deep.

Stress is defined as physical or mental tension that is caused by urgency or pressure. Stress occurs when the demands we face outweigh the resources we have for dealing with it.

1. Health problems

Stress takes its toll on our bodies. We are more likely to catch colds and other infections because our immune system is compromised when we are under chronic stress. Other health problems that result from stress include high blood pressure, heart problems, stomach problems, and susceptibility to life-threatening diseases.

2. Fatigue and burn-out

Stress drains us of energy. Oftentimes we don't sleep well because of all the pressures and worries in our lives, or we sleep less because we are trying to get it all done. We have very little time, if any, to restore our energy supply, and that is when burn-out occurs.

B. Emotional problems

1. Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural by-product of the Super Woman Syndrome. We fear that all the plates we are juggling will all come crashing down. We worry that we won't be able to meet the deadlines, get our children signed up for that all-important class, be able to pay their way to college, or miss another day of work because of sickness. We are living on the edge and anxiety is the natural result.

2. Discouragement; Depression

When you are chronically overstressed, your emotions get worn down and discouragement and/or depression become very common emotional battles.

C. Relationship problems

When we are on overload it affects our marriages, our children, our friendships, and anyone who gets in our way.

1. Anger and resentment

When we are busy and are working hard to be effective and efficient so that we can get everything done, we often leave no room for grace or patience. We need things done now. We need to be there 5 minutes ago. We don't have time to deal with problems, and even a small thing can result in us getting angry. We also take things personally, because we have been put out by it. "Why don't you pick up your socks? Don't you think I have anything better to do with my time than to pick up after you? You are just doing that to make me mad!"

There is a verse in the Bible that says: "Be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger..." This verse goes on to say that our anger doesn't accomplish anything good. It only makes matters worse.

2. Disappointment and critical spirit

When others don't live up to our expectations, we often become disappointed and have a critical spirit. With as busy as our lives are, we expect others to do their part and to do it well and without our help. We put our timing and our agenda on people. When we think our way is the only way, we end up alienating those we love. We may end up doing things over (to our satisfaction), or we end up doing it all because no one can do it quite as good, or as fast as we can. And then we complain, "Why do I always have to do everything around here?"

3. Pushy and Demanding

Super women often have the tendency to push their children to perform, to stay on task, to not make messes, to not cause trouble. These are good things to be teaching your children, but the most genuine desire to help your children succeed can get twisted until you are being pushy. I hate to say it, but often we do this because our reputation is at stake. We need to prove that we can do it all, and having well-behaved, smart, athletic, clean and neat children shows that we can.

A Note on Perfectionism

- Perfectionism is the constant desire to be flawless. Women with this tendency take extreme efforts to achieve a faultless performance. It may occur in their appearance, how their house looks, how well they do their job, or how their children look, behave or perform. The standards are so high that they are practically impossible to achieve, but perfectionists will keep working at something until they are satisfied – sometimes into the wee hours of the night.
- Perfectionists are hard to live with because they are rarely satisfied or happy—no one ever lives up to their standards or does things as well as they should. Perfectionists do what they do to be admired, to be loved, or to be accepted. The problem is the very thing they want is often the thing they end up pushing away.
- Ask yourself the question: Is it worth damaging the relationships with those I love? Then make yourself sit down and enjoy another's company, and put those things that are eating at you to get done out of your mind. I can just hear you saying: "I can't relax until I straighten things up," or "I can't think with this mess." Well, get over it. If you keep this up you will most likely get to the end of your life with your house looking beautiful, your "t's" crossed and your "i's" dotted, but with no one who likes to be around you.

D. No reserve

At the pace of life the Super Woman lives, she lives so near the edge that there is no place for things to go wrong, surprise opportunities, or a much needed break. For example, if you have a fender bender and your emotional and time reserves are gone, a relatively minor incident becomes a crisis.

If you haven't figured it out yet, in life, the unexpected happens more than we expect. It's pretty good advice to *expect the unexpected*? Life is full of unexpected events, but somehow we think it will never happen to us and we often don't prepare for emergencies. We have maxed out our time, and our schedules have no margin in them. There is no room for anything out of the ordinary. Then when something does hit us unexpectedly, we are overwhelmed. We just can't do one more thing. There might be moments when all seems to be running according to the plan, and then the unexpected happens. Your mom gets sick and you're the only sibling who lives close enough to care for her. Her care adds hours of time to your week that you don't have time to give. Something has to go and we are unwilling to make that call.

Without reserves, a difficult time becomes an unbearable time.

IV. Escaping the Super Woman Syndrome

The great news is that you don't have to do everything. It takes courage and an inward determination, but you can actually change the pace of your life so that you can enjoy your life and the important people in it. I know that sounds like a dream. And for some it may sound impossible. You may feel like it's hopeless, but let's look at some ideas that might help.

A. Know thyself

This famous Greek saying is good advice and the Bible agrees. One of the greatest challenges to escaping the Super Woman Syndrome is the challenge of finding the courage and time to look inside. What is driving you to do all this? Do you hear your mother's voice? Are you trying to keep up? Is your pride at stake? Are you trying to prove your worth as a person or as a woman? Are you just doing it because everyone else is doing it and you think it is the thing to do?

1. Fearing people

Proverbs 29.25 tells us that fearing people brings a snare to our lives.

"Fearing people" is when you let them control you (whether they are trying to or not). You try to live up to their expectations (or your perception of their expectations). It's exhausting! I have heard women say, "I'm tired of trying to make everybody happy. I just can't do it anymore." You can get to the point where you feel like a puppet with others in your life holding the strings. Perhaps you are pulled between your mother crying for you to spend more time with her, and your husband's complaints that you are spending too much time with your mother. And we haven't even started with the kids or your friends!

If you find that this is what drives you, learning to proactively take control of your schedule will be a key step forward. If you are in a responding mode, you will be very susceptible to the expectation (or perceived expectations) of people around you.

For example: Proactively schedule rest for yourself. If you don't, and someone asks if you are free, you are at their control, but if you've scheduled time for rest, you can honestly respond, *sorry, I'm booked up.*

2. Trying to prove yourself

Sometimes, our obsessions with perfection and overwork don't come from others, it is an inner compulsion. You feel the need to validate your worth by keeping busy.

There was a great Christian leader who had a plaque on his desk that reminded him to *beware of the barrenness of a busy life*. Busyness does not equal fullness and it is critical for you to clearly understand this. Your value does not come from exhausting yourself, but that brings up an important question, "where does your sense of value come from?" For me, knowing that I am created in the image of God and that he desires a relationship with me has given me a deep sense of security and significance and has set me free from the need to *prove myself*.

3. Sense of obligation

Many times we can't say no, not because we fear people, but because we have a sense of obligation that this is what *we're supposed to do*. (who made all these rules anyway) When we have kids, we feel like we *have to* give them the opportunities that our friends are giving to their kids. The problem is that we're comparing ourselves to 5 or 6 other women, none of whom are doing all that we are doing trying to keep up with them.

Other times, we feel if our husband asks us to host an occasion that we don't have the right to say no.

Women who have an overactive sense of obligation find the word YES coming out of their mouths before they've even thought about it. If this is you, learn to put a hold on your yes until you find a moment in quiet to think through what the cost will be. Take some time to think through your schedule, talk through the evening with your husband to find out his expectations for the evening, make sure he knows what's going on in your life and if, after that, it makes sense then the 2 of you can decide whether it's a good idea.

Realize that usually saying yes means you will have to say no to something else.

B. Evaluate your life

1. What's important?

I like to start this time with prayer and ask God for wisdom (James 1:5).

Get some time with your husband or alone and think through the question: What is really important in life? This will be your basis for deciding what to do and what not to do.

One thing that helped Steve and I was the question, what do we want to be able to say about our kids when they leave the home? We decided we really wanted them to be people of wisdom and character who were in love with their God. This helped us decide which activities our kids would be involved with and which they wouldn't. It really protected us from the temptation to get our kids overly involved in sports and other activities. (One sport a year)

Another great question is, what qualities do we want in our marriage? You may decide that a raise, multiple jobs, or a bigger house isn't as important as a great marriage. Those decisions can save you a lot of stress!

2. How do your commitments stack up in light of what is important?

a) List all your commitments and regular activities

What are your daily, weekly, monthly commitments and responsibilities? This may shock you to see how much you are doing!

b) Question what you are doing and how you are spending your time.

Ask yourself some hard questions:

- Which of the things in my life reflect my priorities and values?
- Which things are not productive?
- What could be put off until a better time, or until later?
- What do you need to spend less time doing?
- What do you need to spend more time doing?
- What things do **you** need to be doing, or could you delegate, hire out, or train your kids to do?
- What is not getting done?
- What would you like to be doing that you are not doing?

C. Choose what is excellent

As you are evaluating your life, you will probably come to the conclusion that there is too much stuff in your life. Paul in Philippians 1:9-11 prayed that our love would be guided by knowledge and discernment. Discernment is that ability to choose what is best, to see what is useful and helpful from what is not. It's often been said that the greatest enemy of the excellent is the good.

There are so many good things that we can be doing for ourselves and for our children, but we can't do everything! We have to learn to make wise choices. How do we choose the few best things from the many good things?

This takes courage. Here are a couple of suggestions

- Don't make snap or emotional decisions that have long range consequences.
Do not be afraid to say, "I'll have to think about it." This can be hard, especially when others want a decision right now. Don't let people pressure you into fast decisions. One of the best things I ever learned to say was, "Let me talk it over with my husband." Salesmen hate this response, but it has saved me from the pressure sell and from making poor decisions. It also helps me consider the affects my decision will have on my family.
- Evaluate commitments in light of priorities
- Realize that every *yes* implies a corresponding *no*.
We can't be continually piling new commitments on to our lives.
- Evaluate your commitments on a regular basis
Choosing what is excellent means you have to take time to evaluate the decisions you make on a regular basis. It doesn't mean always saying "no" without thinking. Some advice given is "Just say no," or "Practice saying no." You may be saying no to something good and beneficial. But then it is important to realize if you say yes to something, you may need to eliminate or say no to another activity to make room for the new. If we just keep adding things, we get into the Super Woman Syndrome.
- Don't let well-meaning people control your commitments
People love to give advice. Our mothers, friends, Oprah, Dr. Phil . . . everyone has an idea as to how you should live or what you should do. It's important to develop the skill of giving a gracious reply to suggestions, advice, expectations, or invitations. "Thank you for that suggestion (for your input, for your offer, for letting me know). My husband and I will consider it as we make our plans (our decision)." You don't have to do things because others think you should.

D. Take time to bring intentionality to your day, week, and month

The key here is to begin the process of taking control of your schedule and building time in for the things that are truly important and will actually build the reserve that will help you live for the long haul. The key is to picture your life as a marathon rather than a sprint.

Develop time each week where you can quietly evaluate your last week and look at the upcoming week. Do you have open times in your schedule for catching up and resting? Have you allotted adequate time for the important responsibilities that can get shoved to the back? Does your week look like you are trying to squeeze in that last responsibility?

As you look at your week, you will begin to develop a sense of what is overwhelming you. You'll begin to see what the *good* things are that are getting in the way of the *excellent*. You will see that some things that, in the moment, feel very urgent, aren't really all that important. Journal what you are learning and observing about yourself.

If you do this for a few weeks in a row, you will begin to see patterns in your life. After a month, start making some decisions about changes you need in your commitments, responsibilities, activities, and other time expenditures.

For example, you may discover that . . .

- you are watching too much TV and that it's not as relaxing and refreshing as you thought it was
- that e-mail is taking up too much time
- that you have some friends who take up an inordinate amount of your time while complaining about their lives
- you run errands haphazardly which takes too much time

It's amazing how much wisdom you can gain simply from making these observations. Now begin to apply this wisdom to your life. If you're married, talk with your husband about the changes you need to make to your life and family.

V. Final thoughts

Prepare for the non-perfect life – for interruptions, for messes, for the unexpected. One author calls this adding margin to your life. He says, "When you reach the limits of your resources or abilities, you have no margin left." So plan margin into your day. Save money for the unexpected. Don't plan out every minute of your day. Allow time for your kids to pick up a Roly Poly bug, or for you to stop for a cup of your favorite coffee. Plan to arrive early, and then if there is traffic, you can still arrive in peace.

Make time in your life for rest, relaxation and enjoyment. Allow this for your kids and husband also. We do not need to be productive and efficient all the time. In fact it is destructive to your life to be on the go 24/7. God created us with the need to rest and get rejuvenated so that we can carry on with life. Keep regular sleep habits. Allow for down time. And take one day a week to break the frantic pace of life. God set us the example when He took 6 days to create the world and then on the 7th day He rested.

Jesus has an invitation to the Super Woman. He says: "Come to me all who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)