

OUT OF TIME

When work and activities take up all your so-called free time, how can you find a minute to be yourself?

“I feel like I’m indoors all the time,” says Michael Colley, 18, a junior at Mount Vernon High School in New York. “I miss going to the park, seeing movies and relaxing.”

Megan Thornton, 17, a junior at Cumberland Valley High School in Mechanicsburg, Pa., says: “People always tell me that life is only going to get more hectic in college. But I know it can’t possibly get any worse than it is now.”

Michael and Megan have the same problem: overbooked schedules. They spend more time on their extracurricular activities and jobs than on their homework, and more time on their homework than with their friends. And they’re just two members of a generation of time-challenged teens: 66 percent of you told a *React* poll that you don’t have enough free time.

“Adolescence is so much more competitive,” says Penny Peterson, psychologist for Montgomery County, Md., public schools. “It’s no longer enough to get the lead in the school play or be hockey captain: You have to do those things and be head of the student council and hold down your job at the mall.”

Many teens say they overload their high school schedules in a race for college admissions. “I did all kinds of activities in high school and was busy all the time,” says Kim Warhurst, 18, a freshman at Butler County Community College in El Dorado, Kan., near Wichita. “My guidance counselor said that activities look good on your transcript—that you’ve got a better shot at college scholarships if you’re extremely well-rounded. And the adults in charge of each activity all

expected you to put their activity first.

“I’m still busy all the time,” Kim says. Most days, she gets back to her room after midnight, after classes, homework, time at her college newspaper and a part-time job at Wal-Mart. Her schedule, she says, forced her to give up some of her high school activities: “I had to quit violin and softball because I had to focus on future goals.”

Megan had been pursuing a career in music, practicing piano, flute and voice each for a half-hour a day, but has now changed her focus. “I know that I’d have to put in more time and effort than I’m willing to at this point,” she says. “There’s too much time involved in practicing. I’d rather have time to talk on the phone with my friends. There’s more to life than practicing piano, flute and voice all the time. I’d rather have more balance.”

For other students, social pressures, not schedules, keep them working into the night. “Kids in my school seem really rich—they’re wearing a different North Face jacket every week,” says Aryanna Fernando, 18, a senior at Beekman High School in New York City. Along with dance practice and pottery class, Aryanna has held a series of jobs to earn the cash she feels she needs to keep up with her peers. “I don’t want to be a slacker,” she says, “and because I’m a senior, I get much less sleep than ever before.”

There are some benefits: Kim says working on school publications is preparing her for a future as a writer. David Skeist, 18, a senior at the Dalton School in New York City, says that his singing group, chorus and

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school play give him a built-in social life: “Putting on a production with a bunch of people makes me feel proud, part of a team. But by belonging to various groups, I don’t get stuck in one clique.”

But there are risks to stressful, fast-paced days, such as skimping on sleep to squeeze in homework late at night or at dawn and then relying on caffeine and junk food to reenergize. “I’m seeing an increasing number of teens with stress-related physical complaints—gastrointestinal problems, insomnia, headaches and trouble staying awake in class,” Peterson says. And when overwhelmed students turn to alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs to stay awake all night, to get to sleep or to reduce emotional stress, an impressive high school transcript can turn into a ticket to the hospital, she says.

To prevent a stuffed schedule from sucking the joy out of life, Peterson says, ask yourself this question: Do I no longer have time for things in my life that give me joy—like time with family or friends or the hobby I used to love? If so, it’s time to make a change.

“It takes courage to turn things down, but you’ve got to do it,” she says. “Eliminate a couple of activities. It’s much better to involve yourself in two or three activities and really excel in them, rather than spread yourself too thin with things you only have time to do halfheartedly.”

Take Your Time Back

If your schedule is threatening to swallow you whole, try following these tips for stopping the stress.

Kick Back

When you finally make it home, Dr. Peterson recommends that you take some “mental health” time for yourself. Before starting your homework, lie down on your bed for a few minutes or have a quick chat on the phone. The break will give you a chance to switch gears from soccer to geometry. Kim says she listens to classical music and takes long drives in the country to relax. Michael watches videos. Herbal baths and meditation work for Aryanna.

Don’t Panic

Are you afraid that if you’re not involved with every activity at school, you won’t make it into the college of your choice? Don’t be. For one thing, Peterson says, “You might juggle all those activities and still not get into your dream school.” On the other hand, many schools are often more impressed by students who did amazing things with one or two time-intensive activities than by those who joined 15 groups they couldn’t have spent that much time with.

Find a Sympathetic Ear

Megan tells her parents whenever she feels like she’s drowning, and it pays off. But if you can’t imagine making the changes you need in your lifestyle to cut your stress—and your parents can’t help because they don’t understand the pressures you’re under—ask a guidance counselor for help. “Sometimes you need to hear from your parents, your coach or whoever that it’s OK to shift priorities—that it’s crucial for your sanity,” Peterson says.

—Jennifer Kornreich

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