

PROBLEM SOLVING

How to deal with round-the-clock work pressure*Friday, July 16, 2010***SUSAN PINKER****Dear Susan,**

Wherever I am, I can never leave the office. Fifteen years ago, I had more wiggle room on deadlines. Clients now expect me to be accessible 24 hours a day, and most ask for a quick turn-around. ... I admit that I find it hard to say no in this financial environment, and also feel distant from some of my colleagues, who compete with me for many of the same projects. I'm almost 60 but feel like I'm worse off than I was earlier in my career. Retiring is impossible as I'm still supporting a family. Is there anything else I can do to relieve the pressure?

– It's BlackBerry Season All Year Long Where I Live**Dear BlackBerry,**

Yes, you can set firmer boundaries around your personal time, some of which you should use to gain a little perspective. Even if your question is a fine late-career wake-up call, there are other, equally probing ones that would add depth to your one-note lament.

Have you asked yourself if your work day is more interesting than it was 15 or 20 years ago? Do you have greater responsibility and more variety on the job? Are you learning and earning more than you did before? Can you now delegate the small or menial stuff while keeping the more appealing jobs for yourself?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, that's a huge accomplishment. Your challenge now is to gain a sense of proportion while protecting some leisure time as a reward for your success.

One way to acquire perspective is to consider the working lives of your parents and grandparents. On average, mid-career employed North Americans are out-earning, out-living, and enjoying far more luxurious lives than their ancestors did, a trend that holds in all industrialized countries, and indeed much of the developing world, writes Matt Ridley, in his new book, *The Rational Optimist*.

Despite our moaning and groaning, Dr. Ridley shows that our lives – including our work lives – are improving dramatically with each generation. Rich or poor, three-quarters of us now have cellphones and televisions, not to mention a car, and live a life of untold largesse, according to the standards of the 1920s through 1950s, he writes. Leisure time has increased, though we now enjoy it in smaller chunks. Parents, especially fathers, are spending more time with their children, and kids spend more time in school rather than going out to work at an early age.

Dr. Ridley reminds us that "in 2005, compared with 1955, the average human being on Planet Earth earned nearly three times as much money (corrected for inflation), ate one-third more calories of food, buried one-third as many of her children, and could expect to live one-third longer." The average person was also more likely to be educated and, like you, using his or her brain, rather than back muscles, to put food on the table.

These huge advances are thanks to our species' collective intelligence, according to Dr. Ridley – the shared knowledge, the division of labour, and the basic level of trust that puts that BlackBerry in your pocket in the first place. Instead of feeling tethered to it, consider it a lifeline to ideas and contacts, or an escape route from putting in face time at tedious meetings.

If your existential problems have taken centre stage, an urgent need for sustenance and the monotony of mindless work have faded as real problems. This may seem a gloss on the old "So you think you've got problems?" approach, but it's also a technique that cognitive therapists call "reframing," and it works.

Happiness – not to mention your ideas about success – hinge on context and your current mindset. A host of studies have demonstrated that our level of satisfaction is tied to our perception of how we're doing in relation to friends or relatives. What we're convinced will thrill us in the future – a new house, a new car, early retirement – usually doesn't.

So how do you gain more control over your time? Start by designating one evening a week, and one day of the weekend, to power down your electronic devices. Spend that time as you will, but don't forget to set aside a few minutes to remember just how far

you've come.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog on the science of human relationships can be found at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind>

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