

Good Housekeeping

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De-Stress Your Weeknights

If your evenings are a blur of cooking and chores, here's how to find more family time instead



Most women know the toughest part of the day — whether the exact time is 5 to 7 p.m., or 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., it's when commuting, chores, dinner prep, and homework meltdowns all collide. My personal black hole comes around 6 p.m., when I'm usually speed-marinating frozen chicken and dashing to check e-mail in my attic office while wrangling my three kids who sound like this: "Where's my piano folder?" "Who took my iPod?" "Ow, I got a paper cut!"

This time is tough for a reason: "We're juggling multiple tasks in a very short window when we are tired, hungry, and irritable," says Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*. All told, it's not a recipe for relaxing family time. To help improve your early evening hours, try these survival tips.

1. Never run late again

Getting behind schedule is a major factor in witching-hour frenzy. Karen Leland, author of *Time Management in an Instant*, says that simple denial is often the culprit. "We soften and blur the realities of how long it takes to get from point A to point B," she says. (Telling yourself that running into Starbucks for a latte will only take two minutes, for instance, doesn't make it true if the line at the counter is 12 deep.) To help you stay on time, we've gathered these tricks.

- **Work backward.** "Begin with the end in mind so that you can figure out, in reverse, what it will take to meet your deadline," says Leland. If you plan to have the kids in bed at 8 p.m., for instance, you need to finish dinner by 6:30, which means the food needs to be on the table by 5:45, and so on.
- **Imagine the worst-case scenario.** Murphy's Law is always in play during rush hour, so why not factor it in? Always include a 10 to 20 percent time cushion for the mini emergencies that trip you up and make you late — heavy traffic, a last-minute phone call, misplacing your keys, parking hassles.
- **Have a getaway plan.** If you get hung up by someone who's super-chatty, Susan Newman, Ph.D., author of *The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It — and Mean It*, suggests, "Very visibly pull out your car keys and hold them in your hand. They are a concrete reminder — to yourself and others — that you need to get going immediately." Is the other person still yakking? Wave the keys, take a step back, and say "Sorry, gotta run — we'll catch up later," adds Newman.

2. Outsource what you can

- **Tame that stress-inducing pile of schoolwork.** Train kids to put permission slips, tests, etc. in folders marked for each child that you can review in the relative calm after dinner, says Donna Smallin, author of *A to Z Storage Solutions*. "To get kids to use their folders, put a love note or dollar inside now and then for the first few weeks," she adds.
- **Find another set of hands.** Having a helper to play with younger kids, fold laundry, or walk the dog is a godsend, says Diane Chapman of Briarcliff Manor, NY, who occasionally hires one from 4 to 7 p.m. Check your local middle school or church; expect to pay \$5 to \$12 per hour.

Next: [Myths to bust now](#)

3. Myths to bust now

Banish these beliefs and downsize your end-of-day stress

- **"I've got to get my evening chores done."** Sure, there are times when there isn't a single clean sock in your house and you must do the laundry. But, says Mandel, many women pile on the tasks unnecessarily, just for the sake of checking off items on their to-do list. Instead, focus on connecting at the end of the day with family — and yourself. "Each night, move one of your usual tasks (paying bills, Swiffering the kitchen floor) to the A.M., when you're clearheaded — even if it means getting up 15 minutes earlier," advises Mandel. Or reslate them for the weekend, lunch hour...whenever you can nab five minutes.
- **"I must multitask to survive."** The human brain literally cannot do two things at once, says Sandra Bod Chapman, Ph.D., chief director of the University of Texas at Dallas Center for Brain Health. "It quickly toggles back and forth from one task to the other, taking its toll on our efficiency," she notes. Some multitasking is fine — chatting with the kids while chopping onions, for instance — but for more involved tasks, Chapman recommends asking yourself, "Does this require my full attention?" If the answer is yes, either focus on that job or save it for later. You'll actually conserve time, she adds, because doing chores sequentially is proven to be faster than running back and forth between them.
- **"Electronics ease my stress."** Actually, the opposite is true: Paying too much attention to the TV, computer, or BlackBerry adds to your anxiety levels and distracts you from family during the witching hour, says Chapman. To remind yourself to unplug, write out a "Stop!" list for the hectic predinner hours, she suggests. "It might include 'Stop answering e-mail after 5:15 p.m.' or 'Stop talking on the cell phone when picking up the kids,' or 'Stop playing *Bejeweled* once everyone gets home.'" Enforce these policies family-wide, as Janet Schofield did recently after she noticed her 15-year-old son, Zack, texting under the table. "That's when dinner became an electronics-free zone," says the Beaver Falls, PA, mom. "We actually have conversations at dinner now — and the evenings feel a lot more peaceful."

4. Change your mind-set

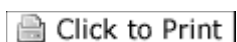
- **Find your "sweater moment."** Having a physical routine when you walk through the door — remember Mr. Rogers swapping his jacket for a comfy cardigan? — helps you and kids transition when they're most likely to be clamoring for attention and your nerves are frayed, says communications expert Laurie Puhn, author of *Instant Persuasion*. "Don't say, 'Mommy needs five minutes,' since kids often don't understand time," says Puhn. "But they do understand a physical action like changing your shirt. Say, 'Hi, guys — I can't wait to hear about your day. Stay here while I change my clothes; I'll be right back, and then we'll catch up.'"
- **Laugh at the chaos.** The next time you're driving to the music store at 7 p.m. because your son forgot to mention he was out of saxophone reeds until (when else?) the night before the band concert, remember this: "See the humor in your crazy nights," says motivational speaker Leslie Charles, author of *Bless Your Stress*. If you didn't have such an overflowing, full, and productive life, weeknights would be a lot calmer — but also a lot more boring.

5. Say yes to not cooking.

To avoid late (and cranky) dinnertimes, why don't you...

- **Triple your recipes.** I've never been able to spend weekends cooking and freezing dinners ahead of time. Instead, I cook every third night, tripling recipes (chili, lasagna, etc.). I freeze two portions, and then alternate what I serve. With frozen microwave veggies, we're good to go.
- **Use the buddy system.** Try the same trick, but extend it: Michele Borba, author of *12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know*, has friends who each make and freeze two casseroles every week and then trade dishes so everyone has a stocked, varied freezer.
- **Pick up dinner at lunch.** When I worked for a newspaper, I'd often grab a rotisserie chicken while at the deli for lunch and then stash it in the office fridge. No one ever said dinner had to be homemade.

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