

OVERDRIVE



ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY
FROM OVERWORK TO LIFE BALANCE

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Introduction

It was approximately 6:15pm that Wednesday in October and the room felt hot. I began to sweat, and a dizzy feeling came over me. I got up to go outside, but not before texting one of my classmates to let her know I was not feeling like myself, and in case I didn't return, to come to the restroom to get me. I also gave her my husband's number, just in case.

On my way to the restroom, I decided against it and went outside instead to call my husband. When I got him on the phone, I told him I felt really "off" and he suggested I go home right away. Heeding his advice, I went back to my classroom to pack my things and advise my professor. He took one look at me and said go, because I did not look like my usual self.

On my way to the parking lot, the feeling intensified and I began having a creepy feeling that I shouldn't get into my car for a 20-mile ride home. Undeterred, I kept walking toward my truck while sweat poured down my back and my vision became more blurred. I felt faint - I knew I would not make it.

Just then I saw another student whom I did not know, and as she came closer, I heard myself saying these words to her: "hello, we don't know each other but my name is Sharon Gill and I am about to pass out. Please hold my hand and call 911 or campus security." The alarmed young woman took my hand and eased me gently to the floor of the parking lot and called campus security. At this time, I felt close to losing consciousness, but quickly called my classmate to let her know I was in the parking lot, on the ground, and for her to call 911. With the little strength I still had left, I called my husband, told him I was not well, and to wait for a call with instructions as to where I will be taken, then hung up.

Right at that moment I heard the sirens of the EMT unit, voices from a gathering crowd, and the shouts of my classmates who had come looking for me in the dim parking lot. I ripped my jacket off because the heat emanating from my body was suffocating and the next thing, I noticed was the EMT workers on the ground beside me attaching blood pressure bands, EKG straps, and a bunch of other gadgets.

Suddenly I heard my classmate screaming that my blood pressure was 220/110 (I later found out that she was telling my husband on the phone). I was then removed from the parking lot to the back of the ambulance and while the men worked quickly and seriously, I felt an intense calm and confidence that God was in control of the situation.

Chapter 1: Overdrive



I have always lived my life in overdrive, especially since I turned 35. It really kicked up a notch when I hit 40 and felt a new-found confidence I hadn't experienced before.

I felt at that time that I could do anything, and that nothing was too challenging. I embraced change and new adventures. In 1997 I co-founded a law firm with my husband which quickly grew and began to rack up awards and accolades.

In 2003 I retired from a successful career as a CEO in law (and, contrary to popular belief, I am not a lawyer). I started Oasis Compassion Agency, a charity that empowers the less fortunate to attain self-sufficiency. Although I didn't ask for it, my work there received much attention and recognition from the community.

My husband took the opportunity of my retirement to merge our law firm with another firm, which at that time was one of the largest law firms in the country.

In between all of this, in 2005 my husband and I founded a church, in a lower income neighborhood and I became a minister to women and youth. Little did we know that our church would become a haven for many young people in our community. We essentially became a grassroots youth ministry.

Due to a lack of support among the parents and older folks in the community, that church downsized and closed its doors in late 2008. However, shortly after that journey my husband was asked to serve as an interim pastor of a large Baptist church which covered the latter part of 2009 through early 2010. By mid-2010, he went back to practicing law full time and I was eager for God's new assignment.

In August of 2010 I decided to attend Palm Beach Atlantic University with the aim of completing my bachelor's and obtaining a master's degree. I subsequently enrolled in a dual degree program scheduled for two days each week from 6pm-10pm.

At this point in my life, I was fully engaged in building and growing the non-profit, supporting my husband in his return to full time law practice, being a mom to two teenagers both of whom were a year off from attending college themselves, and supporting my aging mom who lived with me.

Despite engaging in all these pursuits, it never occurred to me that I was in overdrive! Juggling a growing non-profit, a family, a church, my marriage and a master's degree seemed normal to me. Many friends would say things like, "How do you do it," but I didn't think anything of it. I thought they were crazy for not being as "engaged" as I was!

Then suddenly in 2011, my life began to unravel in a major way. The seams began tearing at the ends.

In February 2011, my husband received word that his law firm (the large national firm) was about to collapse and he essentially had approximately 6 weeks to contemplate his next move. At the time, his division had about 38 employees, some of whom had been part of the merger in 2003. My husband had two choices: go out of business with the collapse or start over with his own firm. We chose the latter and reopened our firm in March of 2011 with me returning to manage the law firm.

The pressure and stress were about to get worse. On May 1, 2011 my mother who had just celebrated her 80th birthday a month prior, suffered a massive stroke that paralyzed her right side. Hospitalized and unable to walk or enjoy life the way she once did, my mom expressed to me that she had no desire to live. I silently grieved the loss of my mom as she once was; my chef, companion, best friend and more. I knew then that my life and her life would never be the same again.

When all of this happened, I was attending college two nights per week, running a public charity and a private law practice. I was also spending time each and every day at the rehab facility with my mom, juggling two teenagers who were also dealing with the emotional loss of the grandmother who helped raised them and took care of their many needs, and of course, my husband.

I continued this hectic pace from 2011 until that fateful evening in October 2013.

Chapter 2: Doctors and Hospitals



After the EMT crew determined that I did not have a heart attack or stroke, they quickly rushed me to the nearest hospital where I was treated with an anti-anxiety medicine, kept under observation for a couple hours and then sent home.

My blood pressure which had skyrocketed to over 220/110, subsided to safer levels with a few hours of calm.

Once home I felt normal but somewhat winded. Over the next couple of days, I kept feeling like I was the shadow of my former self and within a few days of being discharged, my husband drove me to the emergency room of a local hospital. After a quick examination I was admitted due to high blood pressure.

Further and more intensive tests were performed during my two-day stay including but not limited to echocardiogram, brain MRI and chest x-ray.

All tests came back negative and I was once again discharged without any medication as my blood pressure had normalized on its own.

I continued my schedule as usual with only a slight moderation. I felt like I was operating at 80% of my capacity, but I was so used to having a packed schedule that it could be argued that my 80% equated to an average person's 150%.

Approximately 3 weeks after my second hospital discharge, I was preparing for a strategic planning meeting at my law firm when I felt as if my body shifted down several gears. Now I felt like 50% of my capacity, not enough to pull off a high intensity meeting with lawyers and managers. I decided to head home and asked my son to drive me. On our way home, the feeling was so intense that I became anxious and decided to go to a walk-in clinic.

On my arrival there it was determined that my blood pressure had spiked again and at this point the doctor decided to administer blood pressure medication. Their initial dose was too potent for me and it sent my blood pressure plummeting too quickly! They eventually got the right dosage and later discharged me with a prescription and advice to follow up with my primary care doctor.

My primary doctor ordered several blood and urine tests and thus began an extensive search to determine the source of my woes. My condition was described as "malaise" which is the term used in medicine when no one really knows what's wrong. My doctor even suggested at one point that I should see a psychiatrist, but I knew I was not crazy, and neither are you!

I was referred to neurology and cardiology for follow up and further testing. After several visits both determined that there were no findings. I was then sent to an ENT specialist because I kept feeling dizzy and was checked for vertigo but no findings there as well.

By now I was beginning to have many anxious thoughts and mini panic attacks due in part to my inability to feel like my old self. At some point my doctor decided to take me off the blood pressure medicine the clinic had prescribed but I would have regular spikes in my blood pressure which in turn made me anxious which in turned made my pressure higher. Soon I was going to the emergency room weekly, only to be turned around once I arrived or sat down for a while as my pressure would right itself.

I finally went to see my gynecologist at the prompting of some older relatives and friends. After a blood test was conducted, it was determined that I was in the middle of menopause. Her diagnosis was that I was suffering from a convergence of menopause and chronic stress! I was unable to gauge the onset of menopause which involves irregular periods because I had a partial hysterectomy 5 years earlier.

This diagnosis seemed to answer a lot of my questions.

Chapter 3: Xanax and Friends



To control the sudden anxiety attacks that I was experiencing, my primary doctor as well as my neurologist suggested I take Xanax as needed when an anxiety attack occurred. That made me more anxious as the thought of taking a pill filled me with dread. I had heard stories about Xanax and was not sure I wanted to be a part of that. However, one night while I was home, I had one of those attacks and decided to try one. There were no bells and whistles. I did not feel high or even low, but I did feel like I had an appetite.

After a couple more episodes I decided that I did not want to become addicted to Xanax, so the doctor prescribed a low dose pill called Buspar (Buspirone is the generic name), due to its non-habit-forming nature. I took it as prescribed for a couple days and then quit because I am truly averse to medication. I was still having anxiety attacks sporadically but was trying to tough it out.

During this time, I began to withdraw from normal activities and preferred only to hang out with my husband and kids. I still did not feel like my old self, the woman who could spend hours on the phone encouraging friends or family. I felt tired and overwhelmed all the time.

My doctor asked if I felt depressed and I honestly did not, but I did feel frustrated.

One day during this time a friend of mine from church sent me a text that she felt led to take me to the beach. I felt an instant bout of anxiety because a few nights prior I had dreamt that I was drowning at the beach, and on a previous occasion my husband and I were walking on the beach and I could hardly finish the walk because I literally felt paralyzed.

I kept telling my husband that I could not feel my feet. I later found out these were all symptoms of chronic stress. When my friend called, the last thing I wanted to do was to go to the beach, but I knew in my heart I was not a coward or a quitter, so I agreed to go.

Sitting on the beach and having the water wash over my feet as I buried them in the sand, and sharing with my friend the work of Jesus in my life as she shared similar testimonies, was a turning point of this difficult journey. We sat for a couple of hours and I felt the waves taking my fears out to shore with each passing moment.

When I returned home, I felt like I had conquered one anxiety that day. I had more to conquer in the coming weeks, like my new-found anxiety about driving and being in public places, but this was a start.

A couple weeks later one of my best friends decided to pay me a visit from Atlanta, and in her own words she was coming to get me up and get me out.

She is an avid beach lover and quite an uplifting person. On her first night at home with me, she gently encouraged me to give the Buspirone another chance, so I took her advice and within 12 hours I began to feel more like my norm. I was able to attend church the next day and not feel terrified and overwhelmed by the crowd. I began to feel a lot less anxious.

We took several trips to the beach, to dinner and was even able to do some minor shopping. I felt more normal. Life was pumping back into my veins. Laughter became my companion when she was around, and she began to remind me of who I am and what I meant to her and others. I slowly regained my confidence and my strength. After she left, I was visited by other wonderful friends who stopped by my home with breakfast, coffee, lunch, and their special brand of encouragement.

I also received a lot of energy and advice from my relatives, some of whom had or were experiencing similar symptoms. On one such occasion one of my relatives who had no idea what I was going through was able to describe in detail the symptoms and feelings I had been experiencing but found difficult to describe or explain. That was another turning point for me. I realized that I was not alone in this suffering.

A search on the internet further confirmed that there were thousands of women having similar symptoms. Some of my symptoms were stress related and some were menopause driven. It did not matter which was responsible for what. Together they were almost unbearable and would have done me in if it were not for family, caring friends, and relatives, and for my greatest friend of all, Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4: By Faith



During my anxiety period, I would have a lot of trouble sleeping. Like clockwork, every night between 2:00-3:00am, I would awaken to knots in my stomach and beads of sweat on my forehead and on my back.

It was terrible. I decided to use my bible app to play the Psalms so I could sleep. This helped to calm me, but I still had the anxiety knots.

Traditionally, whenever I've had a faith crisis, I would read the book of Matthew for a faith boost.

This book in the Bible tells several practical stories of Jesus challenging the faith of those who required healing. It always reminds me that I have a responsibility in my healing.

I must exercise faith and not doubt. I must believe in the source of my healing, Jesus Christ. As I was re-reading the book of Matthew for the umpteenth time, I was reminded of the faith of the woman with the issue of blood (Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48).

A quick synopsis of the story recounts a woman who had been seeing her period for 12 years; been to many doctors to no avail and thought if she just touched the cloak of Jesus she would be healed. That is faith in action. She exercised her faith and Jesus, knowing her intentions, looked at her and told her to *“take heart, your faith has healed you”*.

With this story fresh in my mind one night, I awakened to the tightening stomach and sweaty forehead and decided I was done with it. I was going to exercise my faith. I know everyone had said that menopause brings hot flashes and anxiety, so this was the new “normal”, but mine felt abnormal. I decided to put my faith into action that night. I gripped the edge of my pillowcase and in my mind I pretended that I was gripping the edge of Jesus’ cloak.

I began to pray fervently asking God to take away these horrible knots and this foreboding fear and that I would not let go of this pillowcase (Jesus’ cloak) until it stopped. I wrestled in prayer for what seemed like an hour as sweat poured down my back, leg and every other exposed area, and my stomach churning like a cement mixer. After some time in this position I felt a sense of calm and peace, and that was indeed the last night I woke up in knots.

Some may think this is far-fetched, but the thing about faith is that it is personal. Jesus often says in the Gospels, “according to your faith”. He even challenged a father who was seeking healing for his son, but whom He knew had little faith.

The man had come to Jesus with that half-doubt statement; *“if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us”*. Jesus immediately picked up on his doubt and challenged him with this statement, *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* This is a fascinating exchange and one of my favorites in the bible. The story is found in Mark 9:17-29. I suggest you read it for yourself.

During my journey back to health I stumbled across an author I knew very little about by the name of Immaculee Ilibagiza. She is a survivor of the Rwanda genocide and wrote two great books on faith; ***Left To Tell*** and ***Led By Faith***. I highly recommend them as a faith strengthener.

These two books reminded me that life is a journey, and everyone has a unique one. Some journeys are more difficult than others, and as I read Immaculee’s story of faith after so much tragedy, it put my own journey in perspective. It is a human tendency to become self- absorbed, and hearing stories of survival, strength and amazing faith can be a great antidote to depression and personal anxiety.

Prayer changes things. Prayers of faith that is. During difficult moments is the time to gather your prayer and faith warriors around. I am fortunate. I am married to a man of great faith who is my earthly anchor. I am also buffeted by the faith of my mother, aunt, cousins, and friends. Surrounding myself with positive people was very important to my recovery.

I also discovered that having even one conversation with a doubtful, negative person can do a lot to undo your faith and belief. It is important to guard your mind, hearing, and eyes from negativity when you are not feeling strong. It is also important to note that the time to develop your faith is not during a crisis, but before one ever occurs. The crisis is the opportunity to put it in practice.

Chapter 5: Let's Get Moving!



I was sitting on my back porch one day, feeling like I will never be fully normal again when suddenly, a text popped up on my phone.

It was from one of my daughter's college friends, Ross, who was studying Sports & Exercise Science.

The gist of his text was that he heard I was ill and was lying around the house, but I needed to get up and start moving, hit the gym and become super-active so I can get back to feeling better!

It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I trusted him, and I recalled some similar advice from a couple of relatives. There was a gym in my community, so I decided to go and check it out.

At first it was difficult because I was still struggling with dizziness but after a few days an amazing thing began to happen. The steeper the incline on the treadmill and the more I sweat, the less dizzy I felt, and my blurred vision began to clear up.

I started sleeping better at nights and my anxiety began to subside more quickly. It was remarkable. I was able to stick to the routine because my husband became my partner. This is important because on the days that you lack the get up and go, you need an encourager to get you moving.

I also began going for walks in the early morning with hubby. First it was one mile, then two then soon we were up to four. Each mile I took, the cobwebs on my eyes melted away. Another improvement brought on by my newfound athleticism was a noticeable decrease in my blood pressure and my resting heart rate. I increased my water intake and reduced my sodium consumption. I added vegetables and fruits and minimized sugars and starches.

I began to look better and feel better. It was amazing. I realized that my previous attempts at the gym each January was more about becoming a size 6 than it was about health. Now I attend gym and eat right because I want to be healthy and live longer. I am more conscious of labels and nutritional content, serving size, portion control (at times \square), and stay stocked up with my Whey Protein, vitamins, and supplements (check with your doctor before starting on vitamins and supplements).

It became apparent very quickly that whenever I would take two or three days off from exercising, my body would begin to feel “heavy” and I would revert to my previous symptoms of dizziness and anxieties. On my follow up doctors’ visits, the doctors were encouraged with the progress they saw and, in my follow, up test results. Ross’s advice that day was the antidote I needed.

Chapter 6: Stop and Smell the Roses



Rest. That sweet word, so often overlooked yet so needed.

One of the more important lessons I learned during this period of illness was the importance of rest.

When we are well, we cannot seem to find the time to rest, get enough sleep, take a vacation, go for a leisurely stroll, etc.

However, when we are unwell, the last thing we want to hear about is work.

We are placed on forced rest, which is totally unenjoyable, and somehow our companies and businesses can get along without us. Choose rest before you are forced to.

My “downtime” lasted almost eight months and I think that was because that’s the amount of rest I owed my body. I tried in my own effort to bounce back to work sooner, but I would go to work, do a half-done job, and come home feeling ill again. I asked God several times to heal me quickly so I could get up and go again, but God kept whispering, “rest my child”.

Several years ago, a busy executive friend of my husband, told him to remember to “stop and smell the roses”. It had seemed kind of odd, but he told my husband that the rest recharges him and allows him to return to work with more and better creative ideas. I knew this fact as well, but with many competing agendas, I overlooked it.

I decided to take the time to get back in tune with my inner self, with nature, with God, family, and friends.

I went for nice long walks alone and with hubby, I read, swam in the pool, swam in the beach, went for coffee several times per week, watched old movies, laughed out loud, and relaxed, relaxed, relaxed. I made up for lost time and it felt great. I know that my mind, body, and soul thanked me for it.

During this time, I discovered the benefits of deep breathing and meditation. Both things helped to relax my mind, body, and helped to quell my anxieties.

As I rested and relaxed, more of my symptoms melted away. They say that “time heals all wounds.” Rest does so as well.

Any remaining anxieties not squelched by my exercise regimen, was taken care of by my forced time out.

Chapter 7: Final Words



In the weeks and months since my episode, I've heard from many women who are experiencing similar symptoms and who are confused about what to do. They feel alone and misunderstood by those around them, including their closest family.

It's my hope that this e-book will provide some comfort and a starting place for those who don't know where to turn. For women who are not experiencing any of these symptoms, perhaps this book may give you some understanding for that friend or relative who is going through a similar ordeal. Many of the issues are stress-related so it can affect women at any age.

Women who have the added burden of menopause and hormonal imbalance, I propose that you consider the steps I outlined in this book.

To recap:

1. **Recognize the symptoms and seek medical help.** Don't assume anything. Get checked out by a doctor and eliminate certain conditions. Place yourself under medical care and follow your doctor's instructions.
2. **Spend time in the word of God.** Read inspirational and uplifting books. Spend time in meditation and deep breathing exercises. I recommend the app from Headspace. It's a great start to guided meditation and teaches you how to deep breathe.
3. **Surround yourself with a great support system of friends, family, and medical professionals.** They are critical to you maintaining your sanity. On the other hand, to the extent you're able to, try and eliminate negative influencers and negative talk about whatever you're experiencing.
4. **Change your diet.** Add more fruits, vegetables, and water. Take doctor approved supplements such as multi-vitamins and minerals. Reduce sodium and sugar intake. Add fiber and reduce excessive carbohydrates. Limit your alcohol intake.
5. **Become active.** Raise your heart rate by doing cardio exercises. Join a gym or purchase a treadmill and some free weights. If possible, get a gym buddy for support on the days when you don't feel like moving.
6. **Rest.** Take time to enjoy the outdoors. Go on walks. Learn to say "no". Maintain a balanced schedule. Take vacations and days off. Watch a movie with friends. Laugh a lot.

Remember you only have this one life.

You need your health to truly enjoy it and to help others.

Live, Laugh, Love, and remember, Faith, Family and Friends!

Please visit our website at www.sharongill.com for more information on my work and many other topics of interest.

You can also book a free 30-minute discovery call with me at this link. <https://calendly.com/faithbasedcoach/discoverysession>



Disclaimer: *This e-book was not intended to give medical advice and you should always discuss your symptoms and conditions with your doctor.*

I became very close to my doctors and consulted with them frequently.

I subjected myself to a battery of tests and while at times it felt frustrating, my doctors always reminded me that tests served to rule out conditions and give peace of mind.

You should also discuss taking supplements with your doctor as many “harmless” over the counter drugs may affect your prescription.

Update:

I want to share a deeply personal update that has profoundly impacted my life since the initial publication of this book in 2015. On November 18, 2021, I was diagnosed with Stage 1A, estrogen-positive early-stage breast cancer. My tumor measured 1.4cm with no node involvement. I underwent surgery and a few sessions of radiotherapy, and I am incredibly grateful that I did not require chemotherapy.

Throughout this challenging journey, I owe my resilience and recovery to the unwavering support of my faith, loving family, cherished friends, and the uplifting embrace of my faith community. This experience has further solidified my commitment to maintaining a vigilant approach to my health, prioritizing mindful nutrition and physical activity.

The statistics concerning cancer in the United States are disheartening. It is reported that 1 in 3 Americans will face a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime, and 1 in 8 women will be confronted with breast cancer specifically. While we cannot eliminate the risk, taking proactive steps to nurture your health, both spiritually and physically, remains your most potent defense.

Undoubtedly, life can surprise us with unforeseen challenges, but it has been demonstrated time and again that a strong and harmonious connection between body, mind, and spirit can significantly enhance our ability to navigate adversity.

As you continue your own journey, I offer my heartfelt blessings. May your path be filled with strength, resilience, and an abundance of well-being. May God bless you on your journey.