

## MINDFULNESS

# How to escape urgency culture (and live a calmer life)

PSA: life isn't supposed to fly past in a blur. Here, specialists explain why urgency culture is harming our health – and how to unlearn the rush response

BY PENNY CARROLL

**I**'ll sleep when I'm dead!" quips one meme. "You have as many hours in the day as Beyoncé!" declares another. Maybe you've caught a few of these 'inspirational' messages while scrolling social media – or maybe you missed them while you were responding to work emails during your kid's basketball game. Welcome to the minefield that is urgency culture: the societal pressure to be constantly available, productive and switched on.

It's not a new problem but, like our lives, it's rapidly accelerating. You can thank modern technology ushering in an age of convenience for that, says Dr Rebecca Ray, a clinical psychologist and the author of *Small Habits for a Big Life* (Pan Macmillan, \$25). "There's this assumption that because things are more convenient, we should be able to do them quicker," she explains. "That sounds really seductive, especially if we tie our sense of self-worth to what we can get done in a day."

Add a pandemic into the mix and you have a recipe for a stress spiral. Working from home (or anywhere you can access Wi-Fi) has obliterated our last remaining disconnection rituals, says performance coach Elana Robertson, who helps people swerve burnout with her program Sustainable PACE. "The collapse of defined work and life spaces has illuminated our inability to create boundaries, because in the past we were reliant on workspaces to keep them separate," she says.

Of course, there are some people who thrive on the stimulation of a jam-packed calendar. But for many of us, the urgency – and accompanying stress – has only intensified. And it's seriously hurting our health.



DR LIBBY WEAVER

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“Not only do we suffer physically when we have the constant and relentless production of stress hormones, but it also affects us mentally – and our psychology feeds into the problem. So it's a bit of a vicious cycle,” says nutritional biochemist Dr Libby Weaver, author of *Rushing Woman's Syndrome* (drlibby.com, \$25).

This always-in-a-rush feeling triggers a flood of the stress hormone adrenaline, explains Dr Weaver, which communicates to our bodies that we're in danger and activates a host of biochemical changes in response, like ramping up blood pressure and redirecting blood flow to limbs to help us flee. This would be fine if we were being chased by a lion, but “you haven't actually been in danger. You've just been producing a lot of adrenaline from all the perceived urgency,” she says.

And when the pressure never really dissipates, these physiological changes can start to settle in, leading to a cascade of chronic health issues such as disrupted sleep, high blood pressure, digestive disturbances like IBS – even impaired fertility. “We have to understand the information we are giving our body, so that we can override these ancient mechanisms by telling it the truth – which is that we are thankfully relatively safe – to begin to switch off some of these responses,” she says.

Problem is, this message can be especially hard to send when the world is telling us that staying on life's treadmill is vital for acceptance in our communities, Dr Ray points

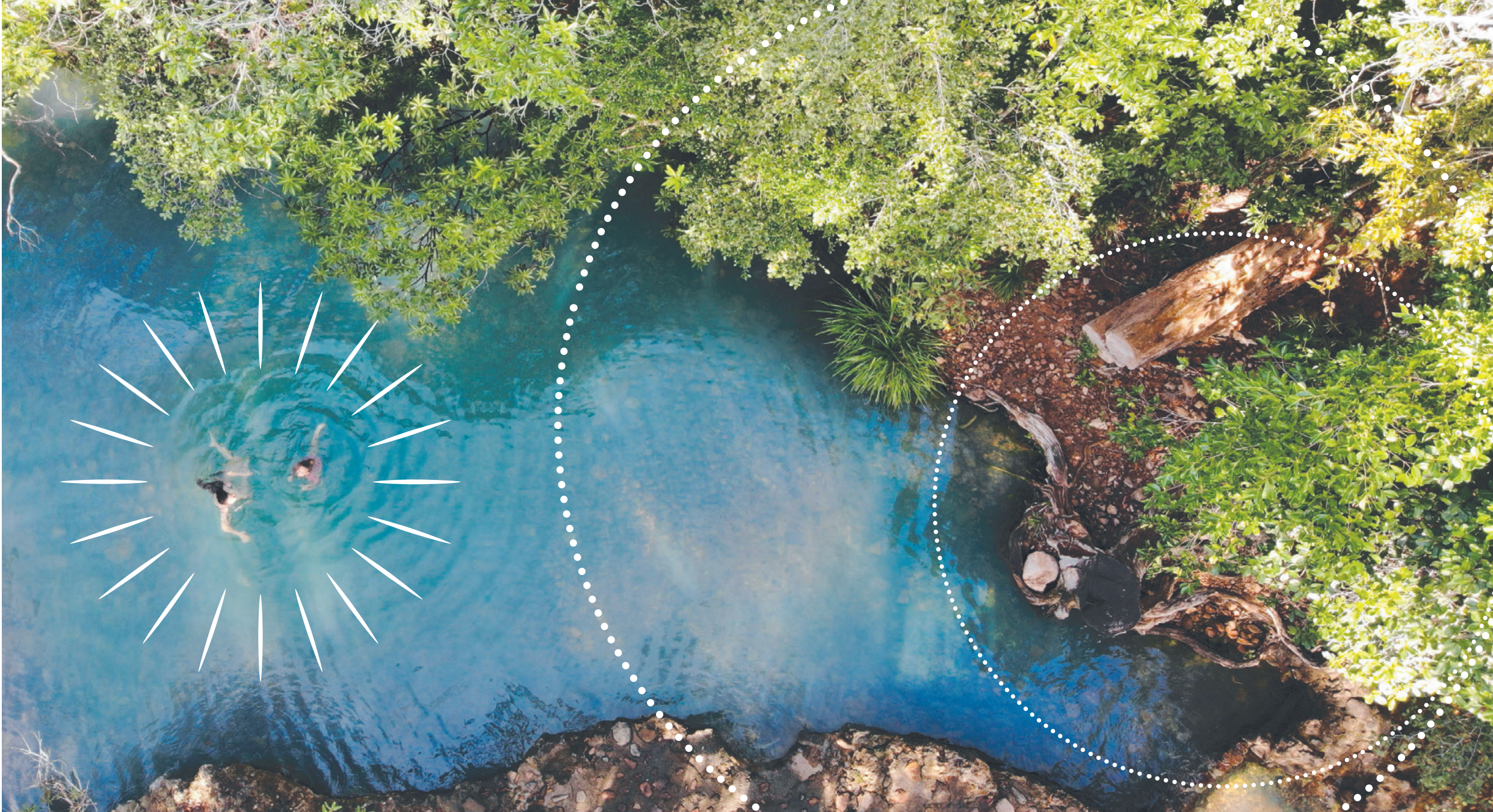
out. “We get caught up in looking at the scoreboard of life, rather than how we're playing the game.”

You've probably heard that meditation, yoga or 'slow living' practises, like growing your own food, are the antidote to our fast-paced world. But if that sounds laughable in the context of your never-ending to-do list, know that even the smallest change can have a big impact. “I call it cultivating 'white space' in your calendar,” says Dr Ray, adding that this can be as little as five minutes playing with your child, or stepping away from your desk for lunch. “When you have this space available just for you... it can allow you to come back to yourself.”

Urgency culture tends to reduce our capacity to realise when our batteries are drained, adds Robertson, so embracing white space can also help you restore that important life skill. “The more we build our self-awareness muscle, the more we're able to recognise what life looks like when we're in thriving mode.”

But, as Dr Weaver notes, perhaps the most important question to ask yourself is: what are your values? “I don't mean ethical preferences, like kindness or generosity,” she says. “I mean, what does your life demonstrate that you value? Because when we live with a lot of urgency and someone asks us to a social occasion, for example, we'll say, 'I don't have time for that.' And what that really means is, 'That's just not a priority for me right now.' We need to try that statement on to see how comfortable we are with it.”

PHOTOGRAPHY: NARELLE BOUVENG, KATE CRACKNELL



## Break the cycle

Use these tips to dismantle your own whirlwind tendencies

### TRY A BRAIN DUMP

Feeling overwhelmed? Set a timer for 10 minutes and jot down all the to-dos circling your mind. “This allows you to take perspective,” says Robertson.

### HARNESS YOUR BREATH

Dr Weaver recommends this quick stress-buster: draw a rectangle and run a finger along the short side, inhaling slowly for four. Next, run your finger along the long side, exhaling slowly for six, and continue around the rectangle several times.

### NOURISH YOUR BODY

Overworked adrenals need extra vitamin C, B and magnesium, says Dr Weaver. Get a dose from leafy greens and colourful veggies, packed into speedy omelettes or a casserole that you can batch and freeze.

### LOOK TO THE FUTURE

“The question I come back to is, ‘What will my 80-year-old self think?’” says Dr Ray. Use this to determine what tasks are truly important to you – and what needs to come off the to-do list.

### BLOCK THE MORNING

Rather than scanning social media or emails first thing, have a meeting with yourself, suggests Robertson. “Check in with how you're feeling. Then look at what's in your calendar and decide whether that's possible or not.”

## “I MOVED INTERSTATE TO SLOW MY LIFE DOWN”

Dr Renee White, director of postpartum care service, Fill Your Cup, quit a high-pressure legal job – and what she learnt changed everything



“In 2020 I was in the thick of COVID lockdown in Melbourne, working as a patent attorney at home with a toddler. In the intellectual property world, decision-making and deadlines can cost both the firm and your clients a lot of money, so the pressure was high. I was a chronic teeth grinder and my headaches and jaw pain were severe. I also had extreme difficulties sleeping.

So I decided to take a step back and retrain in a role that would make a difference to mothers like myself who felt this level of urgency. What I didn't realise was my daily stress was about to increase one-million-fold. Managing clients, marketing and home was arguably more chaotic than attorney life.

I did that for a year, but I just couldn't keep up. So I said to my Tasie-born husband, ‘What would our life look like if we moved to Tasmania?’ We were one of those crazy families who bought a house off the internet!

Moving to Hobart was exactly what I needed – it forced me into a more intentional lifestyle. I hired business coach Fiona Killackey, who gave me permission to slow down. I've limited social media to 15 minutes per day, I no longer have notifications on my phone, and I only check emails twice a day. Exercise has been fundamental to the change in my physical and mental health, and at night I journal or read a book and do a yoga meditation.

There are days where I slip back into that level of urgency, but I'm now better able to say, ‘Stop. Is that really urgent?’ And that comes back to having people around me who remind me it's OK to slow down.”