Praise for *Laziness Does Not Exist*

"What a breath of fresh air. This is the book we all need right now! We are burnt out. We are operating under subconscious beliefs about productivity and busyness and worth that are depleting us daily. And we are making ourselves sick and miserable in the process—but there's a better way. This book will help you understand 'laziness' and look at yourself (and others) with compassion, and create a more sustainable and joyful life."

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—Nashville Ledger

"While the exploration in the book is nuanced and thorough . . . Price's book does not argue that hard work isn't good or that we are without flaw. Instead, it asks us to go deeper to understand what a world oriented around helping people thrive, rather than dismissing them as lazy, may look like."

—Chicago Tribune

"In their conversational and engaging first book . . . [s]ocial psychologist Devon Price makes the thoughtful and science-backed case for why laziness is not only acceptable but necessary."

—SHELF AWARENESS

Laziness Does Not Exist

A Defense of the Exhausted, Exploited, and Overworked

DR. DEVON PRICE

ATRIA PAPERBACK
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

First Atria Paperback edition January 2022

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Interior design by Jill Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-9821-4010-6
ISBN 978-1-9821-4011-3 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-9821-4013-7 (ebook)

For Kim,
who taught me that if a person's behavior doesn't make sense,
it's because I'm missing a piece of their context

Contents

— INTRODUCTION —

How I Learned I Wasn't Lazy

I have a reputation as a productive person, but that reputation has cost me a lot. To the rest of the world I've always looked like a put-together, organized, diligent little worker bee. For years, I managed to balance professional success, creative output, and activism without letting anybody in my life down. I never turned work in late. If I said I was going to be at an event, I'd be there. If a friend needed help editing a cover letter for a job application (or moral support as they called their congressional representative about the latest human-rights horror of the moment), I was available. Behind that veneer of energy and dependability, I was a wreck. I'd spend hours alone in the dark, overstimulated and too tired to even read a book. I resented every person I said yes to, even as I couldn't stop overcommitting to them. I was forever spreading myself too thin, dragging myself from obligation to obligation, thinking my lack of energy made me unforgivably "lazy."

I know a lot of people like me. People who work overtime, never turning down additional work for fear of disappointing their boss. They're available to friends and loved ones twenty-four seven, providing an unending stream of support and advice. They care about dozens and dozens of social issues yet always feel guilty about not doing "enough" to address them, because there simply aren't enough hours in the day. These types of

people often try to cram every waking moment with activity. After a long day at work, they try to teach themselves Spanish on the Duolingo app on their phone, for example, or they try to learn how to code in Python on sites like Code Academy.

People like this—people like me—are doing everything society has taught us we have to do if we want to be virtuous and deserving of respect. We're committed employees, passionate activists, considerate friends, and perpetual students. We worry about the future. We plan ahead. We try to reduce our anxiety by controlling the things we can control—and we push ourselves to work very, very hard.

Most of us spend the majority of our days feeling tired, overwhelmed, and disappointed in ourselves, certain we've come up short. No matter how much we've accomplished or how hard we've worked, we never believe we've done enough to feel satisfied or at peace. We never think we deserve a break. Through all the burnouts, stress-related illnesses, and sleep-deprived weeks we endure, we remain convinced that having limitations makes us "lazy"—and that laziness is always a bad thing.

This worldview is ruining our lives.

For years, I fell into an awful pattern where I'd work nonstop for the first five or six hours of the day, running through as many tasks as possible without any breaks. During those periods, I'd focus so intently on the mountains of e-mails I had to respond to or the papers I had to grade that I would often forget to pause and eat a snack, stretch my legs, or even use the bathroom. Anyone who interrupted me during those cram sessions would get a blank and irritated stare. Once those five hours were over, I'd collapse into a cranky, hungry, emotionally drained heap.

I loved being superefficient like that, plugging away at all the items on my to-do list that had given me anxiety the night before. I could get a truly impressive amount of stuff done during those sprints. But when I worked myself that hard, I'd be completely useless afterward. My afternoons were utterly nonproductive, with me mindlessly scrolling through Instagram

or Tumblr for hours. In the evening, all I had energy left to do was flop onto my bed, watch a few YouTube videos, and eat chips in the dark of my apartment.

Eventually, after a few hours of "recharging," I'd start to feel guilty for not using my time in more productive ways. *I should be out with friends*, I'd tell myself. *I should be working on creative projects. I should cook myself a nice, healthy dinner.* I'd start to feel stress about everything I needed to accomplish the next day. And then, the next morning, the cycle of guilt, overwork, and exhaustion would start up all over again.

Even back then, I knew this cycle was bad for me, and yet I found it hard to break out of. As terrible as my exhaustion felt, completing a huge pile of tasks in a couple of hours felt almost equally good. I lived to check things off to-do lists. I would get a rush when somebody would exclaim, "Wow, that was fast!" because I'd e-mailed back sooner than they expected. I would agree to take on more responsibilities than I wanted to handle because I felt a deep need to show I was a diligent, reliable worker. And then, after putting so many tasks on my plate, I would inevitably flame out and become depressed or sick.

For years, I would berate myself for running out of steam. Whenever I didn't push myself to the limit, I felt shame about being stagnant. Whenever I said no to a task at work, I'd worry I wasn't earning my keep. If I failed to help a friend when they needed it or didn't make it to a protest I'd planned to go to or a concert a friend was performing in, I'd feel certain everyone was judging me. I was terrified that anytime I took a break or drew a boundary, I was being *lazy*. After all, there was nothing worse I could be than that. As awful as being tired, overwhelmed, and burned out with no energy for hobbies or friends was, surely being lazy was worse.

I learned at an early age to tie my self-worth to how productive I was. I got good grades, and teachers generally thought I was bright, so they encouraged me to work extra hard and take on more opportunities and responsibilities. Whether it was tutoring a struggling peer in civics class or

running the arts and crafts table at Bible Camp, adults would constantly ask me to take on extra responsibilities, and I would always say yes. I wanted to be helpful, industrious, and successful. After all, working hard and doing a lot was how you ensured yourself a bright future.

I had my reasons for worrying about the future. My dad grew up in Appalachia, in an old mining town with depleted infrastructure. Job prospects were nonexistent. As an adult, my dad was forever fretting about his financial future. He had cerebral palsy, which made it very difficult for him to write or type, so going to college or getting an office job seemed out of the question to him. Instead, he worked backbreaking manual-labor jobs, knowing his body wouldn't be able to handle them forever. My mom was a dental hygienist, but she suffered from scoliosis, which left her able to work only two or three days per week.

Neither of my parents had university degrees, so their professional options were limited. They desperately wanted me to avoid the same fate, so they taught me to plan, and prepare, and work hard. They signed me up for my school's talented and gifted program as soon as I was eligible. They encouraged me to get a part-time job, to take honors classes, and to participate in extracurriculars like Model UN and speech and debate. They believed that if I worked hard, saved money, and took on many of life's "extra" responsibilities, I could get ahead. I could get into a decent school, earn some financial aid, and forge a successful career for myself—as long as I wasn't lazy. Teachers saw potential in me, and they strongly encouraged this too.

This pressure to achieve my way into stability caused me significant anxiety, but the alternative struck me as far worse. I was already beginning to notice that not all kids were encouraged to thrive the way I was. Some kids were seen as lost causes, because they were disruptive or too slow to master a subject. When those kids were still young, they received some support, and some sympathy. But the longer they struggled, the less patience and compassion they got. Eventually people stopped talking about those students' needs or limitations. Instead, the conversation became about how *lazy* they were. Once someone was deemed lazy, they

were much likelier to get yelled at than they were to be helped. If a kid was lazy, there was no fixing it. It was their fault they were missing assignments, failing to grasp hard concepts, and not putting time into anything "productive" after school. Lazy kids didn't have futures. And, the world seemed to be telling me, they deserved what they got.

Max also learned to tie her worth to her productivity. Like me, she came from a family that spent multiple generations in poverty in the rural South; like me, she went on to achieve academically and professionally at a high level. And like me, her commitment to overwork started to eat her alive.

Today, Max is a writer at an information technology firm, where she puts together applications and proposals, as well as blog posts about the firm's work. In order to do her job well, Max needs a lot of support from her coworkers. They're supposed to provide her with detailed information on each project, completed application forms, and clean, well-written drafts. Often, though, Max doesn't get that information on time, leaving her scrambling to assemble what she needs herself, while a looming deadline and an impatient boss breathe down her neck. She regularly works eighty- to ninety-hour weeks, and seems constantly to be at her wit's end.

"These proposals have to be perfect, but I can't rely on anyone else to check them carefully enough," Max says. "Every government agency that we work with has different requirements. Sometimes it will be something as specific as requiring that we sign our forms in blue ink, not black. But the people I work with miss this stuff all the time, and my manager doesn't actually manage them. So then I'm in the office from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., fixing everybody else's work so we have a chance at getting the contract."

I knew Max had problems with overwork and overcommitment when I heard her complaining, for probably the tenth time, about having logged fifty hours at work in a span of three days. I noticed how frazzled she always seemed to be, how irritation about her job had turned to anger and despair. Her typical workday involves writing and editing proposals

for hours, then coming home, ordering takeout, and collapsing in front of the TV. Often, she's so exhausted that she forgets to eat the dinner she's ordered. Her once-beloved hobbies, like witchcraft and embroidery, often go neglected. On weekends she sleeps in until 4:00 p.m., just to recharge her batteries and recover from the stress she endured during the week. She sometimes schedules massages and vacations to help herself decompress, but on a day-to-day basis she's irritable and short-tempered, and often remarks on the joylessness of her life.

I figured Max's intense lifestyle must have damaged her health, so I asked her about it. She said, "This fucking job ruined my health and my personal life. Last year I had an inflamed gallbladder, but I didn't take any time off work because I knew my manager would pick apart my reasons for needing it and guilt me into coming in to the office. By the time I went to the hospital, I was vomiting constantly and had to crawl on my hands and knees to the toilet instead of walking. They opened me up and found out that my gallbladder was completely dead. The surgeon told me it was the most decayed one he'd ever seen, and asked me why I hadn't come to them a month earlier. Then he gave me a big lecture about how I needed to take more sick days at work. I wanted to scream."

When I met Max, we were both aspiring writers, sharing little snippets of stories and essays with each other on Tumblr. The beauty of Max's writing immediately made me want to get to know her better. There was a calmness and sense of perspective in her work back then, which I just don't see in her life these days. She's an intense person (a quality I admire), but her job has made her cranky and brittle. She doesn't have patience for inefficiency or anything that strikes her as foolish. Her temper can flare at something as simple as the pizza delivery person forgetting to bring ranch dressing. She hasn't written a short story in years.

Max knows her work is consuming her life. She can see the toll it's taken on her relationships, her health, and her capacity to enjoy her hobbies. Max is also very aware that she places unfair expectations on herself, and that she shouldn't force herself to regularly work twice as many hours as her job supposedly requires. Still, she doesn't know how to stop.

Like Max, I used to work to the point of exhaustion and illness, and had no idea how to make myself stop. Intellectually, I knew I was doing too much, but my fear of missing a deadline or seeming lazy kept me plugging away without breaks. I didn't learn to change my ways until overwork utterly destroyed my health.

It was February of 2014, and I was putting the final touches on my dissertation. I'd known since I was a teenager that I wanted to get a PhD in psychology, and I was finally close to attaining it. I couldn't think about anything else. I spent hours and hours in the lab, analyzing data long after my peers had gone home to their partners and children. I found an apartment two blocks from Loyola University, where I was studying, so I wouldn't waste any time commuting to the office. I spent so much time there that I never bothered to buy furniture for my home or set up a home Internet connection.

Then, about two weeks before I was scheduled to present my dissertation, I caught a nasty case of the flu. I didn't let it slow me down. I trudged into the office every day and stayed late into the night, the same as always, ignoring how sick I felt. I didn't even stop exercising. Since I didn't give myself any time to heal, the flu wouldn't go away. On the day of my dissertation defense, I was still running a fever and shivering in my suit jacket, trying desperately to hide it as I presented the results of my research.

I graduated. The flu was still there. I started applying to jobs. I was still sick. For months, the flu stayed with me. I'd do my best to ignore it all day, for the sake of remaining productive, but every evening I'd start shaking and would feel so weak and faint that I'd have to lie on the ground, wrapped in blankets, until morning. This continued for months. I spent that summer bundled in electric blankets feeling absolutely freezing cold, even on ninety-degree days.

Still, I kept working. I tried to hide from my employer that I was debilitatingly sick. I felt shame over being so frail. I spent all my free time

sleeping but berated myself for being so lazy. Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I was tested for rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and mono, but nothing came back positive. Then, a cardiologist found I'd developed a heart murmur, and a hematologist found I had severe anemia, but neither could pinpoint why. I was still sick when winter came, nearly a year after the flu had started.

No medical test or treatment could help me. No doctor could cure the mysterious disease that was plaguing me. The solution, which I finally discovered in November of 2014, was that I needed to rest. *Really* rest—no faking I was fine, no pushing myself to exercise and write and go to work. It was excruciating to sit around doing absolutely nothing. I skipped work meetings and forced myself to relax, because by then I had no other choice. My illness kept getting worse, and denying my body's needs wasn't working. I spent the next two months being completely unproductive: no juggling work and illness, no apologizing for being "lazy" by doing more work than was healthy for me.

Slowly, my energy began to come back. The fever disappeared. My red blood cell count went up. My heart murmur went away. Once I was fully healed, it was time to reenter the world and find a new way to live that wouldn't destroy my body the way my old life did.

In the years that followed my illness, I've focused on building a tenable life for myself. I had to learn to budget time into my day for relaxation and recovery. I abandoned my dream of becoming a tenured professor, which would require countless hours of research. Instead, I taught classes part-time as an adjunct, and sought out online teaching options as often as I could. This allowed me to have a more relaxed schedule. I took breaks and defended my free time fiercely. I taught myself, slowly, that I deserved to be comfortable, relaxed, and happy.

That's when a funny thing happened: The more my health and well-being improved, the more I noticed that my students, colleagues, and friends exhibited the same kind of self-punishing attitudes toward work

that I once had, and just like me, they were beginning to pay a price for it. I realized that burned-out, sick, overcommitted people were all around me. There was Max, with her eighty- to ninety-hour workweeks; my friend Ed, whose mental health was put in jeopardy by their commitment to the domestic violence hotline they worked for; and my colleague Alyssa, who is forever having to juggle the demands of parenting with the pressures of a full-time research job, all while being judged by her in-laws and neighbors for her child-rearing choices. Then there were dozens and dozens of my students, each of whom had been told at some point in school that they weren't doing enough to get ahead—that they were "lazy," and therefore not deserving of happiness or success.

I realized then that my struggles were part of a much bigger social epidemic, something I'm calling the Laziness Lie. The Laziness Lie is a deep-seated, culturally held belief system that leads many of us to believe the following:

- Deep down I'm lazy and worthless.
- I must work incredibly hard, all the time, to overcome my inner laziness.
- My worth is earned through my productivity.
- Work is the center of life.
- Anyone who isn't accomplished and driven is immoral.

The Laziness Lie is the source of the guilty feeling that we are not "doing enough"; it's also the force that compels us to work ourselves to sickness.

Once I began noticing the Laziness Lie all around me, I used the skills I'd learned as a researcher to delve deep into the history of laziness, as well as the most recent psychological studies about productivity. What I found brought me both massive relief and deep frustration. Research on productivity, burnout, and mental health all suggest that the average workday is far too long, and that other commitments that we often think of as normal, such as a full course load at college or a commitment to weekly activism, are not sustainable for most people.

I also came to see how the thing that we call "laziness" is often actually a powerful self-preservation instinct. When we feel unmotivated, directionless, or "lazy," it's because our bodies and minds are screaming for some peace and quiet. When we learn to listen to those persistent feelings of tiredness and to honor them, we can finally begin to heal. I spoke with therapists and corporate coaches and learned about the steps a person can take to establish limits in their professional and personal lives. I found that by advocating for our right to be "lazy," we can carve out space in our lives for play, relaxation, and recovery. I also discovered the immense relief that comes when we cease tying our self-image to how many items we check off our to-do lists.

The laziness we've all been taught to fear does not exist. There is no morally corrupt, slothful force inside us, driving us to be unproductive for no reason. It's not evil to have limitations and to need breaks. Feeling tired or unmotivated is not a threat to our self-worth. In fact, the feelings we write off as "laziness" are some of humanity's most important instincts, a core part of how we stay alive and thrive in the long term. This book is a full-throated defense of the behaviors that get maligned as "laziness" and the people who have been written off as "lazy" by society. It contains practical advice for how to draw better boundaries in all the areas of your life where you might run the risk of overcommitting, scripts for how to defend your boundaries and limits to other people, and tons of reassurance that your worst fear—that you are an irredeemably lazy person—is entirely misplaced.

When people run out of energy or motivation, there's a good reason for it. Tired, burned-out people aren't struggling with some shameful, evil inner laziness; rather, they're struggling to survive in an overly demanding, workaholic culture that berates people for having basic needs. We don't have to keep pushing ourselves to the brink, ignoring our body's alarm bells and punishing ourselves with self-recrimination. We don't have to deny ourselves breaks. We don't have to fear laziness. Laziness does not exist.

— CHAPTER ONE —

The Laziness Lie

I work in downtown Chicago, just off Michigan Avenue. Every morning, I make my way through throngs of tired commuters and slow-moving tourists, passing at least half a dozen people sitting on street corners asking for change. Many times, I've witnessed a suburban-looking parent discouraging their kid from giving money to a nearby homeless person. They say the typical things people say about giving money to homeless folks: they're just going to spend the money on drugs or alcohol; they're faking being homeless; if they want to improve their lives, all they need to do is stop being lazy and get a job.

It enrages me to hear people saying these things, because I know surviving as a homeless person is a huge amount of work. When you're homeless, every day is a struggle to locate a safe, warm, secure bit of shelter. You're constantly lugging all your possessions and resources around; if you put your stuff down for a second, you run the risk of it getting stolen or thrown out. If you've been homeless for more than a few days, you're probably nursing untreated injuries or struggling with mental or physical illness, or both. You never get a full night's sleep. You have to spend the entire day begging for enough change to buy a meal, or to pay the fee required to enter a homeless shelter. If you're on any government benefits, you have to attend regular meetings with caseworkers, doctors, and therapists to prove that you

deserve access to health care and food. You're constantly traumatized, sick, and run ragged. You have to endure people berating you, threatening you, and throwing you out of public spaces for no reason. You're fighting to survive every single day, and people have the audacity to call you lazy.

I know all of this because I have friends who've been homeless. My friend Kim spent a summer living in a Walmart parking lot after a landlord kicked them, their partner, and their two children out of the apartment they all shared. The hardest part of being homeless, Kim told me, was the stigma and judgment. If people didn't realize Kim was homeless, then they and their kids would be allowed to spend the better part of a day in a McDonald's, drinking Cokes, charging their phones, and staying out of the oppressive heat. But the second someone realized Kim was homeless, they transformed in people's minds from a tired but capable parent to an untrustworthy, "lazy" drain on society. It didn't matter how Kim and their children dressed, how they acted, how much food they bought—once the label of "lazy" was on them, there was no walking it back. They'd be thrown out of the business without hesitation.

Our culture hates the "lazy." Unfortunately, we have a very expansive definition of what "laziness" is. A drug addict who's trying to get clean but keeps having relapses? Too lazy to overcome their disorder. An unemployed person with depression who barely has the energy to get out of bed, let alone to apply for a job? They're lazy too. My friend Kim, who spent every day searching for resources and shelter, worked a full-time job, and still made time to teach their kids math and reading in the back of the broken RV that their family slept in? Clearly a very lazy person, someone who just needed to work harder to bring themselves out of poverty.

The word "lazy" is almost always used with a tone of moral judgment and condemnation. When we call someone "lazy," we don't simply mean they lack energy; we're implying that there's something terribly wrong or lacking with them, that they deserve all the bad things that come their way as a result. Lazy people don't work hard enough. They made bad decisions when good ones seemed just as feasible. Lazy people don't deserve help, patience, or compassion.

It can be comforting (in a sick way) to dismiss people's suffering like this. If all the homeless people I see on the street are in that position because they're "lazy," I don't have to give them a cent. If every person who's ever been jailed for drug possession was simply too "lazy" to get a real job, I don't have to worry about drug policy reform. And if every student who gets bad grades in my classes is simply too "lazy" to study, then I never have to change my teaching methods or offer any extensions on late assignments.

Life, however, is not that simple. The vast majority of homeless people are victims of trauma and abuse;[1] most homeless teens are on the street either because homophobic or transphobic parents kicked them out, or the foster system failed them.[2] Many chronically unemployed adults have at least one mental illness, and the longer they remain unemployed, the worse their symptoms will generally get and the harder it becomes for employers to consider them as a prospect.[3] When a drug addict fails to recover from substance use, they're typically facing additional challenges such as poverty and trauma, which make drug treatment very complex and difficult.[4]

The people we've been taught to judge for "not trying hard enough" are almost invariably the people fighting valiantly against the greatest number of unseen barriers and challenges. I've noticed this in my professional life as well. Every single time I've checked in with a seemingly "lazy" and underperforming student, I've discovered that they're facing massive personal struggles, including mental-health issues, immense work stress, or the demands of caring for a sick child or elderly relative. I once had a student who experienced the death of a parent, followed by the destruction of their house in a natural disaster, then the hospitalization of their depressed daughter, all in one sixteen-week semester. That student still felt bad for missing assignments, despite everything she was going through. She was certain people would accuse her of "faking" all these tragedies, so she carried documentation with her everywhere she went to prove that these things had happened to her. The fear of seeming "lazy" runs that deep.

Why do we view people as lazy when they have so much on their plates? One reason is that most human suffering is invisible to an outside observer. Unless a student tells me that they're dealing with an anxiety disorder, poverty, or caring for a sick child, I'll never know. If I don't have a conversation with the homeless person near my bus stop, I'll never hear about his traumatic brain injury, and how that affects basic daily tasks like getting dressed in the morning. If I have an underperforming coworker, I have no way of knowing that their low motivation is caused by chronic depression. They might just look apathetic to me, when really they're running on fumes. When you've been alienated by society over and over again, you tend to look totally checked out, even if you're really busting your ass.

The people we dismiss as "lazy" are often individuals who've been pushed to their absolute limits. They're dealing with immense loads of baggage and stress, and they're working very hard. But because the demands placed on them exceed their available resources, it can look to us like they're doing nothing at all. We're also taught to view people's personal challenges as unacceptable excuses.

Zee is reentering the job market after years of combating a heroin addiction. He's been hard at work fighting his addiction in rehabilitation programs, learning life skills in group therapy, and rebuilding his sense of self by doing volunteer work. Yet when potential employers look at Zee's résumé, all they see is a gap in employment that's several years wide, which makes it seem like Zee spent all that time doing nothing. Even some of Zee's family and friends think of those years of recovery as wasted time. We know that drug addiction is a behavioral and mental disorder, and we know that statistically, most people attempt sobriety several times before they succeed. Yet we tend to view people with substance-abuse disorders as if they're morally responsible for having them, and as if every relapse is a choice they gleefully made.[5]

This isn't just true of how we view and judge other people; we also do this to ourselves. Most of us tend to hold ourselves to ridiculously high standards. We feel that we should be doing more, resting less often, and

having fewer needs. We think our personal challenges—such as depression, childcare needs, anxiety, trauma, lower back pain, or simply being human—aren't good enough excuses for having limits and being tired. We expect ourselves to achieve at a superhuman level, and when we fail to do so, we chastise ourselves for being lazy.

We have all been lied to about laziness. Our culture has us convinced that success requires nothing more than willpower, that pushing ourselves to the point of collapse is morally superior to taking it easy. We've been taught that any limitation is a sign of laziness, and therefore undeserving of love or comfort. This is the Laziness Lie, and it's all around us, making us judgmental, stressed, and overextended, all while convincing us that we're actually doing too little. In order to move past the Laziness Lie, we must confront it and dissect it so we can see the poisonous influence it has exerted on our lives, our belief systems, and how we relate to other people.

What Is the Laziness Lie?

The Laziness Lie is a belief system that says hard work is morally superior to relaxation, that people who aren't productive have less innate value than productive people. It's an unspoken yet commonly held set of ideas and values. It affects how we work, how we set limits in our relationships, our views on what life is supposed to be about.

The Laziness Lie has three main tenets. They are:

1. Your worth is your productivity.
2. You cannot trust your own feelings and limits.
3. There is always more you could be doing.

How do we get indoctrinated with the Laziness Lie? For the most part, parents don't sit their kids down and feed them these principles. Instead, people absorb them through years of observation and pattern recognition. When a parent tells their child not to give a homeless person money

because that homeless person is too "lazy" to deserve it, the seed of the Laziness Lie is planted in the kid's brain. When a TV show depicts a disabled person somehow "overcoming" their disability through sheer willpower rather than by receiving the accommodations they deserve, the Laziness Lie grows a bit stronger. And whenever a manager questions or berates an employee for taking a much-needed sick day, the Laziness Lie extends its tendrils even further into a person's psyche.

We live in a world where hard work is rewarded and having needs and limitations is seen as a source of shame. It's no wonder so many of us are constantly overexerting ourselves, saying yes out of fear of how we'll be perceived for saying no. Even if you think you don't fully agree with the three tenets of the Laziness Lie, you've probably absorbed its messages and let those messages affect how you set goals and how you view other people. As I break down each of these statements, consider how deeply they're ingrained in your psyche, and how they might influence your behavior on a day-to-day basis.

Your Worth Is Your Productivity

When we talk to children and teenagers about the future, we ask them what they want to *do*—in other words, what kind of value they want to contribute to society and to an employer. We don't ask nearly as often what they're passionate about, or what makes them feel happy or at peace. As adults, we define people by their jobs—he's an actor, she's a mortician—categorizing them based on the labor they provide to others. When a formerly productive person becomes less so due to injury, illness, tragedy, or even aging, we often talk about it in hushed, shameful tones, assuming the person has lost a core part of their identity. When we don't have work to do, it can feel like we don't have a reason to live.

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It makes complete sense, of course, that many of us think and talk in these ways. In our world, a comfortable, safe life is far from guaranteed. People who don't (or can't) work tend to suffer; un-

employed and impoverished people die at much younger ages than their employed or middle-class peers.[6] Since we live in a world that's structured around work, not working can leave a person socially isolated, exacerbating whatever mental and physical health problems they might be dealing with.[7] The stakes of not being productive are dire. As a result, many of us live in a constant state of stress about our financial and professional futures—which means feeling a ton of anxiety about how much we're working.

Michael is a bartender. He lives in fear that he's not working enough. He grew up on the South Side of Chicago in a working-class Italian family that dealt with a lot of dysfunction and mental illness. He carved out a life for himself despite all that, and learned a skill that's always in demand. Now he can't say no to a job. When you're a talented bartender in Chicago, you get asked to cover a lot of people's shifts. Michael snaps up every job offered to him, hopping from bar to bar all across the city, even if it means getting only a couple of hours of sleep in the wee hours of the morning. It took me weeks to even schedule an interview with him because his schedule was so overfilled.

"My entire life has been burnout," Michael tells me. "When I owned my own bar, I worked ninety hours a week, every week. I was sleeping on the floor of the men's bathroom at night. I was booking the events, writing the food menu, writing the cocktail menu, getting orders from our suppliers, and doing the actual bartending. Then the bar went under, and I had to start taking whatever other jobs came my way."

Michael has always lived this way. As a teenager, he was a ballet dancer. The unforgiving, workaholic world of ballet taught him to fill every waking hour with training and practice, and to ignore any signs that his body was breaking down. He carried that same level of commitment into the adult world, where he's worked without relent for decades. Even when he travels, he puts out feelers for bartending shifts he can pick up while he's in town. He's never known a break. He keeps a meticulous spreadsheet of his hours and earnings, and the figures are mind-boggling.

"I worked three hundred eighty hours this March," he tells me. For reference, a standard forty-hour workweek adds up to about 160 hours per month.

The consequences of Michael's compulsive work habits mirrored