



Me change

Giving up a successful yet stressful career for a more considered life in the slow lane, Sue White discovers the joys of downshifting

It was a Saturday evening when I first had an inkling that I needed to shift my life down a notch. I'd been away for a fortnight, logging 16-hour days as the PR manager for a performing arts show. As my hard-won cab stopped in front of my inner-city apartment at 11pm, I realised with dread I had just 31 hours before the cycle started again.

It took me six months to recover from that job. Never again, I vowed. I really did try. Upon accepting my next role, handling marketing and communications for a charity, I was determined to find some life balance. No more crazy hours and no more unrealistic deadlines that I would somehow leap tall buildings to meet. During my first week I spent at least one lunch hour feeling extremely self-satisfied. Not only had I made a smooth transition from one contract to the next, I had climbed a level in job title, responsibility and income bracket.

My career plan was on track. I was firmly settled in middle management, with a small team of young, keen employees, no budget to speak of, and a valid cause to keep me focused if I ever felt like slacking off. Not that there was a lot of slacking-off potential – within three months lunch breaks were a distant memory, weekend work at fundraising events was a reality and, worse, I was officially obsessed with my job ... again.

I made a few token efforts to find some life balance. I'd always enjoyed yoga, so most mornings before work I'd fit in about 10 minutes of sun salutations in a hurried bowing to the more tranquil life I strived for, if only I had a bit more time. But with my 30th birthday looming, it was becoming clear that

although the job was different, the results were identical.

Resorting to my standard fall-back, I took the tried-and-tested solution that had seen me through many hard times in my 20s: I chucked in the job and went overseas. I promised myself during my year away that if a new work idea struck me, I would follow it. But no bolts of lightning came. So back in Sydney, for the fourth time in four years, I became ensconced in an even better paying job, and the cycle began all over again.

But this time, something inside me had changed. Despite a daily yoga practice that helped me through busy weeks, days became marred by panic attacks, unprovoked by any one event. All my working life I'd been up to the stresses of my job, but now, locked in the staff bathroom, I tried to recall some calming breathing techniques while tears slid down my cheeks and I wondered what was wrong. Outside of work I was happy, but when confined to an office and surrounded by computers, phones, strategic planning and office politics, I felt inexplicably suffocated.

When the situation failed to resolve itself, it became obvious that something dramatic needed to happen. Mentally scanning my decade-long career, it was tempting to blame the ghosts of bosses past for my disheartened state. But searching honestly for a link between each of my jobs, only one real connection appeared: me. With or without a great plan up my sleeve, I needed a change.

I am certainly not the first to feel this way. Most of us have spent lunch breaks or weekends daydreaming of a life less dominated by our jobs. What's surprising is that it's now a movement, with a label: downshifting (it's also sometimes described as "voluntary simplicity").

Researchers at The Australia Institute say two million Australians have decided to downshift in the past decade. Rather than channelling their inner hippies, downshifters simply crave more balanced lives, and are willing to scale back their careers to achieve that goal. While most downshifters aren't motivated by one single factor to make the change, the growing pressure ▶

as Australians to "succeed" and our increasingly long working hours may be contributing elements.

But while tree-changers head to the bush for peace of mind, and sea-changers are crowding our coastal areas, many downshifters remain in the cities. It was a fact I was relieved to learn, because although my job wasn't working out, the rest of my life was really great. I wasn't after "a year in Provence"; I just wanted to feel less stressed.

The eternal seesaw between my old and new worlds continued as I filtered through things I could live without, those I could attain economically and those that were non-negotiable

The least stressful thing in my life was yoga, and I had already embarked on teaching yoga one night a week for enjoyment. But surely I couldn't give up my career to do that? Or could I? Summoning all my courage, I left yet another job and set out to start a corporate yoga business in cooperation with the Sydney studio where I had been teaching.

Leaving stunned work colleagues behind, I took my savings and set up a makeshift desk in the corner of the yoga studio office. But I didn't think of myself as a downshifter, happily committing to a life of living on less. "It's just a temporary dip," I thought, naively. Surely it was just a matter of time before my new business provided me with a sensible, mid-range income and a stress-free life. Six months at most, I reckoned.

Without my nine-to-five job, city living transformed into an urban utopia, where schedules were flexible and work seemed fun. Then, out of the blue, life went through an expensive run. My fledgling business needed more set-up funds than I'd imagined possible. Friends got married, holding a series of expensive pre-wedding celebrations that effortlessly sucked up half my weekly income. My iPod broke, my hair cried out for a decent cut, and my inner-city rent became increasingly disproportionate to my earnings.

Desperate not to admit I was chewing through my savings faster than you can say "the honeymoon's over", I kept up my previous standard of living, even as my income dropped to 15 per cent of its former level. Finally, a bank statement stopped me short. I realised I had propelled through my

projected annual living allowance in just five months. Something had to give.

Real change proved easy to say and hard to do. Before quitting my job, I had imagined that without a hefty pay cheque to support my inner capitalist I would effortlessly fall into a vortex of wanting less. Now it seemed that relinquishing my six-figure income had been easier than giving up going out for breakfast. Rather than wanting less, desire began whispering into my subconscious before shouting loud for what it

craved. I missed my old financial freedom. I wanted a shopping spree and weekends away, organic food and a new It bag.

I now understood why so many downshifters left the city. Surely it took less willpower to cut consumption when you walked among trees rather than traders each time you left the house? As I struggled to convince friends that nights in with a DVD were as fun as evenings out, and that dinner parties weren't too much hassle after a long day at work - "Why not meet at a restaurant?" they kept asking - simplicity had never seemed so complicated.

With a pragmatism inspired by keeping the horrific bank statement and various bills visible, I reluctantly began making changes. After a series of sleepless nights, I swallowed my pride and arranged to work one day a week in a busy marketing department, churning through tasks that were dangerously close to deadline. Work was easy to find, but admitting I needed it was a huge blow to my ego, after all, less than six months ago I had supposedly given this up. Still, the financial reality kept me on track and provided temporary peace of mind while I figured out how to make my new life sustainable.

The internal seesaw between my old and new worlds continued as I filtered through the things I could live without, those I could attain more economically, and those that were non-negotiable.

In a slash-and-burn phase, I cut out everything that didn't seem too difficult. I could live without the internet at home - the yoga office was only 500 metres away. Taxis were out unless it was raining or public transport was going to leave me seriously

short on sleep. And the organic deli goods, well, as soon as I began equating paying 60 cents an olive with life in an office, they went too. Home life became messier as my flatmate agreed to add a third member to the house, reducing my rent to a manageable amount. I'd be lying if I said everything was easy, but one true joy emerged from this phase: I rediscovered the local library to support my addiction to new reading material.

It helped, too, when I eventually realised that in my downshifted world people still ate out: a picnic in the park can be glorious, and just as chic as dinner in a restaurant. If my fellow downshifters wanted new clothes, they swapped them with friends and made it a social event. Generosity abounded, and I found myself surrounded by people who clung less to their personal possessions, because they'd chosen not to be dominated by them.

As I began to experiment with making life simpler, I discovered my own secret: time is money. With the time to walk rather than drive, I saved money. With time to shop for fresh produce and cook at home, I saved even more. When I was rushed in my 60-hour work week, cooking was the last thing I wanted to do, it was far easier to eat out. In my new existence, I even found a great hairdresser willing to trade a stylish haircut for a private yoga class.

By fighting my diehard habit of being constantly busy, I slowly became comfortable living on less. Working in my old industry once a week also reminded me how much I'd changed. Something had happened to my stamina. Where I once worked 10-hour days without batting an eyelid, I now found it impossible to function efficiently in a conventional office environment for long periods of time. It could have been the lack of fresh air, or the restrictive dress code. Irrespective, each day in the office reminded me how good my downshifted life really was.

Without ties to a traditional career path, I eventually found a freedom I'd never experienced in my working life. It hasn't meant I am less busy, but I am less occupied with things I don't want to do. To downshift in the city I've needed to put my ego to one side and stay focused on what I really want, which is freedom bought by time, rather than freedom bought by money.

I'm not made of an iron will, so I still spend a great deal of time in cafes - far more than my income warrants. Plus, if I'm honest, I work a lot (σὶδ' ἄλλοις ὕπ' ἡμῶν). Sometimes it's for a lot of money, sometimes not for much at all, but I can pick and choose to balance the two, and every job I take is something I'm interested in. Time is money, but time is also my most valuable possession, so now I'm spending it as wisely as I can. ■