THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA
MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 57, No. 9
(First published: September 1949)

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, SEPTEMBER 1976

Let's Slow Down

WHEN Dale Carnegie wrote his book entitled *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* he said its purpose was not to tell something new, but to remind you of what you already know and to kick you in the shins and inspire you to do something about applying it.

This *Monthly Letter* does not set itself up as a confident counsellor in mental and physical health, but merely attempts to break down a problem that bedevils every adult person in Canada.

The problem is the feeling of being pushed. For thirty years it has been becoming progressively worse. We cannot put our finger with certainty on anything that is causing it; we cannot point our finger confidently at the goal to which we are being pushed. We just keep rushing along in a confused state of never having time to do the things that seem to be pressing upon us.

Twentieth-century living keeps us guessing. The trouble seems to be that we are in transition from an age that was based on the assumption of permanence into one where the only certainty is change. We are not highly-enough developed to feel comfortable.

We are victims of mounting tension. We have difficulty in relaxing. We feel that we are not quite as quick as we should be in grasping things. We are sensitive, and doubtful, and in a hurry. Our high-strung nervous systems are on a perpetual binge. We have no time for the repose that is necessary if we are to see and enjoy the stars.

A curious symptom is that people talk more than they did of "next" and less of things done. It's always the "next" job, or "next" week, or the "next problem to be tackled." Having reached a destination we try to cut down our "turn around" time so that we may sail off quickly to the next port.

David Seabury, in his excellent advice on *How to Worry Successfully* reduces the whole business to this: "Frenzied toil has long been a curse in America, though often praised as a virtue." He quotes Longfellow: "But they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night." Then Seabury adds: "Nonsense. They were digging their graves."

It is sad but true that the persons held up by our culture as most praiseworthy and desirable are the very people who are most likely to overdo the pace of life. They are conscientious, painstaking and indefatigable in their work; they have a strong sense of social responsibility; they assume more than their share of community tasks.

Teachers, maintaining discipline in a restive young race; doctors trying to cope with crowded reception rooms; stenographers who must do so many words a minute if they are to get their work out; telephone operators whose hands must keep pace with conversation; business men rushing from piled-up desks to business conference lunches and back again; farmers deprived of help by the lure of city life; all these are examples of high-tension living. And social affairs take their toll, too. Even small talk makes a demand on nervous energies.

Often people in all good faith deny that they are under any tension. The state has become chronic with them, and they are not aware of it. But to the keen observer there are signs: unnecessary hand-waving and pencil-tapping, wrinkled foreheads, frowns, vacant stares, restlessness.

Worry is a menace

"Worry" is commonly blamed.

The mind can do wonders in the way of work and adjustment to disturbances, but it is soon wrecked by worry. If gravestones told the truth, nine out of ten of them would say: "This man's life was shortened several years by the fear of bad developments, most of which never happened."

Worry is a most illogical thing. Often it is not the things we do but the things we don't get done that worry us. We find ourselves harassed by an accumulation of jobs, they may be in the factory, the home, the office, the garden, or in social circles. We worry about the past, which can't be helped, and about the future without affecting it for our good. Many times chronic worry is the cause and not the result of problems.

We all know the story of the centipede that became worried about a possible break-down of the mechanism moving his hundred legs, and ended in a tangle. Another classic is about the woman who worried because she did not worry so much about her elder

daughter as she did about her younger child, and it didn't seem right to her that one child should be more important than the other. A trainman tells about a woman who burst into weeping when the train was crossing a bridge over a flooded river. He questioned her sympathetically about her trouble, and she told him: "I was just thinking how dreadful it would be if I had a child and the child was ever drowned."

Silly? But how much more sensible are the things *we* worry about? Our choice is quite impartial: things past or present, real or "might be"; acts done or left undone — all are grist to our worry mill. And we know very well that anticipating trouble seldom averts it; that apprehension solves nothing; that regret is a dangerous salve.

There is an inevitable kind of worry. Every one of us is sometime confronted by a problem too big for him, or with a crisis of so disturbing a nature that his habitual reasoning reaction is temporarily suspended. Our worry does neither an ailing relative nor ourselves any good, but so long as we live in this dangerous world, so long as we have imagination and sensitivity, and so long as our control over our environment remains so partial, a certain amount of worry is the fate of man.

It is not legitimate anxiety that is the danger, but prolonged and excessive fear that pushes us into ill-considered action. Problems will arise, and we can do one of two things: bring to bear our best reasoned-out solution, or suffer spiritual unhappiness by giving ourselves over to fruitless worry.

What do we know?

So far as the human mind is concerned, we are in a twilight region between understanding and not understanding its workings. We know how fatal it is to meet a difficulty with our eyes on the past, but we cannot yet see far enough into the future to be sure of our course.

Our myths of today were yesterday's truths, and *our* truths are only the working concepts to be used by tomorrow's men and women. We don't like to have our myths taken away, and some of them project themselves into life in a disruptive way.

Among savages there is little neurosis. Is this because, with meagre knowledge of the possibilities of life, they have few incitements to intensify their longings? Our western world, shorn of old restraints, teems with stimulants. Our outlook is the "go — get" outlook. The passion goes so far as to encourage people to wish for what they have not earned, and to be angry when they do not get it.

The search for prestige leads to all kinds of neurotic bypaths: some want white-walled tires on their cars, others like to have their names emblazoned on stationery and speakers' programmes; the social climber must sit "above the salt" or suffer heartburn, and, as Dr. D. Ewen Cameron puts it in his book *Life is for Living*, as a white collar worker you demand cloth towels in your washroom instead of paper ones which are much more sanitary but are the hall-mark of the manual worker's washroom.

The man who keeps his balance realizes that he can't do, be, and have all he would like. Time, ability and opportunity limit what is possible. If he will reduce the number of his desires and fears he will find himself able to cast aside the jitters and to work toward accomplishment instead of striving.

Today's efficiency consists in knowing how to manage our minds.

The mind-manager knows that good, hard, efficient work, either physical or mental, never in itself produced one single case of nervous exhaustion. He knows that most mental fatigue results from monotony, or from descending to a routine task after one of great interest requiring intense thought. He knows that there is so close relationship between the body and the mind that the language of one is readily translated into that of the other; that muscular aches and pains may be caused by mental perturbations. And, as Satan moralizes in Milton's *Paradise Lost:* "The mind . . . in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, Hell of Heaven."

Health requires rest

The high price paid by so many people for what they get out of life need not be exacted at all. They are not realists. Persons who complain of "pressure" of modern life, but neglect ordinary health precautions; people who bewail the loss of their youthful vigour without finding compensating factors: these are intellectually immature.

The layman cannot be sure of his physical perfection, no matter how well he feels. He needs to co-operate with a competent and understanding physician, to listen to his advice — and follow it.

But don't delude yourself. Next worse thing to not giving a physician a chance periodically to keep you in tip-top shape is to satisfy your nagging conscience by doing it half-heartedly. A superficial, incomplete, or hurried examination is to be unqualifiedly condemned. The false security it builds is disastrous self-cheating.

Likely the doctor will say you need more rest, and however you may pooh-pooh it, the chances are 100-to-one that he is right. Most of us do not quit until we have gone beyond the point of normal fatigue and have even exhausted our capacity for "running on our nerve." We borrow against our capital reserves. We put up as collateral such temporary aids as emotional goads, coffee, alcohol and "the demands of life." The only way to get out of the red is by rest.

To many persons, time taken out for rest seems a total loss instead of an investment. Adults, like children, can find many excuses for not going to bed, regardless of consequences. The man who is determined on managing his mind for the good of his mental and physical health will take this situation in hand. Strangely enough, nine out of ten such men will find that they get more things done per day on the average, and better done.

Not only time in bed is to be counted as resting. Short periods of relaxation spaced throughout the day result in far less fatigue for the total work accomplished than when one attempts to carry on in a long

stretch. One may relax when walking along the street, by flexing his muscles and diverting his mind to things around him. One man we know seizes the opportunities given him by red traffic lights to settle back in his car momentarily and relax. That kind of intelligent treatment of oneself is efficiency; the most inefficient way of handling tiredness and pressure is to take stimulants or drugs.

Relaxation rebuilds energy

Rest, meaning both sleep and through-the-day relaxation, is the most generally prescribed remedy for many ills. Sir William Osler, the great Canadian physician, wrote in 1910: "the ordinary high-pressure business or professional man suffering from angina pectoris may find relief, or even cure, in the simple process of slowing the engines."

We do not intend to go deeply into the matter of diet. There are many ready-made diets published; every man is alone in both his desires and the capability of his body to assimilate food, and, anyhow, every man's wife has ideas on the subject. It would, nevertheless, be the act of a wise man to ask his physician about the quantity, kind and frequency of meals that would be best for a man doing his kind of work.

The only point we do wish to make emphatically is that enough time should be taken for a leisurely lunch, divorced from business, whether one eats heartily or prefers a slim mid-day meal. Many a business man in the financial districts of Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver talks his way through lunch and then drives himself to the end of the afternoon on nervous energy alone.

Relaxing at lunch may have its counterpart throughout the business day. Between appointments, while one visitor is being shown out and another is coming in, why not sit back with closed eyes and released muscles? While dictating, why not put your feet up on a stool or chair? If you have a mid-morning orange juice and an afternoon cup of tea, don't gulp them at your desk between snatches of reading bad news about production or a sizzling letter from a customer: stand up at the window and relax muscles, eyes, and mind. This ability to relax is one of the surest symptoms of health.

But there is more to it. Relaxation is good for the mind and body: it is also a sign that one has an adequate philosophy of life. The man who can alternate work and relaxation shows that he recognizes two worlds: the world as it is and the world he is working toward. His balance demonstrates itself in his handling of particular situations and in his long-range view.

Recreation and vacation are important, of course. As John Wanamaker once said: "People who cannot find time for recreation are obliged sooner or later to find time for illness." Every business man knows the "stale" feeling that comes after a prolonged period of high-pressure routine work.

More vacations are needed. Dr. Edgar V. Allen, of the Mayo Clinic, told a group of executives: "If one could calculate the efficiency of an executive in terms of total contribution to an industry, one would probably find that, within certain limits, his contribution increased in proportion to his vacations." Another authority wrote: "For an executive, two or three weeks off in the summer is not a vacation at all; it is simply a reprieve."

Make home a castle

Most effective year-round release from rush and tension is in the home. That is, if the sanctity of the home as a man's castle and personal retreat is preserved. When you can look forward to spending the evening in your peaceful family circle, with the drawbridge up, it gives a glow and a more intense vitality to your whole day.

Everyone, but particularly the person who is conscious of the pressure of business life, will find it a life-saver to build a schedule of privacy and stick to it at all costs. It may appear eccentric to more boisterous friends, but it will become, in a short time, a badge of wisdom and distinction. In addition, you will find that this is something you have always wanted to do.

Whatever way of betterment is adopted, the person who awakens to the senselessness of going round and round will leap off the conveyor belt every once in a while and walk slowly while it whizzes past.

The death toll among business executives is unwarranted. More people die every year of heart and arterial diseases than of any other. Death rates among policyholders reported in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company *Statistical Bulletin* show that of 669 deaths per 100,000 from all causes in six months of one year, 322 were from heart and arterial diseases.

A business man showed us a list of deaths, early retirements, and extended leaves of absence of members of his staff. More than 70 per cent of them were victims of heart diseases . . . and there is no doubt that most common among the causes would be over-strain.

Too many business men have been tricked into believing that they are obliged always to work harder and longer than their subordinates, to push harder than their competitors. Their typical day may be described as a mixture of chaos and struggle. We have been too long resigned to the idea that somehow this is inevitable, a pre-ordained purgatory for business leaders.

Shuffle off tasks

In keeping his balance amid the turmoil of business life, a man must shuffle off all the tasks that do not require his personal genius, and keep his mind free for the decisions that matter. It is necessary that some of the business be left to take its course under the hands of subordinates; that report-reading be reduced to the essential minimum; that long-drawn-out meetings be ruthlessly cut off; that routine be left to others. Such a life need not remain just a dream. In fact, it must not, if you are to keep your mental health and maintain your efficiency.

Probably 75 per cent of the things a key executive does could be done by subordinates. Secretaries can write routine letters; after the amenities are satisfied, telephone calls can be referred to heads of departments

for detailed attention; your own letters and conversation can be cut to the bone; reports you have to read should be brief.

Let us look at some examples from Churchill's management of the war. He demanded compression of information into the shortest space. One of his favourite expressions was: "It would be a great comfort if this could be compressed on one or two sheets of paper."

This demand was not confined to trivial things. On one occasion he asked for the latest ideas for the structure and organization of an armoured division, and added: "This should be prepared on one sheet of paper: showing all the principal elements and accessories." Another request, to be answered on one sheet, was for information about arrangements for Channel convoys "now that the Germans are all along the French coast." Still another demanded a statement about tanks: how many with the army, how many of each kind made each month, how many on hand, the forecasts of production, the plans for heavier tanks — all of this on one page.

Most business men have acquiesced in the custom of reading lengthy reports, instead of insisting, as Churchill did, upon having the work of analysing, selecting and digesting done by a subordinate.

The idea will naturally suggest itself: If Churchill, responsible for all the Empire's war effort, could get a satisfactory report on one page each of the state of Britain's food supply, submarine losses, the crisis caused by Eire's refusal to permit use of southern Irish ports, the state of defence after Dunkirk, and a host of equally big issues: if Churchill could get adequate reports on one page each, what business executive could not with advantage make similar demands of his staff? And what subordinate would not profit by learning to do it?

Besides cutting down the demands upon his time and energy within his own organization, a man needs to guard against encroachments from outside. One of the occupational hazards to which business executives are exposed is the multiplicity of invitations to serve on boards of professional, industrial or community groups. This is not because these are not good and worthy activities, but because the executive, like others of mankind, has only 24 hours a day in his life, and a limited number of years to live.

Time for meditation

The advice given his class by a professor: "Strenuosity is not always efficiency" could be taken with advantage by every person in the business world today. Industry and commerce will benefit more by having men who work at a steady pace than by having a stable of sprinting gazelles who tire easily. An even pace, rather than spurts, makes the best use of energy and intellect.

By slowing down the pace of business living we gain more than physical and mental health — more, even, than efficiency. Caught up as we are in the rush of life, we have forgotten in part how to live. We have forgotten how to find simple things charming. The act of taking a walk at night under the stars does something to you that not all the successful business deals, nor all the pick-me-up nostrums can provide. Joy in sunlight, birds and flowers is not for poets only, but also for business men.

Meditation is one of the great needs of the age. Meditation brings life, its relationships and its purposes, its objectives and its rewards, into sharp focus. It is a sure aid for frazzled nerves. It is, too, a practical tool for living. The man who was trapped by a landslide and had five minutes breathing space in which to save himself practised it: he spent three of the minutes thinking a way out, and two minutes taking it.

Getting off the speedway

Everything mentioned as an antidote for the present mad pace of life calls for a facing of facts regarding ourselves, our jobs, and our future. It is said that there were some who refused to look through Galileo's telescope for fear that he was speaking the truth. Nothing is easier than to hypnotize ourselves with the idea that the present way is the accustomed way and therefore right. On the other hand, nothing would be better for us than to ask about even the most casual and usual action: "is there any other way of doing this?"

The important thing is to get down to acknowledging that there is a problem; then to decide to do something about it; then to do it. One chain-store executive, worn out by pacing the floor mumbling to himself, schooled himself to a system. He sat down with pencil and paper, listed arguments for and against the question before him, put it away overnight, and made his decision after a glance over the two columns in the morning.

Another man goes even farther. He writes out five descriptions of a situation as he imagines five quite different people would see it. There is no worry and no pressure attached to *his* decisions. He sees the problem in all its aspects, and sees the results of various solutions from five points of view.

People who are on the rush all day every day and far into the night are not living fully. The true life of man does not consist in reckless surrender to forces he cannot explain, which is a just and fair description of the rush complex that has us in its grip. Life at its best should be an harmonious adjustment of necessity and desire, of what must be done and what we should like to do. It would be, as Carlyle said in writing about Goethe, "the calm supremacy of the spirit over its circumstances."

These are abnormal days. We must meet them with firmness, admitting our susceptibility to injurious influences and doing what we can to get rid of physical and emotional strain. We should try, in our own way, to change the world for the better, without worrying because it doesn't change faster. We need to learn to overcome what troubles can be surmounted, and adapt ourselves to those that are as yet incurable.

We need to be honest realists. This means admitting limitations of physical and mental strength and keeping within those limits.