



The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Home and Work

By Christine Carter Ph.D.

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Learn how to achieve more by doing less! Live in that zone you've glimpsed but can't seem to hold on to—the sweet spot where you have the greatest strength, but also the greatest ease.

Not long ago, Christine Carter, a happiness expert at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center and a speaker, writer, and mother, found herself exasperated by the busyness of modern life: too many conflicting obligations and not enough time, energy, or patience to get everything done. She tried all the standard techniques—prioritizing, multitasking, delegating, even napping—but none really worked. Determined to create a less stressful life for herself—without giving up her hard-won career success or happiness at home—she road-tested every research-based tactic that promised to bring more ease into her life. Drawing on her vast knowledge of the latest research related to happiness, productivity, and elite performance, she followed every strategy that promised to give her more energy—or that could make her more efficient, creative, or intelligent.

Her trials and errors are our reward. In *The Sweet Spot*, Carter shares the combination of practices that transformed her life from overwhelmed and exhausting to joyful, relaxed, *and* productive. From instituting daily micro-habits that save time to bigger picture shifts that convert stress into productive and creative energy, *The Sweet Spot* shows us how to

- say “no” strategically and when to say “yes” with abandon
- make decisions about routine things once to free our minds to focus on higher priorities
- stop multitasking and *gain* efficiency
- “take recess” in sync with the brain's need for rest
- use technology in ways that bolster, instead of sap, energy
- increase your ratio of positive to negative emotions

Complete with practical “easiest thing” tips for instant relief as well as stories from Carter's own experience of putting *The Sweet Spot* into action, this timely

and inspiring book will inoculate you against “The Overwhelm,” letting you in on the possibilities for joy and freedom that come when you stop trying to do everything right—and start doing the right things.

ONE OF *GREATER GOOD*’S FAVORITE BOOKS OF THE YEAR

“[For fans] of a certain kind of self-improvement book—the kind, like *The Happiness Project* or *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think or Getting Things Done*, that offers up strategies for making certain areas of life work better without requiring that you embrace a new belief system.”—**KJ Dell’Antonia, *The New York Times* (Motherlode blog)**

“A breath of fresh air . . . Based on personal experiments with living life in what she calls the ‘pressure cooker,’ Dr. Carter offers advice in easily digestible nuggets.”—*Working Mother*

“Carter gives actionable ways to balance your life, your health, and your career. This book is packed with smart advice and hard-earned wisdom.”—*Inc.*

“Learn more about escaping the ‘busyness trap’ and uncovering a happier, less stressed you.”—*Shape*

“A highly readable, diligently researched advice book that offers concrete tips on how to get off the treadmill of busyness.”—*Greater Good*

“Chock-full of concrete tips on how to sharpen your focus, improve your efficiency, and use technology to your advantage.”—*The Week*

“Illuminates the simple and sustainable path toward a precious and happy balance.”—**Deepak Chopra**

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Editorial Review

Review

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“With all the agonizing about ‘having it all,’ UC Berkeley sociologist Christine Carter, PhD, blows us a breath of fresh air with her five-step, common-sense primer *The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Home and Work*. Based on personal experiments with living life in what she calls the ‘pressure cooker,’ Dr. Carter offers advice in easily digestible nuggets.”—***Working Mother***

“Carter gives actionable ways to balance your life, your health, and your career. This book is packed with smart advice and hard-earned wisdom.”—***Inc.***

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“Carter’s transformation from overwhelmed working mom to productive and relaxed human being will inspire you. [*The Sweet Spot*] is chock-full of concrete tips on how to sharpen your focus, improve your efficiency, and use technology to your advantage.”—***The Week***

“Carter translates her knowledge of the psychology and neuroscience of happiness into practical advice for navigating the demands of modern life.”—***Publishers Weekly***

“Illuminates the simple and sustainable path toward a precious and happy balance.”—**Deepak Chopra**

“A gift, like a good friend drawing a personal road map out of the crazy busy swirl of our overloaded lives.”—**Brigid Schulte, author of *Overwhelmed***

“This book did something I thought was impossible: It seemed to *give me more time*.”—**Martha Beck, author of *Finding Your Way in a Wild New World***

“A page-turning thriller full of proven ways to have the life you want.”—**Rick Hanson, Ph.D., author of *Hardwiring Happiness***

“Timely, lively, and vital, *The Sweet Spot* is an immediately useful must-read.”—**Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage***

“*The Sweet Spot* inspired me to make immediate changes that have increased my productivity and lowered my stress.”—**Dan Mulhern, president, Granholm Mulhern Associates**

“Refreshing, timely, and inspiring, *The Sweet Spot* will help you focus on what really matters

most.”—**Renée Peterson Trudeau, author of *The Mother’s Guide to Self-Renewal***

“The Sweet Spot is worth finding, and Christine Carter teaches us how.”—**Lucy Danziger, co-author of *The Nine Rooms of Happiness***

“A must-read for every overworked executive, overwrought parent, or overscheduled human being.”—**Jennifer Granholm, governor of Michigan, 2003–11**

“Compelling and practical . . . You will learn exactly how to create a much sweeter life!”—**Christiane Northrup, M.D.**

About the Author

Christine Carter, Ph.D., is a sociologist and happiness expert at UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center, an interdisciplinary research center that “translates” the study of happiness, resilience, and emotional intelligence for the public. The author of the bestselling *Raising Happiness*, Dr. Carter blogs regularly for *Greater Good*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Psychology Today*. She has appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Dr. Oz Show*, *Rachael Ray*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Today*, and NPR, and has helped thousands of people lead happier and more productive lives through her lectures and online classes. Her e-newsletters have more than fifty thousand subscribers. She lives with her husband, children, and stepchildren in Berkeley, California.

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Chapter 1

FROM WORKING OVERTIME TO ENJOYING THE SEASONS

"We are all dying, some sooner, some later. The real exception is to truly live."

—Lee Lipsenthal, *Enjoy Every Sandwich*

A doctor friend of mine, Lee Lipsenthal, was dying from cancer, leaving children and a beloved wife behind. He came to our monthly Buddhism and neuroscience study group one last time to share what his impending death had taught him. Imagine you’ve just been told that you have less than six months to live, Lee said to us.

What do you need to do?

Whom do you need to talk to?

Where do you need to visit?

How will you spend your remaining time?

As I visualized my life with a terminal illness, on the precipice of my own death, I was profoundly struck by how totally out of whack my (real) life had become. In fact, my primary reaction to Lee’s death meditation was that I would feel relieved to be dying.

This realization was shocking and, frankly, embarrassing. Lee understood, but imagine how insulting this sentiment could have been to him. He would have given anything to be as healthy as I was. It wasn’t that I was unhappy with my life—far from it. But I was overwhelmed by it. My imagined impending death released me from the stresses of everyday life. It’s obvious to me now that I needed a break—a figurative

and literal recess during which I could recharge my proverbial batteries.

The trouble was (and is for so many) that I saw no way to take that break without giving something up. I did not see any ways to free up time for rest and reflection, nor did I see ways that I could simplify or reorganize my life for greater ease and less strain. But now I do.

The first part of the “sweet spot equation”—Take Recess—is about starting to breathe easier right away by giving yourself tiny moments to recharge throughout the day. I know, I know: You’re really busy. Too busy to take any sort of break, much less “recess.” Bear with me.

Full Plate, Empty Life

Everyone asks: How are you? And everyone answers: I am so busy.

“We say this to one another with no small degree of pride,” writes Wayne Muller in his treatise on rest, “as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a real mark of character. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others.” Have you ever bought into this self-fulfilling prophecy? When we start to feel worthwhile because of our busyness, we start to believe the corollary: If I’m not busy, I’m not worthwhile.

Most of our modern tasks are what researchers call “instrumental.” They aren’t fun; they are productive, stuff we “should” do, tasks to cross off of a list. The trouble comes when we eliminate the fun stuff in our lives, when play and rest get eliminated and we use a “get ’er done approach” to instrumental work. This trouble is best illuminated by a famous study by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Flow*.

Csikszentmihalyi unintentionally induced textbook cases of generalized anxiety disorder in people simply by instructing his subjects as follows: From the time you wake up until 9:00 p.m., he explained, “We would like you to act in a normal way, doing all the things you have to do, but not doing anything that is ‘play’ or ‘non-instrumental.’?”

Research subjects could make the beds and wash the dishes, drive the carpool, go to work, come home and make dinner, supervise homework and bedtime—any of this sounding familiar?—skipping those moments of enjoyment in the day that bring flow or rest. They avoided those things at work they found especially gratifying, skipped the lovely breather they’d take when the kids were off to school, refrained from juicy-but-not-productive sex.

Following these instructions for just forty-eight hours produced symptoms of serious anxiety in research subjects—restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension—all by eliminating flow and play from their lives. In other words, we get anxious when we aren’t having any fun. Management consultant and author Dan Pink writes about what happened to these particular research subjects:

The results were almost immediate. Even at the end of the first day, participants “noticed an increased sluggishness about their behavior.” They began complaining of headaches. Most reported difficulty concentrating, with “thoughts [that] wander round in circles without getting anywhere.” Some felt sleepy, while others were too agitated to sleep. As Csikszentmihalyi wrote, “After just two days of deprivation . . . the general deterioration in mood was so advanced that prolonging the experiment would have been inadvisable.”

When we strip our lives of play and flow—as we so often do just to get everything done—our mood

deteriorates. Here's the thing: A life made up of only "instrumental" tasks was an experimental anomaly for research subjects in the 1970s, when Csikszentmihalyi's study was run, but it has become the norm for many people today. Fun, rest, relaxation, and flow have been squeezed out of our lives in the pursuit of more. More sports and lessons for our kids (so that they can get into the best schools and get the best jobs when they graduate), and more work (so that we can keep our jobs, or we can earn more money so we can buy more stuff). We are poisoned by the hypnotic belief, writes Muller, that "good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort," and so "we can never truly rest."

Case in point: On May 14, 2013, a twenty-four-year-old "ad man" named Gabriel Li died of a sudden heart attack at his Ogilvy & Mather Beijing office. The official cause of death? Overwork. He'd been working overtime most days the month prior to his death, leaving the office at 11:00 p.m. He was at his desk when he died. Though the American advertising agency where he was employed denied that his death was linked to overwork, Li will be counted by the Chinese government among the estimated 600,000 people in China who die from work-related exhaustion each year.

Deaths like Li's are a global problem. The Japanese call sudden death due to cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease *karoshi*, which means "death from overwork." Sudden cardiac arrest related to overwork happens in all industrialized nations. Stressed and exhausted employees are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease. Cortisol, a hormone that is released when we are stressed, is a chief culprit, as it causes the arteries to narrow.

The Alternative: Produce—and Grow—Like Olive Trees

My great-grandparents grew olives, and my brother runs the olive processing company they started, so I've learned a lot about olives over the years. Olives are an "alternate bearing crop," which means that they grow a lot of fruit one year, then mostly branches the following year, creating what is called a "short crop." They produce less fruit in year one in order to produce a large crop in year two. We can all learn from the olive tree. In addition to being a symbol of peace, olives are also a metaphor for how rest and rejuvenation are essential to productivity.

In today's hyper-busy world, most people don't rest or rejuvenate much. We don't allow ourselves the "non-instrumental" activities in life. Research does find that consistent and deliberate practice leads to elite performance (see Chapter 8 for more on that). But focused work is not the same as unending work. Even Olympic athletes must train and rest or they get hurt. Fruit trees forced to produce for more than one season, without being allowed to rest in the winter, lose their ability to bear fruit altogether.

In our fast-paced and technology-driven culture, we (and our employers) sometimes forget that we are humans, not computers. Like other animals, humans are governed by circadian and ultradian rhythms. Most people are familiar with the concept of our circadian rhythms. In the twenty-four-hour period when the sun rises and sets, we sleep and wake in predictable cycles. When we travel into different time zones, our circadian rhythms get out of whack, and as a consequence, our lives also can feel similarly discombobulated.

Our brains and bodies also cycle in "ultradian rhythms" throughout the day and night. An ultradian rhythm is a recurrent period or cycle that repeats throughout the twenty-four-hour circadian day, like breathing or our heartbeat.

Even in our sleep, we don't just exist in a singular, steady state. We cycle between dreaming and various types of non-dreaming sleep. There are five different stages of the sleep cycle, each stage identifiable by different brain-wave patterns. For example, Stage 1 sleep is characterized by slow theta waves, while Stage 4

sleep, which is deep and dreamless, is characterized by even slower delta waves.

Our brain-wave patterns also cycle when we are awake. About every hour and a half to two hours, we experience a significant “ultradian dip,” when our energy drops and sleep becomes possible. When we work through these dips—relying on caffeine, adrenaline, and stress hormones to keep us alert instead of letting our bodies and brains rest, we become anxious and jittery, and our performance falters.

When we ignore our body’s natural rhythms, we create a state of chronic jet lag for ourselves, which over time leads to clinical levels of depression and anxiety, stress-related diseases, and myriad substance-abuse problems (as we self-medicate to stay alert and to “rest”). As Wayne Muller writes in his book *A Life of Being, Having, and Doing Enough*:

When we are increasingly drained, pressed for time, and afraid . . . we are inclined to grasp for some substitute. We are more easily seduced by certain behaviors or possessions that promise to give us not precisely what we dreamed, but something that looks close enough. Most importantly, it is always the thing we can get easier, cheaper, and faster, in an increasingly busy life—in the bone-weary ache of our exhausted heart—and this kind of swift comfort can become irresistible.

Unfortunately, as our time and energy are spent more singularly on work, our plate gets too full to enjoy what is on it (or falling off of it).

Finding the “Minimum Effective Dose”

When we live our lives as though we are running one marathon after another, day after day, it is, frankly, impossible for life to feel anything but difficult. We know this about actual marathons; there is a whole protocol that runners go through when they finish a race so they can recover. They have medical and other support to begin repairing the damage to their bodies, and they know to rest for weeks or even months between races. Yet we don’t have parallel support systems in place for our daily “marathons.”

Instead of running one “marathon” after another with little recovery time between them, we can learn to honor the natural rhythms of our days and our lives. We can live more like olive trees, which produce olives for hundreds of years, than like our iPhones, which are built to last only a couple of years. We can take a school day approach to life, in which we work and learn and produce and create in predictable periods of time, and then we have equally predictable periods of play and rest and recovery. As in school, we take recess.

There’s one more thing that we can learn from marathoners and olive trees: Our most productive pace is always the most consistent one. When we are producing and creating—when runners are in a race and when trees are growing fruit in the summer and when authors like me are writing a book—we are most successful when we are consistent in our efforts. Long-distance runners (and even sprinters) are more likely to win a race if they run each mile at a consistent pace. Expeditioners—people who walk across America—are more likely to succeed, and finish far more quickly, when they walk or trek the same distance day after day, rain or shine. This means they try to trek twenty miles on hard days when the weather is bad and the mileage is all uphill, and—this is the clincher—they stop after twenty miles on easy days, when the weather is mild and the terrain is downhill. Instead of cramming—working long hours and late nights before a big project is due—we human beings do best when we make consistent, predictable, daily progress.

These insights have translated in a few ways in my work. First, the type of work I do cycles like the seasons. Some seasons I focus on writing. Once a book or an article is written, I rest and explore new topics, turning

my attention to less taxing work, and I take several weeks off and don't write at all. This is my cycle of creation and rest. In addition, when I'm in a production cycle, I write consistently, 650 to 1,000 words a day. I try to write this amount even on hard days, when I am traveling or have a lot of meetings or my kids are home from school. And on easy days—when I've blocked off six full hours of uninterrupted time to write—I stop once I hit the 1,000-word mark. For me, it is more difficult to stop writing on easy days than it is to churn out 650 words (basically just one rough page) on a hard day. But here's the thing: I've found that if I write more than 1,000 words a couple of days in a row, by the third day, the writing becomes rather joyless. Actually, it can be excruciating. I feel like I'm trying to squeeze water from a dry sponge. If I finish my 1,000 words and still have time to write, I let myself edit, or I do research—both things that I find easy and joyful and that set me up for success the next day. And ultimately, I know I'm not slowing myself down—that I can complete a book in about six months (my spring and summer fruit production) at this consistent and very manageable pace.

When we take the approach of trees and successful runners and expeditioners, we find that we are able to live with both strength and ease. We free up time and energy to re-energize, to connect, and to find real and deep meaning.

Let me tell you, life seems pretty sweet to me these days, and not because I'm Oprah-rich and doted on by a support staff. I frequently have profound feelings that life is really, really good. I still feel astonished that even though I'm not working the long hours I used to, I'm more financially independent and secure. Consider that:

Every morning this week I rose from bed without feeling the need to press the snooze button. After a quick trip to the loo, I did a lovely meditation and then went for a short run or did a seven-minute strength-training circuit.

After showering and eating breakfast, I got my writing brain warmed up by reading several articles I'd clipped from various online sources—emails, academic journals, a couple different blogs and online magazines. I had more time than I needed to do this, so it felt luxurious to read and drink my coffee.

After getting the kids off to school, because I'd been pondering what I wanted to write in an unfocused way as I showered and ate breakfast, when I sat myself down in front of a huge blank pad, ideas poured out of me in an easy, non-linear way. I outlined this chapter in about ten minutes.

We overachievers sometimes feel guilty when things are as easy as my life often feels to me now. If it isn't hard, am I actually working? If I'm not working, am I worth anything? When I tell you that I outlined this chapter in ten minutes, do you discount its value, or can you begin to imagine that some of what we approach as the hardest things can indeed be the easiest?

These things—getting myself out of bed, meditating and exercising, starting my most important work first thing in the morning rather than checking my email first—used to be very difficult, if not impossible, for me. I used to press snooze two and even three times in the morning. I used to have to bribe and cajole myself to exercise, and I rarely meditated, even though I knew it was good for me and I had strong intentions to do it. And, distracted by email and seemingly urgent pings for my attention, I used to struggle to put “first things first”—to do the work that really mattered to me.

Moreover, I used to make these things much harder than they needed to be. This morning I ran for only nine minutes—while my children pressed snooze on their alarm clocks. For a former marathon runner, slowly jogging less than a mile a few days a week seems pathetically unambitious. But here's the thing: I'm now

consistently running twenty miles more per month than before I drastically reduced my ambitions. This is because before I started doing just a little bit of exercise each weekday morning, I was spending a lot of time planning my exercise—choosing a half marathon to train for, choosing a twelve-week training plan—but very little time actually exercising. What working single mom can work out for an hour before getting her kids off to school? I know that some people do it, but I'd venture to guess that they aren't as well rested as I am now.

And guess what? I've found what doctors (and Tim Ferriss) call the “minimum effective dose” of exercise. I'm now stronger than I have ever been in my life. I'm the same dress size I was before I had my kids and when I was running marathons—but I'm also stronger because I've been doing one ridiculously unambitious strength-training circuit three days a week.

My body is also different because it doesn't hurt. I no longer have the hip and knee problems that plagued me in my twenties when I was running five or more hours a week but not stretching or strength training. And I no longer get sick all of the time, even though I've reached that age when people start complaining that their body is not what it used to be.

Re-learning to Play

When Lee took me through the death meditation, I realized that I was making my life much harder than it needed to be simply because I'd lost touch with the restful and playful parts of my life. I felt relief to be “dying” because it seemed the ultimate permission to prioritize the meaningful stuff of life, the things I really felt a desire to do. Which raised a really good question: What was it that I wanted to do in my last six months of life?

It turns out, I had no bucket list.

I could think of exciting things that I should want to do and, given a long life, would hope to do someday. But if I had only six months to live? I'd want to go back to the simple things that bring me joy, like cooking dinner for my family and taking the dog hiking with friends. I'd want to hang out with my kids reading young adult literature, and go to movies with my husband. I'd sit around and talk with my writer friends about their theories and books, and I'd read cooking magazines. I'd spend more time with my brother and his wife and their totally adorable baby. I'd want mundane things, like playdates for my kids, whose friends I love. I'd want to sit around and talk about weird spiritual things with my dad. I would hang out with my closest girlfriends and favorite couples all the time, preferably in a hot tub.

In short, these are things I already did sometimes, though much less than I would have liked. They are everyday things, not bucket-list things. It's not that I don't want to learn to track wild animals in Botswana—believe me, I did. But at that moment in which I envisioned having only six months to live, all I wanted was to enjoy my actual life more. I wanted a little more quality downtime.

I realized that I was living under the assumption that part of life is necessarily difficult. More than that, it's stressful. I thought life had to be hard—that's just the way it is. I was living in a constant state of fight or flight, created by a pernicious and unrelenting sense that I was not getting it all done. My system was reacting as though my life was being threatened when actually it wasn't. I was living in a continual state of alarm or exhaustion, and I didn't have to be.

Imagining dying jolted me in a way that Lee would later lay out in his wonderful book *Enjoy Every Sandwich*:

Some cures require a radical intervention of the soul: a change in our mindset and our way of being. These cures require us to stop racing through our busy lives, working, providing, and consuming. Some cures require that we stop and enjoy every sandwich.

So simple, and so obvious, and yet also so profoundly transformational for me. Sure, I'd been trying to enjoy every sandwich before. But with everything I had going on in my life, sometimes that was like trying to read in a very dimly lit room. Lee's magical presence helped me integrate into my life insights that I had been teaching for years. For me, Lee's life—and death—was nothing short of a “radical intervention of the soul.”

We humans have dreams and values and priorities. We love and are loved by others. Our work and our companionship are important to the world and the beings in it. We make art and appreciate nature: a spectacular sunset or a sonata, a phenomenal meal or a particularly beautiful blackberry, a drawing from a child or a kiss from a dog. These “non-instrumental” things require our time and energy; in return, they bring us real joy and, ironically, they increase our productivity.

We humans need play. We need to laugh and delight in small things, like the smell of jasmine at dusk, or the summer sun streaming into the kitchen after breakfast. We need to play peekaboo with babies. We need to sing our favorite songs at the top of our lungs. We need to dance with our children and lovers and friends.

And because we humans are so wildly creative, we are constantly inventing amazing technologies, tools that save us time and effort. The key question remains, however: What will we choose to do with all the found time and energy that we've invented for ourselves?

The Easiest Thing: Take Recess

Today, take a good old-fashioned recess in the middle of the day. Go ahead and do your hardest or most dreaded work—or whatever you need to do—but after about sixty to ninety minutes of focused attention, honor your ultradian rhythms and take a break. Rest.

What do you find relaxing or rejuvenating? Is there an article you've been wanting to read for fun? Does your most vivid fantasy involve a nap? Do you want to spend a few minutes looking at pictures of pretty living rooms on Pinterest? Perhaps you long to go outside into the great outdoors (or the plaza across from your office) and let the sun shine on your face. Just do it. The only rule is that what you do during recess must be restful or playful; it can't be “instrumental” in any way. Anything that you have to do anyway (shower, eat lunch) doesn't count, and neither does anything that exists on a to-do list anywhere.

Have fun!

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gregory Mackenzie:

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