

Every parent knows that children like bedtime stories read at a gentle, meandering pace. But I used to be too fast, too hectic, too hurried to slow down with Dr. Seuss.

Instead, I whizzed through *The Cat In The Hat*, skipping a line here, a paragraph there, sometimes a whole page. When I read *Snow White*, there were sometimes only three dwarves in the tale. Things got so rushed I even considered buying a book of “one-minute bedtime stories:” *Snow White* in 60 seconds. And that's when the alarm bells started ringing.

Thankfully, I never bought the one-minute fables. Instead, I began investigating the possibility of slowing down in a world addicted to speed. What I discovered is that right across the globe people are finding ways to put on the brakes - without having to ditch their careers and join a commune.

We need a “slow” revolution now more than ever. These days, many of us are stuck in fast forward. We work fast, talk fast, think fast, eat fast, play fast. We even make love in a hurry. A British men's magazine recently ran the following headline: “Bring Her To Orgasm In 30 Seconds!” Yet there is a price to pay for living like a roadrunner.

We sleep 90 minutes less a night than a century ago, and stress-related illnesses are soaring. People are burning out younger than ever before. At work, we often do things quickly instead of doing them well. And who has enough time for family and friends? In our haste, we struggle to relax, to take pleasure from things, to enjoy the moment.

The solution is simple: Slow down a little.

Consider the workplace. In much of Europe, falling working hours have created a quality of life that vacation-starved Americans can only dream about. Even in workaholic Japan the government is now urging companies to give staff more time off. Membership in the Sloth Club, which runs a laidback café in Tokyo, is surging.

Working less can mean working more efficiently, too. The Nordic countries

all work relatively short hours yet their economies are highly competitive.

Leading firms see the writing on the wall. SAS, a US-based software giant, combines a French-style 35-hour work-week with generous vacation benefits. The payoff: robust profits and a regular place in the Top 10 of Fortune's Best Companies To Work For. To encourage staff to take a vacation, PriceWaterHouseCoopers, the accountancy firm, now shuts down its US operation for three weeks every year.

Slowing down on the job can pay dividends, too. Research shows that taking regular breaks during the workday makes employees more lively and creative. Relaxation helps the brain slip into a richer, more nuanced mode of thinking. That is why our best ideas seldom come in the middle of a fast-paced meeting or in the final dash to meet a deadline; they come when we chill out – sun-tanning on the beach, soaking in the bath or eating a sandwich in the park. Psychologists call this “slow thinking.”

To get the creative juices flowing, more and more companies are setting aside quiet places where staff can relax, practice yoga or even take a nap. Others are imposing speed limits on the information superhighway. Veritas, a software-heavyweight in California, has introduced email-free days. A senior executive at IBM now signs off every email with this rallying cry: "Read your mail just twice each day. Recapture your life's time and relearn to dream. Join the slow email movement!" And that's IBM, not an aromatherapy cooperative.

Beyond the workplace, many are taking a slower approach to food, and eating better as a result. Look at the rise of farmers' markets and cooking classes, or the renaissance of handmade bread, cheese and beer. The Italian-based Slow Food movement, which stands for everything fast food does not, now has nearly 100,000 members in 50 countries.

Slowing down can also work wonders in the bedroom. We all laughed when Sting raved about romping Tantric-style for hours on end but now couples all over the world are flocking to workshops to learn the art of unhurried love-making. Italy even has a Slow Sex movement.

Millions more are tuning their bodies and minds with slower exercise (think yoga, tai chi and SuperSlow weightlifting) and slower forms of medicine (think Reiki, acupuncture and herbalism).

There is also a growing backlash against the trend for over-loading children. Kids need unscheduled free time to recharge, to learn how to think creatively and how to socialize. Cities across North America, including Amos, a small forest and mining town in northwestern Quebec, now hold official slow-down days when all extracurricular activities and homework are cancelled to give children some time to relax, play, hang out – to be children. Cargilfield, a private school in Scotland, has boosted exam results by banning homework for pupils up to the age of 13.

To send the message that less is more, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has shrunk the section devoted to extracurricular activities on its application form. The university has told parents that their children will benefit from a little loafing and daydreaming. In a similar vein, Harvard now sends all its first-year undergraduates a letter extolling the virtues of doing less and relaxing more. The title of the letter: “Slow Down.”

Of course, you can take this deceleration thing too far. Slower is not always better. Too much slowness is just as bad as too much speed. What we really need is balance - an understanding that sometimes fast is good, but that sometimes slow is good, too.

Getting in touch with my inner tortoise has made me more relaxed, dynamic and creative. I also feel closer to my friends and family and more able to enjoy each moment of my day.

Bedtime stories are certainly a lot more fun when you don't speed-read them.END