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In control

A safety belt for the entrepreneurial edge

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

❗❗ Eventually, I want to have my own business." Most of my clients have such a vision of being their own boss someday. The entrepreneurial spirit burns bright in America. The tricky part is giving birth to a new business, nurturing it through the infant and toddler stages, and doing it all without getting burned out.

By the time new business owners are having their cards and letterheads printed, they know that life isn't going to be nicely balanced for a while.

But I doubt whether anyone truly wants a life like a balanced diet, a piece of pie cut into even proportions: family, work, friends, play, exercise, etc. I'm not sure such a thing exists.

Anyone who chooses to be at the helm of a small business knows, or learns readily, that life will be lopsided much of the time. The mix of the ingredients changes as we change, sometimes because of major life passages, sometimes whimsically, often because of events outside of our control.

For entrepreneurs, the perfectly balanced life has as much appeal as the photographs of the balanced and nutritious meals in the sixth-grade health textbook. We want more than that.

As Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Power of Myth*, "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

Entrepreneurs are thirsty for that rapture, and willing to sacrifice a neat and tidy life to get it.

At the same time, part of the motivation to "run the show" is a desire to feel in tune and at choice about the lives we lead daily. Entrepreneurs who make it are energized by living close to the edge — the trick is to know when you're going over the edge.

Along with everything else it takes to run a small business, it's essential to stay alert to signs that you've stretched your mind, body and relationships too far. I've chunked the thing down into four parts: thinking, feeling, doing and believing. Tuning into those regularly can tell you whether you're setting your own pace or being driven by demons unknown, straight into derailment.

You can catch yourself before derailing, for example, if you keep an ear to your inner voice, your thinking — or metacognition, as the psychologists call it.

Here are some warning flags in the thinking category:

- Your thoughts center on lost effectiveness, others not understanding you, nothing being fun anymore

- You are worrying excessively about what you did yesterday or what might happen tomorrow, or berating yourself for "screw-ups"

- Your thoughts are full of "have-to's" or "shoulds"

The feeling part may be boredom, fatigue, physical illness, depression, or a chronic sense of being overwhelmed.

When we're leaning up close to burn-out, what we're doing is blaming others, complaining, avoiding friends, having trouble sleeping, not finishing stuff, and generally irritated by (and irritating) most people around us.

So what beliefs drive all this yucky stuff? They differ with each person. Some beliefs that drive people to the edge are, "I have to be perfect", or "I am invincible and can catch up on family, rest, etc., after this project is put to bed."

Another one is "I have to succeed" — this with no specific picture of success as I've mentioned in previous columns.

So what are these four areas like when you are on top of things?

Thinking: Your mind is where you are — not someplace you have been or where you're going next. Thinking is clear and you can focus. Sense of humor is available.

Feeling: When you're comfortably sitting on top of your own life, you feel good, which often means the absence of tension, aches and pains, fatigue. You're open to the bodily sensations we call feelings, whether sadness, sexiness, fear, anger or joy. You simply feel these feelings honestly, choose to express them into the world in the way you want, accept them as a badge of humanity and move on.

Doing: You find yourself doing what you want to do, and usually wanting to do what you are doing. You seek pleasure, just as naturally as the little amoebae move toward warmth and light. You are dependable to yourself and do things that nourish your body and your spirit.

Believing: You live out of your own beliefs, not some antique ones handed down to you or beliefs you think you should have. Most importantly you daily nourish a belief in yourself.

Boris Pasternak said it well in *Dr. Zhivago*: "The great majority of us are required to live a life of constant, systematic duplicity. Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn't just a fiction, it's a part of our physical body, and our soul exists in space and is inside us, like the teeth in our mouth, it can't be forever violated with impunity."

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