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Find more **free time** in your day

Mom, student, nurse... Serina does it all, but she wishes life was less work and more play. Organizing guru Julie Morgenstern provides this reader with relief from schedule stress.

The challenge

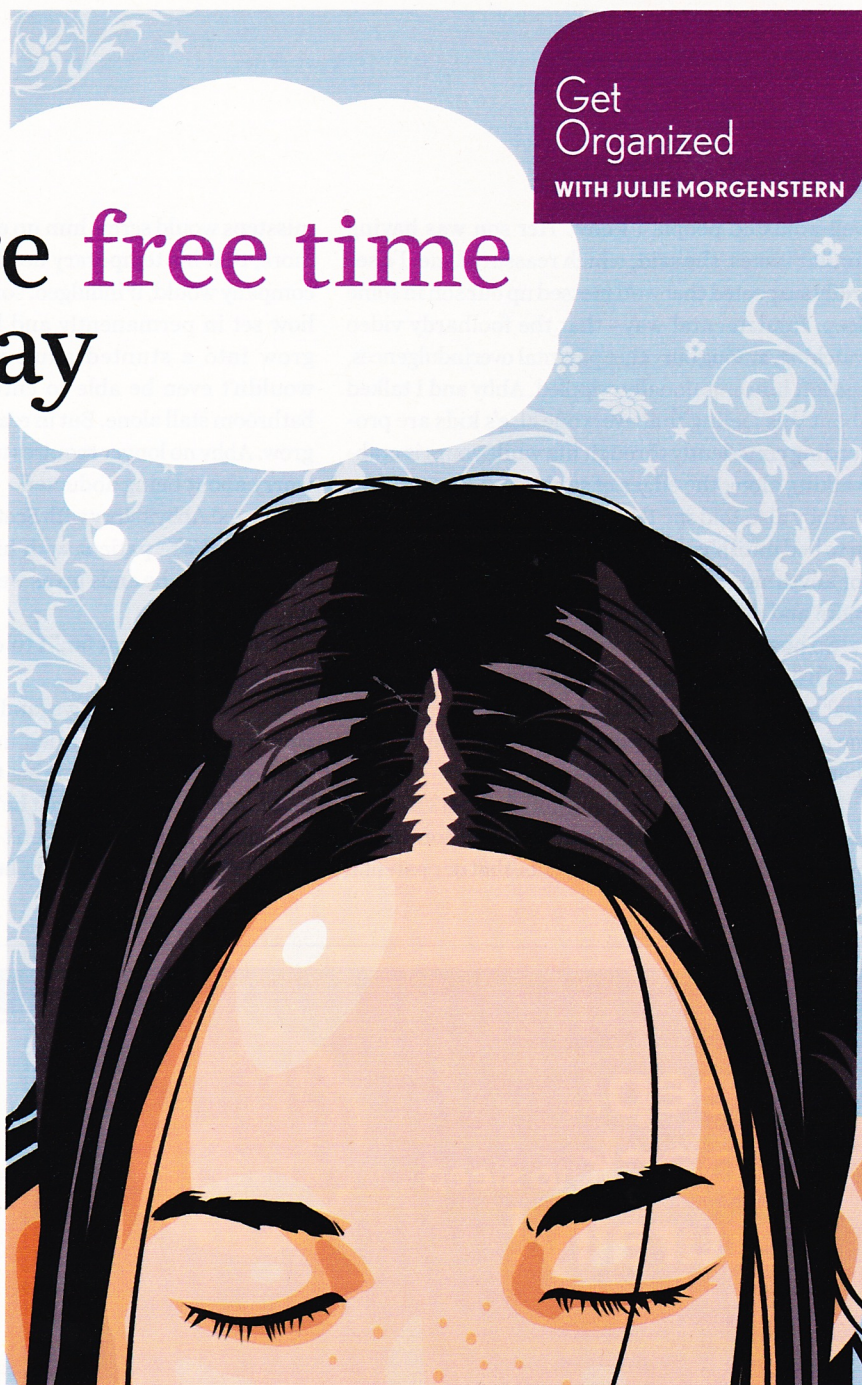
Serina Hunter-Thomas, 38, knows busy. This West Virginia mom works full-time as a Commissioned Corps Nurse Officer for the Department of Health and Human Services, is pursuing a second master's degree in teaching via a combination of virtual and classroom courses, and is the mom to daughters Shalin, 8, Samaire, 6, and Soraya, 16 months. So it's no wonder she doesn't have time to exercise—and has barely been on a date with her husband, Robert, a stay-at-home dad, in the past 10 years. Serina loves the life she's created but wishes she had a little bit more time to enjoy it—and isn't sure how she can do that without adding more to her already overstuffed schedule.

Julie's plan of action

Serina is a high-energy woman who thrives on being busy. My hunch is that right now she operates in only two modes: work and rest. It's that mentality that's causing her to feel burned out. While her work and academic life are highly structured—she never misses her daily commuter train or fails to hand in an assignment—her evenings and weekends aren't and can tend toward chaos. Dinnertime has become a

mad dash, and downtime is practically nonexistent. But by tweaking her schedule with these simple fixes, I'm confident Serina will find the breathing room that will make her life feel even bigger and brighter.

1 Give yourself a break. Free time is not the leftover time after everything else is done—it's something you deserve a little of every day. After a busy day, Serina, who's currently taking four courses in a graduate program, finds herself staying up to work on her assignments until she literally falls asleep in front of the computer. I ask her if it's imperative that she finish her



coursework in three years, or if it would be okay to stretch out her studies to four or even five years. Surprisingly, she'd never thought of that! Serina is so used to performing at her maximum all the time that she needs to realize it's okay to slow down. I also tell Serina to give herself a concrete bedtime and power down her computer at least half an hour before it, so she has time to talk with her husband or read a book.

2 Put you on your calendar. We often put ourselves last on our list of to-do's, letting the things we love fall by the wayside as we desperately try to juggle everyone else's needs. Serina wants to find time to exercise, and even has a gym in her building at work. Still, she finds herself all too often trying to plow through a mountain of paperwork at her desk—even though, she admits, the majority of it isn't deadline-driven. I remind Serina that the work will still be there if she takes a 45-minute workout break, and she'll probably feel a lot more clear-headed and motivated to do it. I suggest that Serina enlist a few colleagues and make an appointment to head down to the gym during lunch hour a few times a week. Serina should write it down in her calendar as an appointment or program it into her online calendar. Prioritizing herself on paper is a visual reminder that her needs matter.

3 Enlist homework help. Right now, Serina's oldest daughter's homework time tends to be stressful, leaving everyone in a bad mood before bedtime. I suggest that Serina enlist her husband, Robert, for more help in this department, and that they formally divvy up academic assignments by subject. For example, Robert could be the reading and social studies "expert," and Serina could be consulted for math and science. If Robert feels he needs a break after spending all day with the girls, they can even work out homework "office hours," with Serina on call from 7 to 7:30 and Robert on call from 7:30 to 8.

4 Make a weekend plan. Serina often wakes up on Monday mornings feeling drained rather than recharged because her weekend flew by in a haze of errands, laundry, and her own homework assignments. I told her to imagine the weekend as six concrete blocks of time: two mornings, two afternoons, and two evenings. I encourage her to pick one time slot each day when the family does an activity together. Saturday mornings could be reserved as family time for going to breakfast, visiting a park, or heading to an early movie, and the afternoons could be set aside as a time for Serina to work on her own school assignments and

the kids to enjoy free play by themselves or play dates with friends. When everyone knows what the plan is, Serina won't have to spend time fielding *what are we doing now?* questions and will be able to feel recharged before she begins her schoolwork. The family already goes to church most Sunday mornings, so Sunday afternoons could be devoted to prepping for the week ahead, such as grocery shopping, leaving Sunday night free to enjoy family time or time with friends.

5 Maximize mealtimes. Family dinners are great—when everyone's relaxed and not famished. Serina views dinner as a hassle: Often she's desperately trying to cobble it together as soon as she rushes in the door. But with a few fixes, Serina and Robert can turn mealtime into an opportunity for the family to check in with one another. Robert is willing to help out but is unsure of his culinary skills, so Serina could prep casseroles and store them in the freezer, then keep one shelf in the refrigerator cupboard stocked with ingredients. Robert can use to make simple dishes. Finally, Serina and Robert can delegate a few dinner responsibilities to their older daughters, such as making salads. With these changes, Serina can look forward to—rather than dread—dinnertime on her commute home.

6 Create a babysitting co-op. Starting a co-op—a community of parents who trade hours of babysitting—sounds complicated, but it doesn't have to be. It's as simple as formalizing play-date trade-offs and can be created with as few as two families. I recommend that Serina reach out to the parents of Shalin's and Samaira's classmates to form a group that trades hours of babysitting, using one-hour coupons as currency and using a shared Google calendar to make requests easy to manage.

Serina's reaction

I never thought about having a structure to the weekends, but I love the idea of making sure we get out of the house during a block of time on Saturdays. Our girls love doing craft projects, so we think it would be fun to go to the library, pick out craft books, and work on those. I also really like the idea of creating weekly menus. In the past, I had tried to do it for a whole month, which was far too daunting. This seems much more manageable. Also, my husband liked the idea of taking on homework duty—we decided he'll do reading and writing, and I'll do math. I already feel less overwhelmed! **R**



Julie Morgenstern is an organization and time-management expert, productivity consultant, and New York Times best-selling author of *Organization: Including Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life*.

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