

IN PRAISE OF

downshifting



The pressure to succeed at work can lead to illness and misery. So should you consider stepping back from your career? Rosie Mullender did just that and she's never been happier

It was a question posed by a long-dead philosopher that convinced me to quit my job: would you choose to live your life, exactly as you've lived it, over and over again? It's natural to wonder what you would change if you could rewind your life. The idea of being able to go back and tell someone you love them, or realise before it's too late that you don't suit a fringe, is a comforting one.

When I stumbled upon this philosophical dilemma, I had a high-powered job as a magazine editor. I'd spent decades working my way to the top, but it wasn't what I expected. Being in charge meant delegating the fun jobs to other people and as well as hiring staff, it was also my responsibility to fire them – a job I couldn't stomach no matter how hard I channelled my inner Devil Wears Prada. Although I told myself I had my dream job, the reality was more akin to a nightmare – I'd jolt awake every night, covered in sweat – so the thought of having to live this part of my life over and over again horrified me and made me realise I'd reached my limit.

LETTING GO

I was, perhaps, the living embodiment of the Peter Principle. This management theory by Canadian educator Laurence J. Peter says that people promoted in a hierarchy eventually rise to a 'level of incompetence' – in other words, people succeed until they reach a role for which they actually lack the skills.

The recent body+soul and Medibank Worklife Survey found that 900,000 Aussies admit to having taken leave recently due to stress, while imposter syndrome – a fear of being exposed as a fraud that often hits perfectionists – affects as much as a third of millennial workers. I've seen first-hand how these stressors can creep up on you. But leaving my high-profile job to go freelance was still easier said than done.

The wellness movement focuses on being the best you can possibly be – eating clean, adopting healthy habits and looking great are all encouraged. At work, you're supposed to thrive in your discomfort zone and 'lean in', all while drinking a vacuum-blended smoothie.

If you're not trying to have it all, there's a distinct feeling you're letting yourself down. There's no set of instructions on how to handle it if you don't want to have it all, or it all gets too much.

"I'm a big fan of the wellness movement, but at the extreme end of wellness is perfectionism," says Carolyn Alchin, the vice-president of the Career Development Association of Australia (CDA). "People tend to think: 'If I do all these things as often as possible, it must mean I'll be a better person.' But sometimes you have to appreciate that some things are better done than perfect."

I've always been fiercely ambitious – so it was a shock to suddenly want to take a step down. But a US study by the Families and Work Institute found that people tend to lose ambition as they age, and that the drive to take on additional responsibilities becomes less urgent from the age of 35.

"Lots of people go into a corporate job because that's their measure of success, but these days there's a greater

