

Why it's okay to tread water at work

It often feels like we are all under pressure to pursue promotions, climb the career ladder, push out of our comfort zones. But actually, says Marianne Power, should we ever consider coasting in our careers?

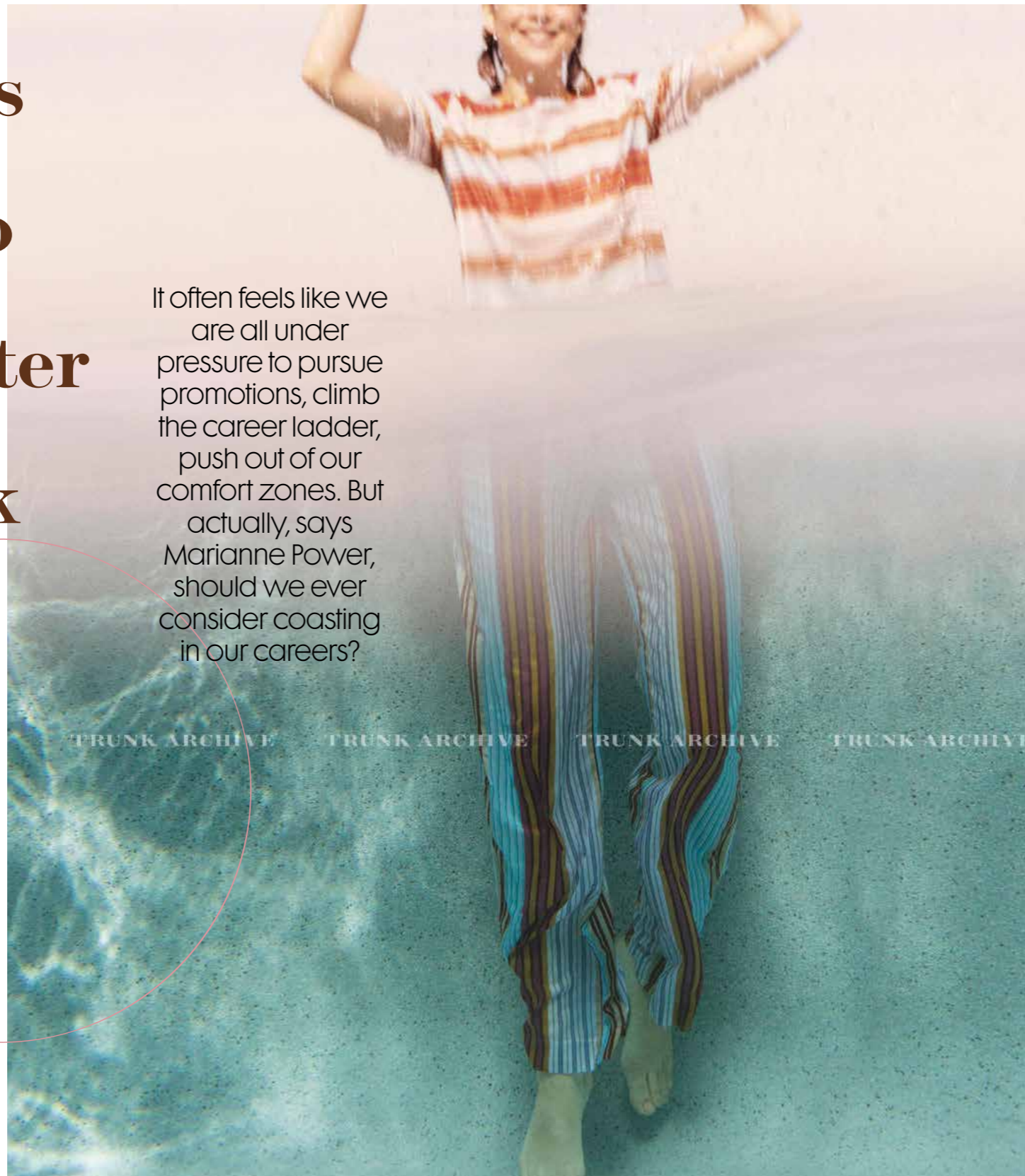
Last year, I was invited to appear on a television show to talk about whether self-help books can change your life. Even though it's a topic I write

about, my immediate reaction was no, I don't want to. My second thought was, pull yourself together, be professional, this is a great opportunity.

So I spent a sleepless night imagining the tough questions that could be asked and Twitter taking me apart. I imagined the adrenaline pumping around my body and the hours of comedown fretting over something stupid I'd said. Yes, it might be good for my career – but would it be good for me? It was probably the first time I'd ever asked myself such a question.

Until that point, I'd always thrown myself out of my comfort zone in the name of work. With every opportunity that came, the answer was yes! Yes, I'm terrified but, yes! Yes, I'm exhausted but, yes!

But with that television request, the answer was 'no' and when I sent an email politely declining, the flood of relief proved I'd made the right decision. In that moment I wondered whether there was a different way to work to the push, push, push approach I'd been taking?



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There are so many messages out there that say 'go big or go home!' And 'If your dream doesn't scare you, you aren't dreaming big enough.' But are there years when, actually, we might be happier if we say no to things that stress us, or stay in the same job without needing to seek out a promotion? Years when we do enough to pay the bills without striving for bigger and better? Years when we just... coast?

It's something assistant headteacher Anne Maxwell relates to: 'I've been in the same role for seven years and I am getting lots of pressure from people above me saying I should be a headteacher or move schools for promotion but I have no burning desire to be in charge. It is fascinating that society is always saying 'what next?' yet actually, I get a lot of satisfaction from knowing what I am doing and being good at it.'

Maxwell believes there's a lot to be said for being competent at your job without needing to constantly push yourself. She tells me: 'I always used to be someone who wanted to climb the ladder as quickly as possible but now I see that the extra money and stress often isn't worth it. I am at the stage where it matters more to me to be doing something I love and to still have time to pursue other things I enjoy beyond work.'

She adds, 'Sometimes, I feel like this is wrong though, or that I lack ambition. But maybe I am ambitious, just in a different way; I'm ambitious about having a life I love rather than status and money.'

Contrary to what we might have been told, psychotherapist Hilda Burke believes that this is a healthy attitude, and that 'We don't need to push relentlessly.' She says, 'Sometimes, it's good to learn how to cruise. There are times for us to be in growth mode and there are times we need to be in safe mode. There are times when it's appropriate to be in safe mode professionally, if there's lots going on outside work, say a new relationship or a family commitment, such as caring for young children, or sick parents. Or you might have another passion you want to pursue.'

Actually, according to Burke, it's important to grow in other areas beyond work, whether that's our relationships, creative pursuits or health: 'It might be that your priority is health and that right now the most important thing is for you to finish work at 6pm to go to yoga.'

Sam Raeburn, 52, admits that she coasted for 16 years as she raised her children, even though she was working in her 'dream job' in television. 'When I found out I was pregnant in 2003, my career was flying high. I was travelling a lot, did 30-40 hours a week in overtime and I loved every minute. But I knew I could not keep working that way if I wanted to be there for my family. After maternity leave, I changed jobs internally so that I had more regular shifts. I wasn't hunting for promotion or expanding my contacts, I just did my hours and went home.'

'Sometimes it felt hard to see new blood coming in and getting the big gigs but I have no regrets. Not only was I there to bring up my two children, who are now in their teens and are such well-rounded boys, I found myself writing two novels and doing some lecturing. I think these sides of me were always bubbling under the surface and would not

have been able to come out if work stayed all-consuming.'

Coasting is something for the self-employed to consider, too. Intimacy coach Lucy Rowett-Schnabel, was 'circling burnout before the pandemic' because she had taken on too much work. This is the danger of working for yourself – the feeling that you should say 'yes' to everything in case the work dries up. She admits: 'In the entrepreneurial world everything is about expansion and being on your "A-game" but that kind of internalised

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capitalism, when we are constantly pushing ourselves, is very damaging for our psyche.’ Because Rowett-Schnabel has had chronic health issues since she was a teenager, she can’t work like that. As she tells me, ‘It is really hard to coast when you are self-employed and hustling is part of the job. It has been an exercise in faith, to trust that if I keep doing my job well and staying within what I can manage, the right people will come to me.’

But while coasting might be a health decision, she believes it actually makes her better at her job: ‘I want to be doing this in 10 years, I don’t want to fly so high that I come crashing down, which is something I’ve seen happen to others. I also want to master my craft and have strong foundations. Sustainability is something we talk about in terms of the planet – but it’s also something we need to think of for ourselves.’

Rationally, I agree with this approach, but sometimes I worry I am being lazy if I am not giving it 110%. It feels strange that I have no big ambitions right now beyond paying the bills and going for a walk. I find myself trying to kick-start motivation to Do Something Big... but why? Hilda Burke says it’s good to question what’s going on here. She says: ‘Rather than pushing on, unquestioningly, sometimes it’s good to think: why do I need to work like this? Is the push leading to something fulfilling? Or is it ego? Am I doing this to get praise or external validation?’

Good questions. I have based too much of my identity on my work; I have enjoyed the attention it brings and the validation, too. As I’ve got older, I care less about this but then I find myself on

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Instagram and fall into the trap of seeing someone on telly or with 200,000 Insta followers and thinking they have it all sorted. ‘There is a lot of social currency in success,’ says Hilda. ‘There can be shame around not being professionally impressive, especially in cities, where work is seen as everything. It’s not a healthy way to live. The irony is that well-rounded people don’t care about accolades, they are too busy enjoying their life.’

I also worry I will throw away my career if I say no to things and take it easy for a while. But Burke thinks this is unlikely: ‘It’s a scarcity mentality; we think that if we say no, that opportunity won’t come around again, but that’s not true, most of the time it does, it’s not a case of now or never.’

Sam Raeburn confirms that this is the case. Aged 52, after coasting for more than a decade, she has been offered a high-profile job as a speech writer. ‘It was totally unexpected and came about from a chance conversation. I feel the same kind of excitement and energy I had in my 20s. It’s a whole new chapter.’ Actually, Hilda Burke says, ‘I see women really pick up a gear in work in their 50s’. Post-menopause, changes in hormones can give us the energy to pursue opportunities at work, while older children can mean we have the mental bandwidth to take on new challenges.

Of course, there are two sides to every story, and Tiffany Philippou, writer and co-host of *Is This Working?* podcast, sounds a note of caution when it comes to coasting: ‘I think having fulfilling work is incredibly important for living a good life and that drifting or not fulfilling your potential at work can slowly erode the soul. Often, people are scared of reaching for more in case they fail, so perhaps say they don’t care about their work as a defence mechanism – but I think that can cause latent misery.’ And that’s a good point. We need to check that we are not coasting out of fear or self-sabotage – and to remember that it feels good to do work we enjoy and that challenges us.

However, our work should only be one part of our life, not all of it. We live in a world that celebrates big wins and flashy careers but maybe it’s time to celebrate the quieter success of people who have seen the sacrifice it takes to be ‘successful’ and who decided it’s not for them... which is, to my mind, the greatest kind of success: living life on your own terms.

After the last two years, many of us have been thinking about what matters and how we really want to live. And this changes. We ebb and flow. Some years, we want to get stuck into work and feel the thrill of achievement. Other years, career-coasting allows us to do the more important jobs of being a good friend, a good parent, a good citizen. Nothing in nature grows constantly. There are times when the field must be left fallow in order for things to flourish in the future.

This is where I find myself right now. Instead of Aiming Big, I’m going to Aim Medium. Should we get T-shirts made?