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DR. DALE ATKINS

knows all about the juggling act

BY leslie chess feller
PHOTOGRAPHS BY bruce plotkin

So why does this multitasking lifestyle expert look so cool, calm and collected? That's a secret she's sharing with everyone.

On a rainy monday afternoon, media psychologist Dr. Dale atkins is delighted to have made it home just a few minutes ahead of our scheduled interview; the petite blonde's warm smile reflects both welcome and relief. it is refreshingly real, in seconds establishing common ground. in this frequently frenetic, typically over-scheduled era, who hasn't had a similar close call?

Relationship and lifestyle expert on the *Today Show* as well as appearances on other television programs ranging from *Good Morning, America* to *Oprah Winfrey* and author of several books — most recently, *Sanity Savers: Tips for Women to Live a Balanced Life* — Dale does her best to practice what she preaches. “But, hey, I am not this perfect person,” she says, admitting to dropping the ball now and then while doing her daily juggle.

Being a wife, mother, sister, grandmother and active volunteer while maintaining a Manhattan practice, writing books, doing seminars and presentations and appearing regularly on national television can produce the occasional meltdown.

“The thing about juggling,” says Dale, “is that sometimes you have to put a few balls down.”

Moving Forward

The need for an easier commute precipitated Dale and husband Rob Rosen's recent move from Westport to Greenwich. “We like to drive into the city and the traffic has gotten much heavier in recent years,” Dale says. An added lure? The couple's young twin grandsons live in Manhattan.

Although Dale grew up in Wayne, New Jersey, her parents used to dock their boat in Westport, so she has fond childhood memories of land excursions to attend productions at the Westport Playhouse, have lunch at Gold's or Oscar's and shop Main Street.

Despite being a few exits down the Merritt these days, the couple's ties to Westport remain strong. “We are very involved with the Caring Committee of Temple Israel,” Dale says, “and then my college roommate and her husband live in town with their family. I fixed them up way back when we were in college, and we are still very close.”

Dale's monthly book club is another cherished connection. “We are twelve women; many are my former neighbors and all of us make it our business to get there, no matter what,” Dale says, pointing out that this is a group bonded by friendship and a commitment to put daily life and careers aside to focus on literature and friendship. “I'm not any great authority in this gathering,” she says. “It's all about whatever book we've chosen to read and everybody has valuable perspectives to offer.”

At a meeting of Women in Business in Fairfield County, however, Dale commands the podium. “Raising a family with both parents working strenuous long hours is hard work,” she says. “Don't forget to take extra good care of yourself. There's a difference between feeling tired and feeling spent.”

The message hits home for many in this audience who later ask questions revealing the personal turmoil that comes with their struggle to combine careers with motherhood. “See what you can do about trimming some of those hours off your work week,” Dale advises one woman who seems on the verge of tears. Patiently, often on an individual basis, she responds to each problem presented.

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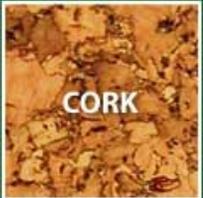
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"I'm so glad they feel comfortable enough with me to share such things," Dale says, adding that, professionally, she didn't experience that particular conflict. Getting married at age thirty-nine meant she was able to focus on her career without guilt. "For me, the stress was being single while all my friends were married with children," she says. "But that's a whole other issue."

Tap Dancing

Given the myriad issues to be negotiated in today's brave new world, it's fortunate that Dale thrives on doing several things concurrently. "I was multitasking before it was called that," she says, smiling. "Parallel involvements are my comfort level."

Until recently, her talk show, *Dr. Dale's Life Issues*, produced by the Jewish Television Network aired weekly on PBS; at Westin Hotels around the world, she offers wellness suggestions to guests via the chain's in-room television channel and interactive website. A lecturer and frequent keynote speaker for corporations, universities, school systems, deaf community groups and special-education organizations, Dale's comments are regularly included in national magazine and newspaper articles. Internet web-zines and websites, the latest forum for exploring often bewildering twenty-first-century options, seek her out.

"Don't worry; you haven't scarred them for life," Dale writes in "Caught in the Act," an article posted recently on Match.com offering advice to parents interrupted "in an intimate moment" by their children. Ever practical, Dale suggests not overreacting. "Take the situation for what it is," she says, "an embarrassing experience that will teach you to lock the door next time."

In Dale's case, what she learned from a mistake put her on the road to today's success. At twenty-one, just graduated from New York University, in her first job as head counselor at a skiing and tennis camp in Austria, she did something very foolish. "I'd been up all night chasing a pair of teenagers who were doing what teenagers do," she says, "which is why I had barely an hour's sleep before my day off."

Using borrowed equipment, she went skiing on a glacier way beyond her skill level. "Luckily, I was with two Olympic skiers, so when I took a bad fall on my first run, they knew what to do," she says. Dale's bindings didn't release and she broke her leg in twenty-seven places.

A year spent in the hospital and in rehab, first in Austria and then at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, and other centers, changed her life. "I'd considered a career in art history, but suddenly here I was, a patient being helped by so many wonderful people. It left me determined to be able to help others the same way."

While still in the hospital in New York, she became involved in research on community education, a project being conducted by one of her New York University mentors. Soon she was well enough to do interviews while taking courses in psychology and special education. Continuing her own rehab and volunteering at Rusk Institute, she helped adults whose strokes had caused speech and language problems, work that contributed to her decision to get a master's degree in deaf special education, focusing on deafness, at Columbia's Teacher's College. "I also worked with children and saw two deaf kids at Rusk who were profoundly isolated," Dale says, "because nobody could speak sign language."

Years later, Dale's doctoral thesis — which examined the impact on older sisters of having a hearing-impaired younger sister — would be the catalyst for her first book. "I had all these pairs of normally hearing sisters as controls and found the relationships fascinating. I'm close with my own older sister, so I was intrigued."

Soon, Dale was doing "Sisters Seminars" at Rancho La Puerta in Mexico and at universities and educational settings across the United States. "I love speaking, teaching and traveling," she says, "so it was perfect. At the end of each presentation, people asked me if I had a book. I didn't, so I decided to write one based on all the information I had accumulated."

Dale believes in acting on her intuition. In short order, she wrote a few chapters and found an agent who sold the book. *Sisters* was published in 1984 by Arbor House. "They sent it to Donahue, but nothing was happening, so I picked up the phone and got lucky," Dale says, adding that she's still in touch with Gail Steinberg, the producer who made it happen.

A few weeks later, Dale, her sister Daryl, and three friends she calls "sisters of choice" went to Chicago. "Phil Donahue had read the book and loved it," Dale says, "and the studio audience was all sisters." Afterwards, she got on the phone and kept calling, something that's no longer necessary. "All the young assistants I worked with in the beginning," she says, "have moved up to be producers of big shows."

On a snowy day in Westport six years ago, word-of-mouth produced a pivotal opportunity. "I was at my desk working on a piece about what happens to a family when the father loses his job," Dale says.

"The phone rang and this woman said she was from the *Today Show*." Assuming it was a joke, Dale almost hung up.

Fortunately, she didn't. A producer she had worked with on another show had moved to *Today*. When told her advice was needed for a segment about what happens to a family when the father loses his job, Dale says, "I got goose bumps."

She sent in her article and soon found herself in front of the camera. "I'm lucky that they usually don't need me in that first hour," she says, with a smile, "because, even though I'm an early riser, getting up at 3:30 a.m. pretty much leaves me wiped for the rest of the day."

That said, it's a great occasional gig, perfect for someone brought up to believe that each person's obligation is to try to make a difference. "My goal is to reach the most people possible with information that can improve their lives," Dale says. "Television, particularly a morning show, can do that, and there's nothing like starting the day with a useful new perspective."

Family Time

Dale points out that when she married Rob almost twenty years ago, he was a widower with two sons. "Jono was fourteen and Josh was twelve at the time," she says. "So suddenly I had to adjust to being a working mother." To ensure separation of work from home, she deliberately did not establish a Westport practice. "These days, to manage all the different things I do, including trying to help with my grandsons," she says, "my part-time practice works well for me."

On those days, Dale and Rob are on the road by 6:45 a.m. "He drives and it's a great time for us to talk," she says. An advantage to getting into the city bright and early is that, before seeing patients, Dale has time to stop by for breakfast with her mom. Sylvia Atkins, who is very artistic and who still designs jewelry, is eighty-five years young, according to her daughter who explored issues relating to aging parents in a recent book entitled *I'm Okay, You're My Parents*.

"Growing older presents particular challenges," Dale says, adding that this is a subject of great concern to the boomer audiences she addresses in Fairfield County. "Friends die," she says, "which is a very tough reality. And then there are health issues. When you see people you love not taking care of themselves, staying silent doesn't feel like an option. It can be a tricky situation to handle."

When working from home, Dale is usually up by 6:30 a.m. and makes a point of beginning her day with quiet time. "I don't get too complicated about it," she says. "I just try to empty my head and get really relaxed. I do it first thing, before hitting the shower or having breakfast."

Until recently, Dale shared a different kind of relaxation with her dog Miles, who died earlier this year. "I miss him; he was a Tibetan terrier, a very yoga-type dog," she says. "Going outdoors to play together, watching the frogs and birds and enjoying all the natural beauty right in my own backyard was a great way to start the day," she says, adding that she feels almost ready to get another dog.

Meanwhile, Dale's been exploring her new neighborhood by bike and on foot. While in Westport, she worked out with a trainer, but this summer chose to do laps in the backyard pool. "I love to swim," she says. "My favorite exercise is the kind that takes me outside."

Details, and the Rest

Dale laughs when asked the nitty-gritty question about managing work and family life: How does she get it all done? "For many years, I tried handling every single thing myself, every phone call, my own billing. It was crazy," she says. "Everyone in my life was telling me that I had to get help, and finally I did."

In recent years fortunate assistants have benefited from Dale's positive default approach to life. Each assistant was helpful in a particular way, and each, over time, became friends with the boss and was encouraged to move forward to fulfill personal dreams.

All three of Dale's former assistants are now published authors. "I believe," she says, "people have the power to achieve what they set out to do."

"My wife lives her life on a completely different level than anyone I've ever encountered," Rob says. "She's a realist whose instincts are reliably positive." He recalls that when they first met, Dale's much-loved father was stricken with Alzheimer's. "I was impressed by her ability to take comfort from the moments he was lucid. Seeing the good side of every situation and in every person she meets is one of Dale's great strengths."

Dale's success on national television does not surprise Rob. "She's not creating a contrived persona nor is she someone who wants to be a star," he says. "There's no inflated ego here; she's a talented therapist who genuinely likes people and that's what comes across."

Dale praises Rob's flexibility and explains, "I'm someone who needs to do many different things, from scuba diving to adventure travel to having friends over for a Shabbat dinner or on Passover." (In the latter category, Rob boasts that his wife makes a really great tsimmes. "Last year," he says, "we had thirty-five at each seder.")

When trying to do too much, Dale, like anyone, might lose her cool, but she rarely loses her temper. "The way I deal with overload is to get very quiet," she says. "I don't freak out. I'm much more apt to go take a long, restorative walk from which I return much more able to cope."

Dale reports she's checked quite a few goals off her life list. Swimming in every ocean? "I'm halfway there," she says, agreeing that perhaps she ought to eliminate the Arctic Ocean for reasons of hypothermia. A world traveler, she looks forward to future trips with Rob; a proposed camel safari in the Rajistan is perhaps better suited for doing with female friends. Dale is still in close touch with people she knew forty years ago. "I grew up in a small town," she says, "so in college and afterwards, I really embraced diversity; I have friends from all over and each one is important to me."

As for moving forward, she says, "I'd love to dance with the Rockettes," adding that her mom says she was tap dancing at age two. "I absolutely love it," she says. After her skiing accident, Dale recalls lying in her hospital bed, broken leg suspended mid-air. "I kept asking if I'd be able to dance. The doctors told me I'd be lucky if I walked again." Not only does Dale still dance, she tap dances. People who know her are not at all surprised.



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