

Jewelry, chocolates
and flowers are sweet,
but the gift of time
is the most precious of all

Dear Cupid

BY ANU SOOD

As a slightly obsessive woman, my life is carefully planned — something like a neat line of dominoes. If everything falls as intended, the week comes together in an orderly, almost magical way.

Unfortunately, it rarely happens.

Between family, work and personal commitments, there's almost always one rogue domino that topples the line. I'm not unique. Ask any woman balancing career and home and she'll tell you she's regularly overwhelmed.

So, on this day of romance, chocolate certainly tastes good and flowers smell sweet, yet the opportunity to relax and spend more time with family is the most attractive gift of all.

Here are four ways to inject more time (read happiness) into your week.

Meal preparation

You can cut many things out of life, but eating is not an option. Fulfilling the need for tasty and nutritionally balanced meals is time-consuming.

"It is not just the cooking time," says Michele Piironen, a personal chef. "It is the planning, shopping, preparation and cleanup afterward that take up so much time."

Her company, Food to Grow, (www.foodtogrow.ca) offers busy professionals and children-shuttling parents such services as menu planning, grocery shopping, food preparation and delivery of packaged meals that come with heating instructions.

Her service allows families to save up to 10 to 15 hours a week. Piironen offers many levels of service, depending on needs and budget. Her tailored approach also accommodates a variety of dietary needs, including restricted, heart-smart and vegetarian menus.



HOMES



CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Home repair

Is your Honey-Do list turned into a Honey-Can't-Do list? While our partners are also over-busy, that doesn't change the need to fix nagging problems around the house.

According to Craig Hicks, general manager of Gillespie Handyman services (www.gillespiehandyman.com), by contracting out your to-do list, you don't have to "spend your weekend going to the store, figuring out what works, going through the trial and error process and end up with a product you don't want."

Taking care of a small problem also prevents a bigger crisis that re-

quires more time and certainly more money to fix. A good handyman can take care of everything from fixing the holes in your dry-wall made by rambunctious teenagers to adding grab bars to help your parents safely navigate their home. Some customers are so comfortable with Gillespie Handyman services they e-mail their repairs and it gets done while they are at work — no hassles, says owner Ryan Gillespie.

Interior decorating

While making your house esthetically pleasing doesn't save time, selecting low-maintenance furniture and finishes can ease the perennial

time crunch.

When it comes to pampering, women want the gift of time. A handyman is one answer, and a professional chef like Michele Piironen, who delivers home-cooked meals, is another. Yummy.

time crunch.

According to S. J. Normand, interior decorating co-ordinator at Algonquin College's School of Design, decorating professionals offer a wealth of advice on making home life less time-consuming to maintain — everything from maximizing storage to the best low-maintenance finishing on flooring.

Designers lend expert advice on planning your room so you're not financially sidelined with inappropriate pieces of furniture. "They can tell you which stores offer the items in your style so you are not spending time looking for items in the wrong places," says Normand.

Organizing

"The more stuff you own, the more things you have to clean, dust, repair and move. That takes all the time," says Angela Irvine, professional organizer at Love Your Space. And all that maintenance takes away precious time from other activities.

Irvine is a master of de-cluttering homes, leaving time and space to appreciate what's left. Your home doesn't have to be a total mess to benefit from a professional organizer consultation. They will do big and little cleanups, from a single closet to a large kitchen.

Ultimately, the homeowner is boss and can veto an organizer's suggestion to ditch the green crock pot, says Irvine. The amazing thing is how free you feel when there is less stuff dragging you down, says the organizer.

Now, that is certain happiness on Valentine's Day.