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CLUTTERBUSTING

with Karen Tatman

I HAVE a real love/hate relationship with To Do lists. Especially the ones I make at the start of every school holidays. Because my regular job is tied to the school terms, I tend to have a running list of jobs rattling around in my head that I'm sure I'll get around to "on the holidays".

Oh stop laughing ... I know ... but knowing doesn't seem to stop me writing them all down, very neatly, with the heading "To Do" at the top of the page. Sometimes I even do a nice heading in a different coloured pen.

And, in the first few days at least, the sheer number of jobs on the list doesn't daunt me. After all, I've got two weeks to get everything done. TWO WHOLE WEEKS. Ages ...

Well okay, perhaps the last holiday list was a little optimistic, including, as it did, stripping the wallpaper in the guest room, repainting my son's room, and setting up a proper home office.

Perhaps if I'd left it at that, there might have been a slim chance, but it didn't end there. Oh no.

The list also included:

- Clean out the Taj Mah-Hutch (that's where the rabbits and the guinea pig live – and yes, it's quite big).
- Wash Shakin' Dog (big job but at least he trembles himself dry).
- Worm the cat (enough said, can take days).
- Extra horse riding lessons, one basketball clinic.
- One trip to the movies.
- Play dates and sleepovers (no, not me, the kids ... although).
- Vacuum the car (not for the feint-hearted, trust me).
- Finish this column, preferably on time.
- Do my tax.
- Finish building all the Lego Star Wars stuff that arrived last Christmas.
- Bake something (anything!)
- Do a proper inventory of the kids' winter clothes and make good use of the sales to buy one-size-up for next year and, wait for it ...
- Have lots of time to relax together as a family because, after all, WE'RE ON HOLIDAYS!

And that was just page one ...

But there's just something so, I don't know, relieving, about corralling all those mental notes that clutter up your cerebral hard drive and make you forget the gold coin donation on free dress day (or, for that matter, free dress day itself!) and putting them somewhere other than inside your head.

Once it's on paper, it's a plan, of sorts. And that's the bit I love. Surely I can't be the only working mother whose head space resembles an air traffic control tower most of the time. And while, deep down inside, I know the To Do list never gets finished, it makes me feel a whole lot better when it's not rattling around in my brain.

Have you read a book called I Don't Know How She Does It by Allison Pearson? It's one of my favourites, mainly because each chapter ends with a list of all the stuff that the heroine, Kate Reddy, is desperately trying to remember.

Admittedly, her life as a highly paid funds manager with two small children, a long-suffering husband and an e-mail lover is nothing like mine (except the e-mail lover bit ... JOKING MUM!), but I still like to read it when I'm feeling particularly overwhelmed. It sort of puts things in perspective. But I always find myself thinking ... perhaps if she just made herself a nice list?

Anyway, as I was saying, for the first few days of the holidays, the size of the list seems quite reasonable then, one morning, it's the Sunday of the middle weekend and all I've crossed off is worming the cat. No small victory, he's rather a big cat, but I can feel the rising tide of, not quite panic, but definite unease. It is, after all, rather a big list.

Okay Karen, just breath ... and prioritise. There's still a week to go. In desperation I invite two of the kids' friends over for a play date and a sleepover. I offer them \$5 each to finish building the Imperial Star Destroyer while Betty Crocker and I get busy in the kitchen. TICK! TICK! TICK! Three jobs down, and one ... seriously messy house.

Not sure who it was that said:

**"If you've got kids,
doing housework
in the holidays
is about as useful
as shovelling snow
in a blizzard".**

But they really nailed it. And it's kind of hard to focus on the higher order jobs when you're struggling to find a path through the dirty clothes piled knee high in the laundry. And then, as if by magic (definitely of the Dark Arts variety), suddenly it's two more sleeps until school goes back.

Interestingly, it's always at about this point in the holidays that I find myself secretly looking forward to the routines and rhythms of term time.

Sure we're all busy, but there's a kind of orderliness to the general disorder of family life when the kids are back at school and I'm working. And I don't even kid myself that I'll get around to any big jobs because I'm simply too busy. If the dishes are done, the floors are swept and the next day's lunches are in the fridge by the time I fall into bed, I feel pretty much on top of my game.

And after all, there's always the next holidays for all those big jobs ...