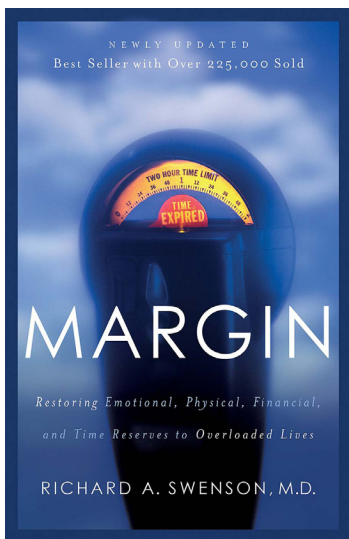


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard A. Swenson

Richard A. Swenson, M.D. is a full-time futurist, physician-researcher, author, and educator. He has written and presented widely, including both national and international settings, on the themes of margin, life balance, contentment, stress, overload, complexity, societal change, health care, and future trends.

Margin

THE NUTSHELL

PART 1: THE PROBLEM: OVERLOAD

Many people today are suffering from a societal epidemic: overload. We are exhausted and hurting, struggling to keep up with life. We feel distressed, but aren't always clear on the reason why. We are besieged by anxiety, stress, and fatigue. Our relationships, and our own bodies, are suffering. The flood of daily events seems beyond our control. We are overloaded, and living on the edge.

We have lost our margin. Margin is the space that once existed between ourselves and the loads we carry, and our limits. Without margin, especially in the key areas of emotional energy, physical energy, time, and finances, any sense of well-being is unlikely. Without margin, without any space, we live constantly on the edge of burnout—always tired, always stressed, never at peace.

We must live with an understanding of our limits. Everything in life has limits: relationships, governments, buildings, brains, organizations. If we live within our limits in each of these areas there is room to flourish within them, however when we begin to reach the boundary lines we must recognize that rules change and we must re-evaluate. We are not to avoid the problems of life, but we must learn to navigate them in such a way that leaves us margins in which we can operate in healthy ways.

Today our stress levels are unprecedented. Exponential change, debt, hurry, noise and complexity all contribute. In particular, there are three contemporary

Margin

sources of stress that make this age a difficult one: due to the increase in violence and crime, we are more afraid. Due to rapidly changing job markets, we are more insecure. And due to the breakdown of the family, we are more alone. We need to have some margin in our lives to be able to handle the stresses that we face.

The tendency of our culture is to add detail to our lives. We live for the “one more”, one more job, debt, purchase, decision. However, we can only handle so many details in life before we exceed our threshold and we are overloaded. Overloading occurs when the requirements upon us exceed that which we are able to bear, resulting in disorganization or frustration. To understand overloading, we must first understand the law of limits.

Humans are not infinite! We have limits to our ability—and we must recognize that limits are not the enemy, the overload is. God created us to live within certain limits for our own well-being. When we reach our threshold and all of life becomes a challenge, we must remember to blame overload and not our family, work or responsibilities.

PART 2: THE PRESCRIPTION: MARGIN

In the past, margin was a normal part of people’s lives. Life was slower and less complicated; people had time to sleep, think, take care of themselves, and build relationships with those around them.

To be healthy, we require margin in at least four areas: emotional energy, physical energy, time, and finances. Emotionally, we have seldom been so stressed, so exhausted; physically, we are over-fed, underactive, and sleep-deprived. Time-wise, we are always busy and worn-out; financially, we are struggling to stay afloat with record debt levels.

Of the four areas where we need margin, margin in emotional energy is the most important. When that is lacking, it makes everything else more difficult. The truth is that we have limited emotional energy, but increasing demands on it. The world we live in seems to be deteriorating; the challenges are increasing.

The presence or absence of margin influences how healthy our lives are. Restoring margin to our lives is a huge first step towards healthy living. But margin cannot survive standing on its own. Too many forces come against it. Four other pillars are needed to provide the proper support: Contentment, simplicity, balance, and rest. None are very popular today, but all are keys to maintaining margin and living healthy lives.

Looking at the greatest commandments, we see only one category: relationships. If we got a report card from God, it would only have three lines:

1. How did we relate to God?
2. How did we relate to ourselves?
3. How did we relate to others?

In all three, the key concept is love. Everything boils down to that. Loving God, loving ourselves, loving others—those are the keys to a healthy life. Margin is about love—making time to love, enabling ourselves to have the internal resources to love, and making space for love.

And when we give ourselves to that, health cannot be far behind.