

Take a Break

(Without Breaking Your Biz)

A guide for makers and designers who need to put their business on hold

by [Tara Swiger](#) and [Stacey Trock](#)

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So you want to take leave in your business

Maybe you need to take maternity (or paternity!) leave as your new little one arrives, or perhaps you have aging parents who need your care. Maybe you're about to have surgery, or perhaps you've had a bad reaction to a medication. No matter the reason, is it normal to take an extended time off from your business. No, not just normal, it is an unavoidable fact. You are a human, in a body. You love and take care of people with bodies. Our bodies fail, change, and sometimes just need some upkeep. Not to mention, our pesky brains and emotions require care.

So friend, if you are finding yourself in need of a leave*, you are not alone; this is a natural step in any longterm business!

*Note that we will use the word leave instead of "break", because "break" sounds kinda fun, and we know everyone has periods where they HAVE to leave their business for un-fun, unwanted reasons. But if you do need a break, just to reset, that's fine too!

Before we go any further, we need you to be in agreement on this fact:

Taking leave from your business is natural, it's OK, and you have permission to take time off, no matter what the reason.

Ok?

We ask you to accept this and agree with it, because I (Tara) have worked with a lot of makers who believe they shouldn't take time off, or that it's not responsible, or that in doing so, in some way they're failing. That's a normal fear, but in order to move forward, to make a plan to KEEP your business running, you gotta give yourself permission first.

I have talked to makers who are so stuck on "I shouldn't do this," that they are incapable of making a plan or thinking it through. They keep circling back to "I shouldn't do this," and they never get any farther than that.

If you get stuck thinking you shouldn't do it, you may force yourself into a situation that isn't right or healthy for you. You'll either quit your business altogether, or you'll work yourself so hard that you burn out, and stretch yourself so thin that you can't keep going. These scenarios can be prevented by taking some time away from your business, but if you can't acknowledge that as a viable option then you're in danger of losing that business entirely.

We want to help you keep your business running, to avoid having it all falling apart, while still keeping you healthy and un-overwhelmed (*let's all try to be just plain whelmed, ok?*).

Are you with us?

If so, write this somewhere you'll see it, or print out the certificate (you'll find a full-page version in the workbook)

I have permission to take time off my business.

I have permission to scale down or slow down my business while I focus on

{insert reason you want/need to take leave}

In this guidebook, we will guide you through three steps to streamlining your business, identifying your profit and creating the leave you want. If you have time to prepare, we'll cover everything you can do to start streamlining now in order to be ready for leave later on, so read through all of the sections and follow all the instructions in this course. If you don't have time and you need to take leave NOW, we've got an "express pass" option at the end of Section 1.

Section 1: Defining what your business is

To take time away from your business, we first need to get clear on what your business IS. What do you do daily? Weekly? Monthly? What makes your business run?

We know, you do a lot! But no matter how large a job this seems, you need to write down exactly what it IS you do, so you can come up with a plan to NOT do it! :)

There are a few categories to think through:

Products: What do you make, order, or label?

Ordering: How often and what do you order?

Marketing: Where do you post, and how often?

Admin and other: What's all the other stuff you do?

Start filling out your tasks on the *What Is Your Business?* Worksheet, then use the *What is the Flow?* Worksheet to be sure you've captured all of your tasks.

What IS your business?

What are the projects you worked on in the last year?

What are your current projects, including what you're doing now and what you've already committed to in the next year or so?

What are your consistent, repeating tasks?

Daily:

Weekly:

Monthly:

What is the flow?

Another way to think through what you do is to think of the "flow" of how a project comes together.

Where does a product start (what things do you have on hand? what do you do to get started?) and where does it go next?

What do you do to make it available for sale (take photos, write description, label, etc)? What do you do to point people toward it (blog, email, social media, etc)?

What's the process when you sell something?

Once you get the list going, keep it out and near you when you work in your business and add things as you do them. Keep adding to it for at least the next week. (You'll be surprised at all you do!)

If you're making a major life change (like having a baby, taking care of an aging parent longterm, or cutting back your work hours), use the following worksheets to figure out how you spend your work time and not-work time. This will be very useful any time you want to move around or change your "chunks" of time.

Now fill out the worksheets - *How do you spend your work time in a typical week?* And *How do you spend your life?*

How do you spend your work time in a typical week?

Pick a week that's fairly typical for your business, and track every minute of the time you spend working. Fill in the below calendar (or use an app in the Resource Guide). You can indicate chunks of time spent on similar tasks.

	S	M	T	W	TH	F	S
morning							
afternoon							
evening							

How do you spend your life?

For a typical week, document how you spend your time. No need to break down work, but include various household chores and leisure and put in “work” chunks when you work. The more detailed, the more useful this will be!

	S	M	T	W	TH	F	S
morning							
afternoon							
evening							

Now that you know what you do

First, of all, let's celebrate all you do in your business! You are amazing! Of course you need some time off!

Express Pass: If you need to take your leave right away, you can jump to "Section 2" on page 19.

If you have a few days or weeks to plan, don't skip ahead! Instead, we're going to streamline, automate and systematize what you do.

Why?

You want to make your work as streamlined as possible before you step away from it for a few reasons:

1. It'll be easier to come back to your work slowly, if you've got it all systematized.
2. It'll be less expensive to get help, if it's already as efficient as possible (you don't want to pay someone for 5 hours when the tasks could be done in 2!).
3. You may need less of a break than you think! If you need to cut down to just a few hours a week, we may be able to do that through systematizing, without you leaving your biz altogether! You won't know until you work through it!

Becoming more efficient

Ok, now this can be a big task and in a healthy business you'll be upgrading and changing your systems all the time. So take a deep breath. You do not have to get this right immediately. You do not have to have the most efficient systems before you step away from your biz (because that will never happen! It's a process!).

You already started thinking about your business systematically in the What is the Flow? worksheet. Hopefully, you recognize how the moving parts of your business are all connected to each other. Now it's a matter of recognizing patterns and categories and flow in your work. We're going to take these patterns and either batch, automate or systematize them.

Batching

The first step to batching (doing similar tasks at the same time) is to recognize similar tasks. Look at your lists of all you do and move them into categories based on similar traits.

For example:

What tools do you need to do this task? (Put together tasks that use the same tools, like computer work, sewing machine work, ironing board work, etc.)

What room do you do this task in?

What can you do from your phone? (ie, photograph, Instagram, reply to tweets or Facebook posts)

Consider the flow as well:

What tasks naturally lead to the next task?

Where do you get so absorbed and productive that you lose track of time?

What are the qualities of the situations when you flow? (Are you in a particular room? Listening to a particular playlist?)

Some tasks that most business owners can batch:

★ Instead of answering emails as they come in, set aside specific times when you'll reply to or act on all your emails. (This is a HUGE adjustment, but it is

also KEY to working less. As long as you're answering emails as they come in... you're working non-stop. Tara has strong feelings about this.)

- ★ Take photos of several products at once. I (Tara) would wait until I had 14 skeins of yarn to photo, then I would have 2 weeks' worth of products to list (one thing a day).
- ★ Write descriptions and create listings all at once.
- ★ Schedule your social media for the next week at once. (Tara schedules Instagram posts while she's waiting in line for her coffee or waiting for dinner to cook.)
- ★ Labeling products
- ★ Printing shipping labels
- ★ Packaging orders

Make your list of things to Batch (using the worksheet by this name). If you're not taking your leave immediately, find a time for a batch in your next day!

List of Things I'll Batch

Automate

After you've batched things, it's time to look for what you can automate.

Automation is simply turning some tasks over to technology (either to complete the task, or to remind you to do it, so you have one less thing to keep track of).

For example, I (Tara) have automated PDF delivery, managing email sign-ups, managing membership levels and recurring payments (for both the Starship and Patreon), and sending blog posts to social media.

Stacey has automated PDF delivery and recurring payments. She's more of a systems gal.

Things you might automate:

- ★ Printing shipping labels
- ★ Scheduling social media (so you don't have to remember daily!)
- ★ Thank you emails to paying customers
- ★ Paying regular bills on auto-pay

Once you've automated some stuff, you are probably noticing tasks or categories you WISH you could automate - stuff that needs to be done the same way every time.

It's time for systems!

Systematizing an area of your business just means making the process explicit. You've probably been keeping track of all of these tasks in your head - it's time to get them out of your head and onto paper.

To make it a system that you could turn over to someone else (or do when you're sleep deprived), *make a checklist for each project*. There's a [lot](#) of

science about how much more effective we are and how many fewer mistakes we make when we work from checklists.

To get started, look at one of your batched tasks - what are the steps in this task?

Systematizing is this simple: Write down every task. Follow your checklist each time you do the task. Don't do ANYTHING that's not on the list and if you find it's missing a step, add that in!

It's really that simple - just put every single step of a task into a list. Use the Step by Step Checklist for ____ task worksheet.

Step by Step Checklist for _____ task

We know, this might feel crazy, especially if you don't plan on hiring anyone. You may think you've been keeping track of this for so long, why take the extra time to write it all down?

The answer is simple: Because you need to take time off.

Stacey likes to pretend that she's hiring her future self to do some things, and that person needs to be told what to do.

This means that you may (*hard to believe!*) forget some of what you do now. It's possible that you'll ask for (and receive) help. Perhaps you'll decide to start back on this task, before your baby is sleeping more than 2 hours in a row or while you're on painkillers. In other words, you may work while you're still at just 30% capacity.

And the best reason to systematize is this: Seeing it all written out is going to make it so much more obvious what can be batched or automated or just deleted all together. **Bonus:** when you read a great article about how you should be adding an image to your blog post, you can just add that into your checklist and now you'll remember to do it every time!

Things you can create a checklist for

- ★ Blog posts (writing and posting)
- ★ Sending email newsletters
- ★ Listing a product in your online shop
- ★ Packing for a craft or trade show
- ★ Setting up your booth
- ★ Meeting with retailers
- ★ Accounting and bookkeeping
- ★ Social media posting (really all of your marketing!)
- ★ Packaging and shipping orders

Section 2: Maintenance Mode and Minimum Required Income

Now that you have your business as streamlined as possible (for now!), it's time to think more about taking your leave.

What do you actually want or need to do? Do you want to step away entirely (ie, do absolutely 0 business tasks) or do you want to stay in maintenance mode? What does that look like for you? Only you can answer these questions, but we can help you find the right solution for you.

How much Leave do you want?

To Step Away Completely

If you're only stepping away entirely for a week or less, there's no need to close everything. You can operate on maintenance mode. I (Tara) have taken entire weeks off my business (even when I sold a physical product) without telling anyone. Just set up an autoresponder on your email that tells the person when you'll reply (ex., I'll be replying to emails by DATE) and put info on your shop page about when the next shipping date will be.

But if you really need to stop everything for longer than a week or two, let's talk about that. This is easy - to absolutely close down the business for a limited amount of time (and we do recommend making this a VERY limited amount of time - or in many situations you can choose a minimal maintenance mode, which we'll cover in a minute), remove all things from your shop (or put it on "vacation mode" if that's an option with your platform) and make an announcement on both the home page of your website and shop. Also post an announcement on any social media that customers may use for customer support (i.e., they ask purchase-related questions). There is no need to send an email to your subscriber list, unless you are going to leave the shop open for a

few days and they can make purchases now. If you're closing immediately, there's no need to tell them. You do NOT need to make an announcement everywhere - fewer people will notice than you think!

Keep the announcement short and sweet and for the love of yarn, don't go into gory detail. (If you want to share the journey with your followers, then don't go away! Stay and post when you can!)

A sample announcement:

Thanks for visiting {shop}! We're closed until {date}, when we'll be back with more {products}!

I know it feels like you need to give a reason, but you don't.

Something other than "Total Leave"

If you're in a situation in which you can still do a bit of something in your business, or you're coming out of a total leave, let's define exactly how much time you want to and can spend working.

Some examples of "partial leave":

When you have a baby, you may step away from the business entirely during your last pregnant week and for the first few weeks of your newborn's life, and then ease back into semi-leave.

If you're recovering from outpatient surgery, you may need to take a day or two totally off and come back with semi-leave as you recover.

If you're in the hospital, you will be on total leave while you're there (really, put down your phone and heal) and then ease into partial leave.

If you're going through chemotherapy (or a friend, partner, child or parent is!) you will most likely want to go into maintenance mode so you can focus on healing.

You're on a new medication and it's making you foggy or exhausted.

(Tara: I've been there!)

For the rest of this guide, we will focus on two key goals for creating a semi-leave that keeps your business functional.

Our goal is to have a 'semi-leave' where you:

1. Keep your business in maintenance mode
2. Earn your minimum required income

What is maintenance mode?

The details will vary for every business, but basically, it's keeping your business functioning in the important operations in a way that sets your business up for success the following year and doesn't disappoint your customers or harm your business in a serious way as you take a break. It is unlikely that you'll have a traditional maternity leave, as leaving your emails unanswered for 6 months would probably damage your customer relations. You also wouldn't want to fail to ship orders for a year. However, by working early to manage your customer expectations and creating an action plan for what you can accomplish during this time, you can get together a system that works! This maintenance mode will include being strategic about planning for the future, as you will need to continue to plan ahead (apply to craft shows, investigate new products, etc.) so that your business doesn't collapse. The amount of involvement you have in your business while it's in this mode may vary from person to person, but the idea is that it functions on its own without you (through the magic of technology) as much as possible, and it requires significantly less interaction from you to keep running.

Define your own maintenance mode

Grab the worksheets you did in the first section, and consolidate them on one list. Write down your major tasks, and next to them, write the amount of time you spent on each (you can estimate this, guided by scaling up how you spent your example week.) Now, next to that, write the approximate amount you earned for

each task. You can use the Task-Time-Money Chart to complete this. Fill in the first three columns.

By looking at this list, you can work on figuring out what tasks are most important to your business.

Go back through and fill in the Notes section, by noting the tasks that answer the following questions:

- ★ Which tasks are important to your customers?
- ★ Which tasks are time-sinks?
- ★ Which tasks fill you with joy?
- ★ Which lead directly to money?

The goal is to define your core business - the tasks and projects that form the heart of your business, so that you can dedicate your limited time to the most important tasks.

Real Story

In my (Stacey's) pre-baby business, I wore a lot of hats. I wrote books, taught courses, designed patterns and ran a kit club. I also did a lot of social media. When it came time to prepare for baby, I knew I needed to cut out anything that wasn't directly serving my customers or making money. I decided to keep my Kit Club running (because canceling all of the subscriptions would be a serious financial loss), but slow down on pattern designing. I answered customer emails once a week (the minimum I felt I could do without losing their faith), and passed up on book deals and teaching gigs. I also dropped doing some things that were 'fun', but not crucial to my business, like the more personal blog posts and certain aspects of social media.

How do you decide what stays and goes? It's a balance between what you can physically (and energetically) do and what makes money.

What is the minimum required income?

The dollar amount will vary for each person/business/family, but the definition is the minimum amount of money that you need your business to earn in order to survive. If your family can rely on a partner's income for a year, then this income level may be zero, and you'll be guided by the goal of what maintenance mode means to your business. Keep in mind that even if you're not earning any money, your business may still cost you money - hosting, fees, software renewals. If you're the main breadwinner for your family, then your financial needs are higher and your plan will be driven by succeeding in earning the amount of money you need. Your business may even experience slight growth during this time!

Fill out the Minimum Required Income worksheet to get clear on this number.

Note: This worksheet assumes that your business contributes to the family budget and that there is a minimum income you need to make. If that's not the case, you can skip it and use the previous worksheets to define your leave. However, if your business (like both of ours) contributes to your family budget, you need to be crystal clear on the minimum amount is. Fill out the Minimum Required Income worksheet now.

Minimum Required Income

What is your minimum required income?

If you don't know this number, you're going to have to do a family budget.

Write down the amount of money that comes in without your income:

Write down all of your expenses.

(We're not just talking about business expenses; write down everything your family needs in a normal month!)

Subtract... what is left is the amount you'll need to earn:

Let's look at that number and compare it to your *Task-Time-Money* worksheet - can you see where that money comes from with the least amount of work?

In other words, *how did you make that minimum amount last month or the month before?*

If you're not sure where and how your money comes from (I bet you found it hard to finish the *Task-Time-Money* worksheet!), you need to look at your real numbers! Fill out the *Where my Money Comes From* worksheet!

Where My Money Comes From

First, collect your sales data from your last 3 months. This may be in Paypal, Stripe, Etsy or Ravelry. Next, identify your main product categories. You don't have to identify every single product (ex, a specific pattern or painting), just its category (ex, "digital pattern", "9x11 print", "sock yarn"). If you can easily sort by category, do that for your top categories and write down how much you made from each one below.

If you can't easily do that, here's how:

If you sold across several platforms, compile all the data for one month in one spreadsheet. Look for the product name column. Add a new column next to it: "Category". Now go through your sheet, line by line, and write in the category of each product.

Sort the spreadsheet by category.

Total the sales in each category.

Category 1:

Month 1

Month 2

Month 3

Category 2:

Month 1

Month 2

Month 3

Category 3:

Month 1

Month 2

Month 3

You probably have more than 3 categories - write down the totals for at least your top 50% (ie, if you have 10 categories, track your top 5. If you have 20, track your top 10.)

Now you should have clarity about:

- ★ All the tasks in your business
- ★ How you spend your time
- ★ What tasks lead to money
- ★ What products make the most money

Whew!

We bet that at this point, you already have an idea of what you can stop doing all together, and what you can spend less time on.

Awesome!

Now let's look at how everything fits together with the leave you want or need to take.

Fill out the worksheet *Defining your Leave*.

Defining Your Leave

Why are you taking time away from your business?
(Writing it out will help you remember why this matters!)

Does your leave have “stages”?
(ex, totally off for 2 weeks, followed by reduced mobility for 6 weeks, followed by slowly getting back to work for 6 weeks)

During each stage of your leave, what will you still be ABLE (physically and mentally) to do (from your list of tasks)?

Be realistic: worst case scenario, what could you still do at each stage?
(It's ok if the answer is nothing!)

Let's get even more realistic: Are you choosing to do tasks that are direct money-makers? Are you avoiding time-sucks?

(Feel free to delete some things from the list that you think you could do but are not vital to your business.)

Make Plans

Now, dear biz owner, it's time to make plans. The previous worksheets have helped you define what matters, what makes money, and what you'll have the time and energy to do. The next step is to put plans in place to enact them.

Look at the list of everything you're not going to do and apply the following filter: Does it matter to your income or to your customer (ie, person who has given you money) experience?

If not, can you drop it completely for now? (Probably, yes)

There are a few categories of things you may not want to close completely, so you need to decide how you'll handle it:

- ★ Your shop
- ★ Your social media
- ★ Your email

What will you do about your shop?

Vacation Mode:

This is a setting in Etsy that lets you keep everything in your shop (so you don't have to relist it) but redirects visitors to a "Tara is in Vacation Mode" page, so you won't make any sales. This may be the right solution for you, if you don't want to sell anything during this period.

Extended Shipping Times:

What about just shipping orders that come in later? This is a great solution if you only need to be totally off for 1-2 weeks, and you can start shipping when you're back. (Shipping can be the only task you come back to, in an extended leave!)

Announcing it:

I (Tara) recommend only announcing a change in your shop if you're willing to serve people right now or you'd like to make more sales immediately. A simple "The shop is closing for 2 weeks starting next Monday" or "Tomorrow is the last day to get your item shipped this month!" may get some immediate sales (yay!). But if you can't immediately fulfill orders, just close it or change your shipping policies - there is no need for an announcement (people will not freak out, I promise).

What will you do about social media?

Taking a break entirely

as long as you don't use social media for customer service very often, and if your shop is completely closed, you can absolutely just take time off - very few people will notice. No need to announce it, just slip away.

Scheduling posts

If your shop is open, then you want to maintain traffic to it via social media. Schedule some posts ahead of time (see the Resource Guide for our recommendations) and you can fill in some posts in bits of time during your leave.

If Instagram is one of your main sales tools, be sure to take a lot of photos ahead of time, so you have things to post during your break. (Posting one picture a day takes only a few minutes and can be fit into almost anyone's leave. The actual photography part may be a bit harder if you're stuck in bed - so stock up on pretty photos before your leave.)

What are you going to do about email?

As we were writing this class, the question we were asked more than any other was: How do I handle my email?!?

We have several suggestions:

Set expectations.

On your contact page, set expectations for how often you reply to emails. On Tara's it says you'll hear from her within 2 weeks. In reality, she replies to every email that same week, often within a day; but that just lets her exceed expectations, instead of disappointing people!

You'll also (nonverbally) set expectations by how quickly you reply. If you answer every email, tweet or direct message within 10 minutes - that's what people will come to expect. Instead of replying immediately, create more reasonable expectation by scheduling your reply to send later. (Also, maybe don't check your messages every 10 minutes? More on that next.) Tara uses "send later" in Gmail ([Boomerang](#)) to schedule replies later, if an email comes in when she's in the middle of clearing her inbox.

Batch emails.

Stacey answers her emails once a day, every week day. I (Tara) only answer emails once a day, a few times a week. When I needed to take a mental health break last summer, I answered only once a week. I didn't set up an email auto-reply, I just answered emails once a week... and nothing exploded. Only one person complained ("I sent X yesterday, did you see it? Can you reply?"), so I told her, "I'm only replying once a week, I'll be sure to answer on Friday, with all of my emails." No harm done!

I've heard from students that they use their emails to manage their kids' schedules, so they need to check it all the time (is there softball practice tonight?). If that's your struggle with batching, then I suggest setting up two inboxes, or using filters to send one kind of message to a specific folder. (Perhaps all your softball-related messages go in a folder that send you a phone notification; or perhaps all your work emails are filtered into a folder that you open once a day and answer.)

This isn't just about creating a better workday for you (and I have a lot to say about that!) - this is about giving the best possible customer service. An email you fire off while cooking dinner and breaking up a fight between your kids is not going to be as thought-out, well-written, or effective as one you compose during your special email-replying time.

When you go on your leave, this is even more powerful: By batching your emails to once or twice a day, you open up your limited time to the income-generating actions.

(And yes, for many of us, email IS income-generating action. I promise you won't lose any opportunity by not replying in 10 minutes, unless you're a paramedic.)

Turn on an email auto-reply

There are actually two kinds of auto-replies: The first is what your email-newsletter software sends out when people join your list and the other, the one most of us use, is the one that your email client sends out when you're "on vacation". Before we get into the second one, let's talk about the first one. Having an email that auto-sends when someone signs up for your email list is an easy marketing tool that can be serving your people even when you're away from your business! Use it to send a coupon code, or a list of FAQs, or a friendly, personal greeting!

Now on to the auto-reply that will send whenever you are emailed. Stacey is a huge fan of the auto-reply. There's nothing worse than giving a customer the impression that you aren't there or aren't paying attention. In my auto-reply, I state when the customer can expect a response (even if it's a vague 'as soon as possible after I return on X date') and I give resources that tackle 75% of my customers' problems. This may be the best from your FAQ or links that customers will appreciate. It may help you to keep track of the types of questions you get on an average week and include replies to ones that are 'frequent' in your auto-reply. Include your social media links if you are going to be

able to provide more updates than your email suggests. I also recommend selecting a setting that only sends an auto-reply to a person once in 72 hours, so if you are online emailing with someone, they don't get the reply every time.

Here's Stacey's auto-reply:

Hi there! Thanks so much for your email!

I'll be at Stitches Texas [or wherever] through Sunday, September 25th [or whenever]! I hope to see some of you there!

I will reply to your email as soon as possible once I return. Thank you in advance for understanding!

Follow me!

I post sporadic updates about what I'm up to on Twitter (@freshstitches) or Instagram (@staceyrock), so be sure to follow me!

Get help right away!

If you're looking for crochet help, stop by my Ravelry group (www.ravelry.com/groups/freshstitches), where there's always a few friendly folks to help answer your questions!

You will also probably find it helpful to use the search bar on www.freshstitches.com. For example, type in 'attaching limbs' and really great articles will come up!

If you're new to crocheting, then I recommend downloading my free ebook or checking out my Craftsy classes. They're both great!

Happy Crocheting!

Stacey

Email Amnesty

I (Tara) just heard about [Email Debt Forgiveness Day](#), followed by reading that the [HuffPo](#) (+ [Daimler](#)) employees have emails set to auto-delete while they're gone. I love the idea. In fact, I'm going to use it while I'm in the U.K. teaching this November. I'm simply not replying to emails that come in. Not while I'm gone, and not after, either. I'm putting it in the hands of the sender (who is the person

who wants to contact me, anyhow) to get a hold of me when I come back. (See the script I'm using on the next few pages.)

Now, I have the ability to do this because I have hired and trained email support. I will just have everyone send everything to Jess and let her answer (and forward a very small percentage of them to me).

But you can do this without hiring help - just decide you're not dealing with email for a period of time.

If you're going to do something like this, there is one caveat: You **MUST** have a customer service support system. You must have some way of dealing with your paying customers. (If your shop is closed, of course, you don't have to worry about this.) It is vital to the health of your business that you have a way of answering a customer's question or dealing with a problem (their package was lost, their item was damaged, etc).

I bring this up not because this is the solution for everyone, but because I want to challenge your way of thinking about email: You don't owe an emailer anything. You don't owe them your reply or your time or your stress. The only person you "owe" anything to is the person who has paid you for a product. Now, if you want to make more sales, you'll also want to answer the person who is interested in buying your product. But a more streamlined, supportive solution is to have already answered their question - in your product description, on your site, and in a FAQ.

Write up template replies. For everything.

Instead of replying with what your brain comes up with in each moment, write up the answers to every possible question ahead of time (or the first time you get asked) and use that template answer for everyone. There is some misunderstanding that this is less personal, but it's not. It's still you who wrote the reply. It's still you who cares so much about their experience that you took

the time to craft the right reply and use it every time, so everyone gets the same level of attention and care.

Template replies are a way of ensuring a thorough, well-thought through reply, to every question. (Check out [Canned Responses in Gmail](#))

Tara's Email Amnesty Auto Reply

Thanks for writing! I'm teaching in the U.K. and my internet access is spotty, so I probably won't see your email until after Thanksgiving. But instead of promising a reply then, how about finding you a solution now? **Please choose from the following options, as I will not be replying to this email** - especially if your answer is below!

If you're a student, Starship Captain, Lift Off member or patron and you have a question about the product you purchased, how to access something, or anything, please ask Jess: vulcan@taraswiger.com. She will reply within 24 hours (during the workweek). (*Confession: she knows more than I do about how to fix your log-in, your emails, or membership.*) I REALLY appreciate you and want you to get the best help possible, so email Jess now! She knows all of the things.

If you're a reader, listener, or friendly person and you have nice things to say to me: OMG! Thank you! I will read and treasure your email, really. In order to keep making the stuff you love, I won't be able to reply. But know that I'm holding it in my heart and it totally made my day!

If you're a publisher, editor, or workshop organizer: Hi! I'd love to work with you! Email your question or comment to Jess (vulcan@taraswiger.com) and she has ways of getting it to me. You'll hear back from me by 12/1, and probably sooner if you email Jess all the details!

If you're trying to sell me something or get me to feature your client on my podcast, go away. Please.

If somehow the above categories do not encompass you: Dude! Congrats on being a special snowflake! You know what you should do? Email Jess: vulcan@taraswiger.com. If your question, comment, or opportunity requires my insight, I'll get back to you by 12/1. If not, Jess will get you sorted.

If you just reallllly don't want to email Jess (and I don't know why you wouldn't, she's the best person in my tiny company), **you can re-email me after 12/1.**

Just to recap:

I won't be replying to this email.

So!

- ★ Email Jess OR
- ★ Re-email me after 12/1

Cool? In the meantime, [follow my adventures on Instagram](#), or [get even more goodness as a patron](#).

Hiring help

After you batched, streamlined, and systematized, you may have two realizations after the initial, Holy COW, I do a lot of work!

1. I actually don't need to do every task
2. I need or want help for the tasks that don't require me to be the one doing them.

We are 100% on board with you getting all the help you need. In fact, we've listed a bunch of hiring solutions you may not have even thought of, on the following page.

That said, the choice to hire help is a complicated one. You need to consider your income, expenses and the level of skills of your potential employee. Are they answering emails? Setting up software? Once you decide you need help, what do you do first? The considerations and possibilities go beyond what we can cover in this course. Luckily, we have some recommended resources.

- ★ Tara has written about the [7 steps to hiring the first person in your business](#)
- ★ She's also written about how to get [your partner to provide more support](#)
- ★ Tara's assistant and First Officer and Favorite Person, Jess Cook, has [created a class](#) that helps you figure this all out.
- ★ You can find more links and resources in the Resource Guide!

If you already have employees or contractors in your business, be sure to include them in planning your leave! They may be happy to take on extra tasks or recommend other solutions (perhaps they know about some automation!). Remember, you can make these changes temporary; maybe you normally handle your own inbox but you're going to let your assistant take over for a few weeks and just forward the really important stuff to you, and then eventually you can reassess and decide if you want to take that task back from them or let it remain in their To Do list.

Real Story:

Over the years that I (Tara) have been working with Jess, I've slowly increased the size and scope of what she does in my business. This summer, when I needed to take a Mental Health break, I turned over a huge chunk of what I had been doing (for example, copying my podcast into to my blog posts and to the YouTube descriptions), because I simply couldn't manage it. When I was back at 100%, I left much of it with her and now had the time and energy to add all kinds of extra only-I-could-do-it stuff to my business, like weekly (free) webinars and more teaching gigs!

What kind of help is available

Everyone will need different types of help. It's essential to put on your worst-case scenario hat and plan for 'what if'. You may come out of surgery ready to be on your feet... or you may come home with bed rest orders. If you planned in advance to have a friend bring over dinner the first week and you don't need it, you can either say no thanks (that'd be silly) or take the gracious help anyway. If you don't plan and DO need the extra help, you're setting yourself up for a hectic and stressful event.

- ★ Get a teenager in the neighborhood who's willing to come over after school for an hour to watch the baby while you're still in the house (Note: this can actually be a younger kid, even, because it's more of a "Mother's Helper" than a full-fledged babysitter!).
- ★ An intern from the local college and/or high school (for shipping, packaging, etc)
- ★ A housekeeping service
- ★ Let's Dish, Blue Apron or any other kind of meal delivery/prep service. Or... you can actually contact a catering company, order a meal for 20 people and put them in freezer bags. Really.
- ★ Task Rabbit is a service where you can hire help for individual tasks, like running errands, doing chores, or building furniture (seriously!)
- ★ Dog walker
- ★ Day care
- ★ Grocery delivery
- ★ Your 'inner circle'. Seriously, ask your mom if she can stay with you for a week. See if your best friend can plan a visit. Offer them food and hugs in exchange. Or a place to stay. Whatever won't drive you nuts. Many hands make light work. Line enough people up in a row and you're close to having a live-in helper!

Professional Business Help

- ★ Web Hosting
- ★ Web Developer (last December I hired Wendy to custom-build the Starship - it took less time and money than I expected)
- ★ Graphic Design
- ★ Visual Branding
- ★ Pattern testing
- ★ Tech Editing
- ★ Copy Writer
- ★ Social Media Manager

Stacey made the decision to hire a web developer as part of her leave plan. It actually allowed her not only to save time, but to kick the quality of her website up a notch!

Hire a VA or an in-person assistant for recurring tasks.

They can

- ★ Edit your blog posts, PDFs, patterns
- ★ Schedule your social media
- ★ Test your technology (make sure your buy button works before your launch!)
- ★ Copy edit anything you write
- ★ Write: blog posts, sales pages, etc
- ★ Manage your social media accounts (finding links to cool stuff to post)
- ★ Handle email
- ★ Answer customer support

A few final considerations

One of the questions we were asked as we worked on this guide was: What if something comes up that I just can't deal with?!

Oh, we get it. Even with all this planning and thinking and streamlining, there will absolutely be things that you didn't expect.

And you know?

You can handle it.

Whether you're able to reply to the problem, or you can't - it will be fine.

We're not being flippant, we're serious. If something comes up that you didn't plan for, and you have the time and energy to deal with it, you will. You've run your business this long - you'll deal with whatever comes up.

And if you don't have the time or energy to deal with it - maybe a collaborator drops out while you're recovering from surgery (a true story from one of Tara's students!) or a package goes astray and you can't replace it or you piss off a customer and you just can't even. It'll be OK. Really. One angry customer, one missed deadline, one refunded order - they aren't going to ruin your business.

Yes, you want to do your best. Yes, you want to make your customers happy. Yes, you want to be on-time (early!), to spec, and cheery. But life is going to get in the way. You can only do your best. You only have so much influence over your customer's happiness. You only have so much energy and time.

It's our hope that you have clear idea about how to both become more effective in working time, and how to take a break without losing your business. Whether

you need to take 14 days or 14 months leave, we hope that this guide has helped you plan for it and that you feel peaceful (and smart!) taking time off. No matter what comes up - you will be fine. You will deal with it.

We believe in you.

Now go out there and take some time away from your business!

Time Off Permission Slip

I have permission to take time off my business.

I have permission to scale down or slow down my business while I focus
on _____
{insert reason you're taking leave}