



As an executive, (pictured here in 1996), Caroline worked closely with Richard and says the man behind the persona is 'shy'



Known for 'getting things done', British-born Caroline built a reputation for success

Working with Richard Branson

'I HAD A MELTDOWN'

Her career at the top came crashing down

Caroline Ravenall was a woman who had it all – a high-flying job at Richard Branson's Virgin empire, invitations to the best parties and no shortage of male admirers. So why was she having car accidents and constantly waking up in the middle of the night? As a top sales and marketing executive at Virgin Atlantic Airways, the Auckland resident spearheaded the launch of the airline in South Africa during the mid-1990s. The first two years

were the best of her career, but things started to go downhill. "I was getting a pay rise virtually every month," she says. "I was driving a new Land Rover Discovery every six months as a company car. I travelled the world. I had Richard Branson's personal phone number." But as Caroline (48) began to burn out, she found herself in the grip of a major meltdown. "There were lots of sleepless nights, waking at 2am and not being able to go back to sleep. After a while, I would wake up and start to cry because I knew I would be awake for the next three hours. "I had a lot of car accidents – all of them my fault – because I was rushing everywhere. I also

found myself becoming isolated. "I would forget things. I was introducing myself to people I'd met three or four times – and that doesn't cut it if you're the head of sales and marketing. They were the signs something was about to give." The last straw came in 1999, when she woke up distressed in the middle of the night, despite having taken a high dosage of sleeping pills. The next day was a launch party for the London to Cape Town route. There were hundreds of important guests at the event, who cheered when Richard dramatically entered the marquee, suspended on a fireman's rope – but Caroline felt empty inside. "I just remember standing and looking, thinking 'I don't want to be here.' I was trying to be the life, soul and face of Virgin, but inside I couldn't wait to get out. That night signified everything was changing." So she quit. Initially she took a few months off, but when she

returned, Caroline realised that she needed to discover the real meaning to her life. She embarked on a spiritual journey, which led her away from her agnostic beliefs and towards the theory of reincarnation. "I think we are here on a journey to learn," she says. "Part of spiritual growth is to become balanced enough in ourselves to be able to deal with anything." She spent several years studying metaphysical subjects at modern day "mystery school" Aquarian Dawn, an organisation that was part of the new-age movement in South Africa. In 2011, she made the move to Auckland's North Shore, where she wrote her book, *Stop Worrying, Start Living: A guide for the spiritual worrier/warrior*. She found her niche at work, helping to improve company cultures in the corporate world, both here and in South Africa. Writing her book for the past 18 months, Caroline survived on savings and the help of her

then-partner, who she moved to New Zealand to be with. "That's part of the journey – people come into your life for a reason, season or a lifetime," she says. She's no longer in touch with Richard Branson, but remembers his kindness to her family after her dad died in a car accident. "Richard rang and asked if the family needed money," says Caroline, who has sent him a copy of her book. Now she's looking forward to the next chapter in her life – without the aid of medication. "It's easy to put yourself on antidepressants to try and numb the pain. I've done that, but the pain is there for a reason. "If I need to work in that corporate environment again I will be able to do that, but it's not going to be my sole focus any more."

Vicky Tyler

Stop Worrying and Start Living available at Whitcoulls next month or online at carolineravenall.com



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TIPS TO STOP WORRYING

- Assign a certain time of day to worry about everything and then forget it.
- Learn to meditate or try another method to help calm the mind. Caroline says you can never stop thinking, but it can allow you to listen to yourself.
- Stop comparing yourself with others around you. "We are all unique on our own journey," Caroline explains.
- Simplify your life.
- Learn to lighten up, develop a sense of humour and find ways to laugh at yourself.