

## PAY ATTENTION TO TIME

Time is the original equal opportunity employer. All of us, regardless of race, creed, or color, get the same amount of time to work with—24 hours per day, 168 hours per week. Time is no more scarce for us than it is for anyone else. Everyone gets the same time “salary.”

It's often said that time is money. This statement overlooks a major difference between the two: Money that's lost can often be returned or re-earned. In contrast, time is a nonrenewable resource. Each hour that ticks away is lost, never to be regained. We can deposit money in a bank and store it there to withdraw later. Not so with time.

Imagine a drive-up teller who could dispense time as well as cash. You could speed up to the window and plead for extra time: “I need four more hours to meet a deadline; I'd like to make a withdrawal from my account, please.” It won't happen.

So time is valuable. Every moment of time is unique and unrepeatable—a gift that literally comes only once in a lifetime.

The closer attention we pay to time, the more we realize the benefits of managing it. For many, the phrase *time management* calls up images of people on rigid schedules that are planned down to the minute. They fear that managing time will kill their spontaneity and rob them of flexibility.

Actually, using time-management techniques can be a ball. Time management is about freeing up more time for the things that matter most to you, including time for fun and being with the people you love. Few things feel as good as spending your life energy in the ways that you choose.

Begin with being willing to take charge of your time. Ironically, some people are not. They'd rather blame their frustrations, lack of productivity, and unrealized dreams on the demands of others: “I'd have gotten that done a long time ago, but my boss keeps dumping work on me.” “When you have children, you give up having any time for yourself.” “I just was born without any skill at time management.”

An alternative is to stop blaming others and start taking charge of time. We can learn to say no to the demands of others and to negotiate more realistic expectations. We can choose to free up extra minutes and hours each day. We can distinguish between what merits our time and attention and what's not worth doing at all. With these ideas in mind, we can have the time of our lives.

Following is a cycle of regular activity you can use to get the most out of this precious gift we call time. The cycle includes three steps: monitor, plan, and revise. Taking each step can help you apply the principles of focused awareness and moment-to-moment choice to your experience of time.

### Monitor

If you want to take charge of your time, then get a detailed picture of how you currently spend this nonrenewable resource. Many people spend a lifetime



without getting this picture. Years and even decades pass, leaving them only to guess where all the time went.

With an accurate account of how we spend our time, we can spot any recurring problems we have with managing time and diagnose them with pinpoint accuracy. Armed with that baseline data, we can make changes in our schedule that free up time for high-priority activities.

For example, someone complains about not having enough time for reading books. After monitoring his activities for several days, he discovers that he spends at least two hours every day watching television. He decides to cut television back to one hour so that he can spend an extra hour reading a book.

Choose a method for monitoring your time that works for you. One option is to summarize your entire day on a single 3x5 card. Simply note the starting and ending times for each major activity.

Other options are to list your daily activities on a calendar or to use computer software that's designed for time management.

Track your time for at least two days. You can learn even more by doing this exercise for a week.

After collecting specific data about how you use your time, summarize it. Create a list of categories that describe your typical activities: sleeping, eating, grooming, working, watching television, reading, and so on. Then total up the number of hours you spent in each category.

## Plan

Imagine the woodcutter who constantly claims that she's too busy to sharpen her axe. She may get a lot of work done in the short term. However, her productivity will eventually drop to zero unless she takes the time to care for her equipment.

Many people cut furiously at the "trees" nearest them without taking the time to get an overall view of the forest or take care of their tools. They spend the bulk of their time reacting to crises, urgent phone calls, and other species of disaster. In the process, they forget about important but nonurgent activities such as exercise, cooking nutritious meals, meditation, prayer, or spending time with the people they love.

We can avoid this fate by creating a comprehensive vision for our lives—by writing a life purpose, choosing our values, and setting long-range goals. Then we can practice planning the short-term future by creating daily or weekly to-do lists that align with our vision. Planning from the long-term to the short-term helps us stop putting out fires and start living the life we choose.

## Revise

When mid-week rolls around, you might find that your weekly plan needs to be changed. Perhaps some activities are taking twice as long as you expected. Or maybe a scheduled event was canceled. When these things happen, feel free to revise your plan.



Some people are afraid to do this. To them, revising a plan feels like admitting they've made a mistake. What's actually involved here is *updating* your plan based on the latest feedback. Plans that are regularly fine-tuned can be the most useful.

This fine-tuning is a strategy that you can practice for a lifetime. As you do, play with the following options.

**Expand, then contract.** Regularly ask yourself *What do I want to accomplish in the next two weeks?* You'll probably come up with a long to-do list. To avoid being overwhelmed, first estimate the number of hours each task will take. (Be realistic.) Then narrow your list down to the items that are the most urgent and most important.

You might want to block some time in your calendar for handling your "A+ activities"—those with the highest priority. Remember to make dates with yourself for recreation, reading, exercising, and other self-renewing activities. These activities are as important as anything else you put on your calendar.

**Schedule fixed commitments first.** Sleep, work, housework—such activities tend to concentrate themselves in blocks of time. These activities can become so routine that we take them for granted and fail to account for them in our plans. When planning, allow adequate time for regular, fixed commitments. Then schedule other tasks around them.

**Expect the unexpected.** Include time for errands, travel, and surprises. Errands include low-visibility and easy-to-forget activities—runs to the post office to buy stamps, last-minute trips to the grocery store, and commuting time between appointments. To avoid being rushed, leave breathing space in your schedule for these events.

**Get it done, one task at a time.** The loftiest long-term goals are accomplished in the same way as your goals for next week: completing one task after another. As you plan, convert any ambitious goal into a list of small steps—simple activities that you can add to a daily to-do list.

**Put your activities into "containers."** Activities tend to fill up whatever space is allotted to them. By allowing less space for them on our calendars, we can often increase our efficiency.

Set clear starting and stopping times for each task. Sometimes a task that normally takes three hours can be completed in two.

**Get back to your purpose.** If you did the "Live from a purpose" journal entry earlier in this book, you have in hand a powerful tool for sane scheduling.

Use your purpose as a device for screening out activities and commitments that are out of alignment with your values and deepest desires. For example, if your life purpose is to practice and promote health, then schedule time for exercise. You might choose to bump or eliminate a lower-priority activity (such as watching television) in order to do this. That's fine. You're demonstrating the power of a life purpose.

At any point in the day, you can recall your purpose statement and major life goals. Then ask *What would a person with this mission do this month? This week? Today?* You might get answers that are not on your to-do lists. That's fine. You're not a robot that's programmed to blindly follow orders. With your long-term vision firmly in mind, you can make moment-to-moment choices that bring you most directly to the life of your dreams.



## *Match your values and time*

This journal entry is designed to help you discover whether you're satisfied with the way you currently spend time. You can make a distinction between tasks you freely choose to do and tasks that represent obligations imposed by others.

This journal entry has several parts, each to be completed at certain points during a single day. On a separate sheet of paper, write your responses to each numbered item below.

1. When you awake for the day, ask yourself if you really want to get up. Quickly list the things you look forward to doing—the activities that make it worthwhile for you to get out of bed.
2. Ask a few questions as you sit down to each meal. Are you truly hungry and ready to eat? Do you want to eat the food that's in front of you? Will you feel energized by the food you're about to eat?
3. As you go about your daily activities, ask "Would I choose to do this if I was financially independent, free of the need to work for a living?"
4. After conversing with someone, ask yourself "Did I truly want to be with this person? If I could have spent time with someone else, who would that person be?"
5. After work, review your plans for the rest of the day. Ask "Do I consider the activities I'm about to engage in to be worthwhile? If I had only six months to live, would I do anything different with the remaining time in my day?"

Next, sum up your responses by completing the following sentences:

When thinking about the degree of alignment between my values and my activities today, I discovered that I ...

---

---

In order to bring my activities more in line with my values, I intend to ...

---

---

Come back to this journal entry periodically and note how your responses change over time.

