

Effective time management tips

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This page was deeply influenced by the book "Getting things done – the art of stress free productivity" by David Allen

What is time management?

Time management is the ability to perform all your necessary functions (either at home or at work) at the right time, and in a way that is stress free and enjoyable.

Why time management is hard?

Modern day society has made our lives extremely busy and fast paced. The endowment of equal rights and opportunities for women has created a reality in which both household adults are usually working full time. Due to this, most people have two shifts a day – the first in which they work and a second in which they need to take care of household duties, parent children and still have time for additional activities (e.g sleep?). The fact that your duty list includes both professional and personal tasks is challenging as of itself. Moreover, modern society has created never-ending opportunities for your thought lines to be disturbed – your cell phones ring constantly, the inbox of your email receives an email every couple of minutes and working places with hundreds of people result in constant interruptions. So – you are bombarded daily by external inputs that require you to perform functions as well as your own wills and aspirations that you need to move forward. This is a lot of strain to your brain and memory and results in reduced ability to be creative and thoughtful and have some time left to do leisurely things you want to do to fulfill yourself.

You may have noticed this yourself but EVERY commitment you make to perform a task (to yourself, your spouse, your kids, your students, your friends) is being tracked by a sub-conscious part of you. Since this information does not have a precise time frame it is just left lying around in your mind, and your subconscious makes it surface at random times. This "pulls" your attention from focusing when you need to and creates inappropriately managed commitments, which results in a feeling of loss of control. For example – you always remember that you need to buy batteries exactly while you are reading a story to your kids or trying to fall asleep and not when you are standing in front of the battery stand in the supermarket. Even if you don't realize this, the feeling that you will not remember to do what you need to do at the right time and place is a source of stress. Most people have been experiencing some version of this mental stress so consistently and for so long that they don't even realize its severity.

What can you do about it?

Your mismanaged commitments take a large portion of your daily thoughts and energy and thus create an enormous amount of stress for you. Therefore, it would be great if you could manage your memory better to be more effective and lessen your need to constantly "remind" yourselves what you need to do. BUT how can you do it? To be able to be productive it is essential to be completely focused on what you are doing at any given time. Moreover, you need to stop worrying/thinking about things when you can't do anything about them.

One non-trivial thing you need to grasp is that the reason that your brain reminds you non-selectively of tasks is because you don't give them enough thought

(and so your brain does not know when to remind you of them) and NOT because you have not done them yet. This is a non-intuitive notion - (you often think that if you give LESS thought to your tasks you would be happier and calmer). However, it has been shown that once you are sure that you will be able to do a task at the right time your brain will “let go”, freeing it to be more creative and ensuring that tasks do not get lost in the rush of your life thus reducing your stress.

Capturing your TASKS

The best way to “ease” your brains is to capture EVERY unfinished TASK you have in a trusted system outside your mind. A TASK is anything that you need to do. It can be as tiny as buying milk or as huge as changing the world. Some tasks are one time actions (like hanging a picture in your office) some are repetitive (like call auntie May every Tuesday at noon to say hi) and some are comprised of many individual ACTIONS (like review a paper, which requires first reading it, then writing the review). What defines a TASK is that you had decided at some point in your life that you would like/need to do it. An ACTION is something that you do to move a TASK forward on the road to completion. Once you have captured all of your tasks, this will relieve a heavy load off your brain, as it realizes that you are “on top of things”. However, to really be effective and calm, you need to also make sure that you will be reminded of the necessary ACTIONS in an organized system that you refer to regularly.

So how can you organize your TASKS and ACTIONS? First, sit down for an hour or more and write down ALL (as in every single little thing) that you need to do – every task that you worry about, from those small, insignificant, everyday things, to those mind blasting, life changing ideas. Think of all aspects of your life and collect these TASKS from all letters, emails and notes that you have lying around the house or office and throw them out afterwards (won’t that feel great?!). From now on, every time you have a new TASK pop up in your mind – write it down immediately so you won’t forget it. (some people like to walk around with a notepad in their pocket to capture exactly those TASKS as they arise, and so immediately clear them from their heads.). Add to the list things that you do routinely (“Monday is football night”; “I need to clean the house once a week”). Even though you think you already “remember” them, actually they use up quite a lot of energy since your brain is always afraid that you might forget and break a life long habit.

Remembering to perform ACTIONS

In order to ensure that any single ACTION leading to the completion of your TASKS are indeed performed at the right place and time you need to set up a place where you will see your TASKS and ACTIONS regularly and be reminded to do them. The best way to do this is to set up a calendar in which you will put in reminders for ALL the ACTIONS that you need to perform. One great way to do so is to use a computerized calendar since an electronic calendar allows you to put in repetitive ACTIONS with little effort (by using the option of “Repeat every X”). iCAL or Google Calendar should work great. Google Calendar can even send you SMS reminders! In addition, all TASKS should be kept in a list that will be reviewed at the beginning of every week and that list will be updated as some TASKS are finished and others arise. Many people like to divide tasks to short term/daily tasks vs. long term tasks so as to make maintaining the TASK list easier – but this is up to you (It might be nice to be reminded once a week that you have a TASK to feed

hungry children in Africa even if you don't have time this week/month/year/decade to get to performing this TASK).

Some tips for maintaining your lists in an effective way.

Once you have a detailed TASK list set up, most new TASKS will come to you from the outside (phone calls, letters, emails or talks with people/boss). All these sources should be dealt with in the same way. Every time you get a new input (email, phone call) make a decision:

- SCHEDULING: If that input is a specific date in which you need to do something – put it into the calendar straight away.
 - ACTION: If it is something you need to do - than think: If it takes you less than two minutes to have the task done than do it STRAIGHT AWAY. This is because it will take you more time to put it in your trusted system than to do it. If it's a longer TASK than file it in your trusted system. As above, once it's done, erase it from all other places. You should only have ONE trusted place to come back to.
 - INFORMATION: If it is something you want to remember – make a file/folder for things you want to remember and move it there. For example, you can have an email file called “information” and a paper file (or desk drawer) with the same name. Any material that comes in by email can be moved to the correct folder (if you want to remember to read it at a specific date, add a reminder for it in your calendar) or if it arrives by mail put it in the drawer. Don't leave anything out on your desk if you don't have to.
- Regardless of the type of task (schedule, action, or information), once you have dealt with it get rid of every evidence of its existence by filing it in the TASKS list, Calendar for ACTIONS or information drawer. The way to do so this is to take it out of the inbox if its an email, delete the phone message, throw away your little note etc.... One thing that people find extremely useful is to arrange their email inbox so that it contains only things that haven't been done as of yet. In this way, your inbox, like your mind, will be clear. Move all emails that you don't currently need to a “dealt with” folder or to more specifically named folders such as “work”, “interesting” or “fun”. The same is true for your work desk – if it will only have on it things that need to be dealt with than it will be organized and clear. More importantly, the physical action of clearing away a task registers in your brain and it will therefore allow you to “let go” and forget it

Modern lives are full of things worth doing – I hope these tips allow you to do them well and be happy and calm while doing them.
GOOD LUCK!!