

Improving Your Time Management Skills

Objective

To learn techniques that will make you more aware of the passage of time. To learn techniques that will keep distractions from making you late.

You Should know

Do you frequently arrive late to meetings or appointments? Do you feel like you never get enough done? Are people often annoyed at you because of time-related issues?

Effective time management requires two groups of skills—planning ahead and marking the passage of time. Fortunately, you can learn these skills if you are motivated to change your behaviors and you take the time to practice doing things a little differently.

Some people have difficulty paying attention to the passage of time. How many times have you been overly involved in something and lost track of time? Do you ever become involved in an interesting activity, lose your sense of time, and as a result be late for important appointment? When you become unaware of the passage of time, you may not allow time to finish a project, you may find yourself taking a phone call or getting involved in an activity even though you have to leave for an appointment.

Another element that impacts your use of time is the “time eater” – a small, unexpected activity or occurrence that accompanies actions you take. Examples of time eaters are getting caught in a traffic jam, searching for a parking spot, or making a “quick” stop to find yourself waiting in line for thirty minutes! They might also include distractions such as phone notifications, constantly checking social media, or answering texts. Time eaters interfere with on-task effectiveness and time management.

Here are techniques you can try for using your time more efficiently.

- **Plan ahead.** Choose a daily planner that works for you, either electronic or print. Consider size, technology, ease of use, portability, color, and feel. Block out times for known events, such as work, meals, and standing appointments.
- **Avoid over-scheduling.** You might overestimate how much you can get done in a given period of time.
- **Practice saying “no.”** Over-committing will set you up for frustration.
- **Differentiate between what you "should" do versus what you "want" to do.** For example, you might want to organize your messy closet, but you should first complete a report that is due tomorrow.
- **Create a to-do list.** Choose no more than three high-priority tasks to complete on a given day, marking them with an asterisk or color-coding system. Write or type those tasks in your planner in the gaps of available time. When you add an item to your daily

plan, delete something else or move it to tomorrow's schedule. Remember, there is a finite number of minutes in your day. Consider delegating some tasks to others.

- **Break large projects into multiple mini-tasks.** Include a deadline for each small task.
- **Create "holding places" near the door.** Make it a habit of placing keys, wallets, and other important items in one designated place any time you walk in the door. Place any items you need to take with you on the floor next to the door. Encourage family members to do the same.
- **Reduce morning stress by preparing the night before.** Organize and lay out all items for your morning outfit before you go to bed. Post your morning routine tasks, and do only those items. Avoid squeezing in anything else!
- **Set timers as external cues of elapsed time.** For example, you can use a combination of a vibrating watch alarm set as a warning signal and a timer set 15 minutes later as a reminder to stop what you are doing. Set an alarm to vibrate every 10 or 15 minutes. When the alarm goes off, use it as a cue to orient yourself in time. Ask yourself if you are doing what is most important in that moment, and if you are where you need to be.
- **Double the amount of time you think it will take to do something and then plan accordingly.** Set and stick to your deadlines and to-do list.
- **Practice to have a greater sense of time.** First, estimate how long tasks will take. Write or type your estimates in your planner next to each item, and keep track of the actual time spent. Look for patterns. For example, do you often underestimate how long it takes to drive places? With practice guessing and recording the actual elapsed time, the gap between your estimated and actual time will narrow.
- **Consider "time eaters."** For example, double the amount of buffer time you normally allow for traveling to a destination. To optimize task completion, turn off phone notifications and e-mail alerts. Hang a sign on your closed door requesting no interruptions.
- **Pack a "found time" tote bag and keep it in your car to use when you arrive early.** Choose items or activities you enjoy but often deny yourself due to a perceived lack of time. You might include magazines, novels, catalogs, or crossword puzzles, or projects without a set deadline, such as completing thank-you cards (along with pens, stamps, and envelopes) or balancing your checkbook. You might use the wait as downtime in your day, trying a simple meditation technique or breathing exercise.

What to Do

Starting your day stress-free can set the tone for your entire day. Determine how much time it actually takes for you to get ready in the morning, accounting for everything that must be done. Review the following example:

6:00 – 6:15	<i>Wake up, morning meditation</i>
6:15 – 7:00	<i>Exercise (run or ride stationary bike)</i>
7:00 – 7:30	<i>Eat breakfast and read the newspaper</i>
7:30 – 8:30	<i>Shower, get dressed, pack lunch, ready for the day</i>
8:45	<i>Out the door</i>

Your schedule will look different if you have children, or pets to feed/walk.

Outline your morning schedule:

Time:

Task:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Use a separate piece of paper or your planner if you require more space.

What are some challenges/obstacles you have preparing for your day?

Next, review the list of techniques for using your time more efficiently, and identify four you are willing to try for the next week.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Now, use the following chart to practice techniques to use time more effectively. Note the date, and the technique(s) you use that particular day. Identify any "time eaters" you experience, then describe what worked well and what you can do differently.

Date	Technique(s) incorporated into your schedule	Time eaters	What worked well?	What can you do differently?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise increase your ability to use your time more efficiently? Explain.

Did this exercise allow you to identify time management strategies that actually work for you? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
