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# Time management

## The “No Time” Trap

“Lack of time” is a major cause of stress for many of us. It is also the main reason people give for not eating healthfully and for failing to follow an active lifestyle. Each of us has the same 24 hours per day.

How do some people, even very busy ones, find time to follow a healthy lifestyle? If you are aware of dawdling, you may have enough time but don’t get as much done as you’d like because your life is disorganized or because you are easily distracted. However, if every day feels like a race, if you routinely leave priority items undone, and if interruptions or delays make you feel panicky, you may be overbooked. As a result, you feel stressed and pressured by competing time demands.

Those who manage to follow a healthy lifestyle, despite a busy schedule, have mastered the art of time management. Whatever the cause of your time crunch, you can learn the skills needed to take control of your schedule too. And you likely already know more about time management than you realize.

Many of the skills covered in the *Asserting Yourself*, *Personal Responsibility*, *Stress Management*, and *Setting Compelling Goals* Lifestyle Education Series modules can help you make the most of your time.

## tools for success

- Integrate personal responsibility and assertiveness skills into the time management process.
- Use time management as a stress control tool.
- Prioritize values and spend time nurturing them. Learn to identify and work on high priority tasks first.
- Organize your physical environment and daily schedule to maximize your efficiency and focus on your priorities.
- Simplify your life; eliminate or streamline activities.

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## General Rules for Managing Time

- **Take personal responsibility.** Accept that you are ultimately responsible for how you spend your time.
- **Be consistent.** Match your time usage with your values. Consistently apply your time management system. “Hit or Miss” won’t work!
- **Be less perfect.** Don’t waste time trying to excel at everything. Choose areas of your life in which you can be average. Do you have to be the world’s greatest cook, housekeeper, host, employee, and parent? Don’t confuse high standards with unrealistic, perfectionistic goals.
- **Assert yourself, ask for help.** You’ll never know what someone else may be willing to do unless you ask. Just don’t set your standards so high that no one else could possibly meet them.
- **Learn to say “No.”** This important skill is difficult for many people to master. Until you learn to consistently protect your time by

setting firm limits with those who ask for it, you will be over-scheduled and overwhelmed.

This module will help expand your time management skills through the “POS” system. Prioritization, Organization, and Simplification are the watchwords successful schedule jugglers live by. If you’re trying to manage your time, think “POS.”

Guard against using time management to squeeze new obligations into your day. The goal of time management is to increase your efficiency and reduce unnecessary, self-imposed demands so you can spend more time on enjoyable and healthful activities—and ultimately improve your well-being. Use your new “found” time on yourself.

The exercises in this module will help you discover how you use your time, how you wish you could use your time, and techniques for bringing your schedule into better alignment with your goals.

## Priorities: Learn to Live Them

To reclaim your time, begin by taking responsibility. All of the activities on your schedule represent choices and priorities you have made, and continue to make, regarding your time usage—even if the “choice” was the subconscious decision to let other peoples’ needs dictate your schedule. No one has any more time than you do. They simply choose to use their time differently.

Taking responsibility for your time is the recipe for happiness. Many of us get so involved in making it through each week we lose sight of why we are performing tasks in the first place. Reflect on your goals. Are you living your best life, or do you feel you got off-course somewhere along the way? Complete and review the following Values and Time and Practical Prioritization exercises to find out.

## Values and Time

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Values give life meaning and direction. Many people claim certain values are dear to them, yet do not live their lives (and spend their time) accordingly.

On the following page are some important values listed in random order. Rank-order these values and also rate the amount of time and energy you are currently investing in supporting each value in your life as high (H), moderate (M), or low (L).

Values	Importance Ranking	H/M/L
Intimate Relationships		
Health		
Fitness		
Family		
Work Satisfaction		
Personal Possessions		
Fun Activities		
Power/Control		
Spiritual Values		
Life Balance		
Personal Growth		
Sense of Purpose		
Community Service		
Friendship		
Financial Security		
Status/Recognition		
Physical Appearance		
Creativity		
Intellectual Stimulation		

- Which values did you consistently rate high on importance (top five) and high on time and energy investment?

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- What does this exercise tell you about how you might consider managing your time differently?

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## Practical Prioritization Exercise

You can apply the ABC prioritization system to a day's worth of tasks and activities. Under "Today's Tasks," list everything you need to and would like to accomplish today (or tomorrow).

Then read through your list and put a 'D' next to any task you can *delegate* to someone else.

Next, prioritize the items on your task list by placing an A (highest), B (moderate), or C (lowest) in the "Importance" column.

Finally, label the most important thing you have to accomplish 'A1,' the next most urgent task 'A2,' and so on. Repeat this procedure with the B and C priority lists. *Eliminate as many C tasks as possible.*

Today's Tasks	Delegate (Y/N)	Importance (1 least, 5 most)
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		

Now, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my schedule reflect my priorities? Do I say certain things are important to me but spend very little, if any, time on them?
- What are my major time-wasters? Identify interruptions, delays (like looking for misplaced objects), activities that could be shortened or eliminated (for example, are weekly staff meetings necessary?), and projects others could handle.
- Is my life in balance? Is there time for playing, relaxing, doing nothing, enjoying nature, being creative, nurturing relationships, exercising and taking care of myself?

Make leading a healthy lifestyle a priority. It will give you the sense of calm and the energy you need to keep the rest of your life on track.

## Organize for Maximum Efficiency

How much time do you lose each week due to poor organization? An hour spent organizing your home, car, or office can save many hours of wasted time down the road.

**Clean up the clutter!** Follow the Fly Lady's ([www.FlyLady.com](http://www.FlyLady.com)) decluttering tips. Set aside 15 minutes a day to clean up. Fun approaches like the 27-Fling Boogie, Hot Spot Fire Drill, and 5-Minute Room Rescue can bring calm to chaos.

**Make a "to do" list** at the beginning of each day or the night before. Categorize entries as A (top), B (moderate), and C (lowest) priorities to differentiate "must do" tasks from those that can wait.

**Minimize procrastination** and avoid being overwhelmed by complicated tasks by dividing them into smaller actions that can be quickly accomplished. For example, if you're planning to buy home exercise equipment, research your

options one day, test equipment on another day, and place your order the following day.

**Use a printed or electronic organizer.** These tools will help you schedule your time and prioritize “to do” lists. Many include a personal address book and a filing system for reference information. Having all this information in one convenient place can be a tremendous time-saver.

**Invest in garage, closet, shelf, and drawer organizers.** Modular units you can adapt to different spaces in case of a move are the best choice. If an upper-level storage space is out of your physical reach, make sure a step stool is readily accessible.

**Sort ahead of time.** Keep separate laundry bins for white clothes, colored clothes, and household linens. Sort silverware as you place it in the dishwasher basket: forks in one slot, spoons in another, and so on. Invest in clear storage containers so you can quickly see what you need. Sort mail into “need to read,” “needs action,” and “ready to file.” *Throw the rest out.* You can keep a recycling bin and/or shredder near your desk or in your garage where you can throw any unwanted or “junk” mail.

**Create a home office space.** Devise a system that will make it easy for you to quickly put papers and supplies in their place.

**Use technology to your advantage.** Make templates of frequently used information like directions to your home, instructions for child/house sitters, emergency numbers, routine shopping lists, etc.

**Use the Internet** to research products and health issues, shop, and communicate by email.

**Learn to use an online banking** and financial management programs, like Quicken® or [www.mint.com](http://www.mint.com). They can help you pay bills on time, simplify balancing checking accounts, generate

reports for insurance reimbursements, and facilitate tax preparation.

**Sign up for automatic payment** of routine bills. You can arrange for utility bills, car payments, rent, mortgage payments, and other bills to be automatically deducted from your checking account each month.

**Establish a group calendar and message center.** Use these tools to track family members’ schedules.

**Keep multiple shopping lists.** Make one list for groceries, one for items purchased at a discount warehouse, and one for other items. Group items according to where they are located in the store. Plan multiple errands in the same part of town.

**Call ahead.** Make sure the item you want or person you wish to speak with will be available when you arrive.

**“Buy in pairs so you have spares.”** Reduce unplanned trips to the store. When you open the last container of a staple item (shelf-stable food, cleaning product, or paper good), add it to your shopping list.

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“I buy duplicates of basic suits so one can be at the cleaners and the other in my suitcase.”

—Elizabeth, frequent business traveler

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**Routinely reorganize.** It is great to establish a system, but you need to consistently apply it in order to benefit.

**Negotiate and delegate.** Swap chores so you do what you are best at and vice versa. Recruit help. Even young children can learn organizational skills; for items stored in a drawer or bin, attach pictures of the items to the outside of the container. Make clean up fun. Put on music, play time games, reward yourself and your family with fun, free-time activities.

## Simplify to Multiply Free Time

Time management is not as easy as ABC. If you are overbooked, prioritizing your time into A, B, and C activities won’t help you get everything done. Something has to give. It is better to choose to give up some activities than to “give out” from the stress of trying to have it all and do it all.

Most people who use the ABC organizational system report they rarely get to the 'C' priorities on their schedules. Eliminate as many of these as possible. Then delegate useful C and B activities (like washing windows) to others or hire help.

### Simplification Strategies

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**Limit extracurricular activities.** Ask each family member (as well as yourself!) to limit extra activities to one per season or school term.

**Volunteer for "one-time" projects.** Giving time to one-time projects should help you say "No" to long-term projects with less specific timelines.

**Think "low-maintenance."** Replace worn clothes, furnishings, appliances, and other belongings with easy-care versions. Consider installing low-maintenance landscaping. Apply the easy-care philosophy to your grooming routine.

**Simplify your celebrations.** Don't let sophisticated ads and slick magazine spreads dictate your plans. Every room does not need a seasonally appropriate decoration. Read an issue or two of *Real Simple* magazine to get into the "more is less" mindset. Share cooking, decorating, and cleanup responsibilities.

**Slash your gift list.** Chances are your friends and family would be happy to eliminate some of the gift-giving obligations that have developed over the years. To avoid hurt feelings and embarrassing situations, let the people you typically exchange gifts with know of your plans well in advance. Use a gift lottery to limit your list or select a fun activity all can participate in rather than buying each other individual gifts. Or select a favorite charity and make donations honoring your family members or friends.

**Buy time with money.** Hire someone to do routine, time consuming chores that currently crowd your schedule. This may include a personal chef, a dog walker, a gardener, cleaning service or a personal concierge (a professional errand runner). Another time saver may be using home delivery services. Laundry/dry cleaning, groceries, pharmaceuticals, personal care items, and prepared meals can all be delivered to your door. Some companies even provide standing orders to eliminate the need for you to reorder each month. You may pay more, but you will enjoy more quality time as well.

**Simplify cue management.** Time management can help you improve your health by making time to eat healthfully and exercise. It can also help you avoid cues to overeat or be inactive. Identify the time of day when you are most likely to lapse into your old behavior patterns. Plan an incompatible activity during this period.

The Mindtools website [www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com) has many interactive time management tools you can download.

"I 'found'  
**45 minutes**

a day by switching to a simpler haircut that involved less styling and investing in a single set of makeup, color-keyed to my complexion instead of buying sets to match each outfit."

—Kate

## Time Traps

Sometimes, no matter how much you reorganize your life, you find yourself slipping back into old time management habits. It can take more than learning to schedule activities for you to break some types of time traps. Rather, it requires that you recognize why you allow them to happen. This real-life scenario may be helpful in analyzing your own time-use tendencies.

### “The Rush”

Carrie, a manager at a public relations firm and mother of three school-aged children, was chronically overworked, over-tired, and overwhelmed. When her husband became a partner in the accounting firm where he worked, Carrie jumped at the chance to become a “stay-at-home mom.” The first couple of months were great. She had time to spend with her family, run errands, catch up on her sleep, and even join a book club. But six months into her new lifestyle, Carrie found she was overcommitted once again. A close look at her schedule revealed she was spending nearly four hours a day preparing and cleaning up after meals. She had gradually taken over her husband’s usual chores, she had said “yes” to many requests for her to volunteer her time, and she was driving her kids to and from all activities, many of which they used to walk to. She was too busy to attend book club, and she and her family had gained weight.

After taking such a dramatic time management action as to leave her job, why did Carrie lose control of her time again?

Carrie found a variety of complex issues contributed to her time-use style. For one thing, after awhile she missed the recognition she had received at work. She also came to realize she had become an adrenaline junkie. She loved the high of meeting tough deadlines. Loading her schedule provided the “rush” of excitement Carrie’s new stay-home lifestyle lacked. Volunteering to create press releases for local schools and service organizations filled some of her career needs.

On the other hand, after many years of being a working mom, Carrie felt she owed her family a devoted wife/mother, so she turned herself into a servant. In the back of her mind, underpinning the whole time-crunch process, she heard her hardworking parents criticizing the idea of spending time being non-productive. To them, anything like a book club that did not directly contribute to the family’s well-being was a waste of time.

It took a bit of practice for Carrie to learn to give herself free time, but she eventually learned to deal with her internal dialog more effectively. She still “hears” her parents’ disapproval, but now she reminds herself, “I need time off to recharge my own batteries.”

## What Are Your Time Traps?

Do you recognize any aspects of your own time-use habits?

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How do you think you can begin addressing your personal time traps?

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