“Cool, calm, and under control.” – the art of Time Management.

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Time management is something that affects us all. Quite simply how do we fit everything we need to do (or ought to do) into the time we have? It’s a struggle for all of us sometimes.

Time management might be better titled ‘Life management’ as it prioritises the content we’re fitting into the time rather than the frame into which we’re trying to squeeze our lives. How we use our time is absolutely fundamental to who we are as people and how we wish to ‘spend’ our life. Finding a way to manage your time effectively, and finding the space to do everything as well as you’d like to do it, might be the most important thing you ever do.

On which note it must be pointed out that effective life management isn’t some mystical technique learned in remote Tibetan monasteries and neither is it equivalent to rocket science in its complexity.

This guide will outline some key ideas, themes, and problems. It’ll also provide some possible solutions and practical methods for bringing your life back under control.

Some myths about time management

“It’ll mean keeping track of every minute!” No, because that’d waste even more time! Having a decent idea of where your team is being spent will help you think about whether the way you use your time matches your priorities. But accounting for each and every minute of the day would be a time-consuming, frustrating, and soul-destroying process.

“I don’t want to be ruthless about my time!” Good, we don’t want you to feel you’re not enjoying yourself or spending ‘quality time’ on activities. Efficient and Ruthless have different meanings but they both stem from the idea that you take charge of your time and prevent yourself, other people, and ineffective systems wasting it. Ruthlessness is an extreme version although it’s often used as an excuse for not having the courage to stop having your time wasted.

“It’s dull – I want to be spontaneous!” Time-management is about giving your life slightly more order so yes; it does mean doing things in a less random or ‘on a whim’ style. However, it also means you’ll waste less time on tasks that could be done with less time, less effort, and more effectiveness. Which therefore means you’ll find more time to do new and exciting and spontaneous activities – because you’ve not wasted it all constantly going round in circles of vague activity.

“Some people are just better at time management than others.” True, but it’s because they’ve become good at it through practice rather than

because they were born that way. Busy people become good time managers – because they have to be! Conversely people with little to do become awful time managers because they have little to manage. During busy periods we all behave in slightly different ways so we can cope with the demands, but we don't always acknowledge how we 'step up' to the challenge and transfer those skills to times when we're less pressurised. Good habits can be formed!

"Its all about discipline." Yes it is. However, by knowing more about what motivates us and how we can create simple processes to help us manage our time we need less discipline because it becomes easier to do.

Where does your time go?
The first step to resolving time management issues is to establish where you currently are, how are you spending your time and why is this unsatisfactory?

We rarely need a complete overhaul but maybe there a few things we can start to work on that are obvious issues.

Time-mapping

1. Pick a period of time to try to manage e.g. a day, week, fortnight, or a month. You'll need to look at everything you try and get done in that period so pick a time frame you can sensibly work with. If you have a busy daily schedule then choose a day, if it's slightly bigger tasks over the course of a few days then choose to think about a week instead.
2. Make a list of all the things you *should* be spending time on in that period. Be sure to include sleep, food, exercise and social activities as they are all vital to your health and happiness – it's not just work, work, and more work!
3. Now make another list of all the things you *actually* spend time doing and make notes where you think certain activities might be getting too much or too little time. Be as honest as possible or you'll remain in denial and nothing will change.
4. Compare lists and try to establish some key areas where you're spending too much time or too little time, or where you could abandon some old activities and add in new ones
5. *Optional – you could map out your desired and real time allocations as pie charts to give you a clear picture of where your time is going. The visualisation is more powerful than a simple written list.*

These key areas for activity are the first things to start working on – your priorities for better time-management.

What prevents us managing our time better?
Before you read over the page, make a quick list of what you believe your own bad habits to be – and not just activities like daytime TV: maybe also some of the behaviours and attitudes that stop you being more effective.

Each of us 'wastes' time in different ways, and sometimes it's not so much what we're doing but how and when that defines whether we're being effective or not. For instance going to the gym or going for a run are effective uses of our behaviour, but not when it's an excuse to avoid work or study. Likewise sometimes socialising is sabotaging our productivity and on other occasions its vital to maintain friendships or preserve our sanity when we've been working too hard. Understanding why we're doing something and trying to keep it all in balance are the most important things.

Ineffective activities are almost impossible to define as they are rarely ineffective just by their nature, even TV can be a valuable, intellectual experience or even just a necessary bit of relaxing entertainment. Most people list TV, email, Internet use, socialising, and physical exercise here – but in all cases it's inefficient use of the activity or using it as an excuse to avoid what they perceive to be a more worthwhile activity.

Ineffective beliefs and attitudes are more significant but again difficult to define. The most important one is "I can't do anything about it"; if you feel that a situation is outside of your control or influence then you'll do nothing about it. In every instance we always have some ability to influence a situation however small that influence might be. More often than not we can influence situations but it just seems like too much work. A related belief that sabotages our effectiveness is a fear of failure or embarrassment. Because we're scared of it we put it off and skirt round it when we could just get it over and done with and move on.

Ineffective behaviours can also be hard to pin down but there are a couple of obvious ones, such as putting off unpleasant tasks in the vain hope they'll go away or become more pleasant somehow. Usually it just creates a backlog of activity and the task become ever worse as time goes on. Attacking tasks piecemeal can also work badly because you never really get on with it and every time you start it you have to remind yourself where you were and thus lose valuable time. It also tends to then stretch on forever without ever seeming to progress!

Ineffective processes or procedures seem to hold all of us up, whether it's pointless bureaucracy or an insistence on doing things in a drawn-out way because to do it any quicker is scary. Some of the processes will be our own – "I always do it like this", where we used a habitual, comfortable process of doing something even when there are other ways that achieve the same results in less time. Sometimes the processes are external to us and they're a way in which another individual or organisation does something and with which we're obliged to interact. Whilst established processes, particularly in large organisations, are hard to change that doesn't mean they are impossible to change and similarly it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to change them. Our own habits can be changed and we should be willing to adapt when new ways of doing things become apparent.

Other people are felt to be the cause of a lot of our time-wasting. Whether it's distractions, emails, text messages, or simply waiting on other people to turn up or to do something we often lay the blame for our time-management on other people. Whilst other people can, will, and inevitably do waste our time there are ways to minimise this by changing our own behaviour – better communication (particularly of expectations) is at the heart of this issue and just because someone else has poor time management it doesn't necessarily mean you'll suffer.

Key tactics for effective time management:

- **Structure your time:** plan your time out into simple periods in which specific activities get the time they deserve. Use the planning methods described further on to map this out and use the prioritising techniques to allocate time to specific activities. By having some structure (however loose) you'll minimise confusion, faffing, and the waste caused by an unplanned and piecemeal attack on the tasks.
- **Build in 'sacred space':** find times and places where you can successfully devote yourself to a particular task without disturbances, distractions and suchlike. Turn your email and your phone off and do that reading or exercise, or spend time with people you want to spend some quality time with. Mark these times out in your diary and make sure everyone who needs to knows not to bother you.
- **Contingency time:** sometimes we can be pretty unrealistic about how long things will take because we don't want to believe they'll take long. Always think about travelling times and set-up/clear-up times for your activities and that way you'll plan sensibly, get places on time and not make commitments you'll fail to fulfil.
- **Forewarned is forearmed:** knowing what is about to happen is the best way to reduce stress: it's uncertainty that makes us anxious. By using a diary and reading ahead in it, or by mapping out the immediate future and our commitments we can ready ourselves for events however good or bad they might be. What we're not going to have is any unpleasant surprises and therefore reduce our daily crisis-count.
- **Communication & assertion:** a lot of time is wasted by explaining things poorly, not listening properly, not asking questions when you're not sure what is going on, and not saying no because we don't want to offend but we know we'll back out at the last minute anyway. If we communicate, explain and listen well; if we check others understand and we're clear about everyone's expectations; and finally if we assert ourselves clearly and honestly then we can minimise a lot of wasted time.
- **Create the right habits:** we've all got ways of doing things that work and ways of doing other things that don't. When you have periods where you are in control of your time what are the differences between then and when you don't feel in control? Is it an attitude? A behaviour? Does it require particular contexts (e.g. pressure from an external source?) What are the differences that make the difference?

Find out what works and use that rather than banging on uselessly with the old method like a broken record.

Prioritisation & Planning
Getting these two things right is fundamental to effective time management; what do you do first and how do you find the time to do it?

The Prioritisation Map:
"Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things that matter least." Goethe.

Being able to prioritise effectively is critical, but we all prioritise different things so ultimately you need to do 2 things:

1. Find a way of prioritising things that helps **you** get done the things **you** want done.
2. Given that most inter-personal conflict arises from clashing priorities, you need a method that helps you clarify your own priorities and give you some perspective about where other people might differ.

The Prioritisation Map is a way of establishing how all your different tasks interrelate, and how you might assign them any form of priority.

Draw two axes, one for urgency and one for importance: you can simply mark them high and low, or even adopt a scale from 1-10, for instance. Now mark all your tasks onto the graph where they seem to fit. Remember to include things like sleep, food, 'fun' activities and so on and make sure you give them a sense of priority too.

High Importance	Long-term important tasks, relationship/ team-building. (B)	Requires immediate attention. (A)
Low Importance	Distractions and time-wasting. (D)	Questionable use of your time. Question objectives. (C)
	Low Urgency	High Urgency

'D' tasks are a waste of your time because you clearly don't regard them as important and they're not urgent either!

'C' (low importance/high urgency) tends to be things prioritised by others, or by tradition, "we always do this like this", but if considered yourself they really aren't that important.

Good time management would try and plan for as much as possible to be 'B - high importance-low urgency'. 'A' - High urgency usually creates stress and fatigue. It's impossible to keep stuff out of this box, but try to!

An alternative method…
Make a list of all your tasks/projects for a given period – be that a day, week, month, year, or whatever. Now mark them each with one of the following letters: A, B, C, or D with A being highest-priority and D being lowest. Try and have roughly even numbers of tasks in each priority band. Now take each band in turn and arrange them into numbered priority order with 1 as the highest, i.e. B1, B2, B3, etc.

You should now have a list from A1 to D-something. It's good practice to set yourself a target of A and B tasks to do before you're 'allowed' to do a C or D (which are usually much more interesting or fun).

It is a slightly brutal method but it does give you some perspective. Also think about how your friends, flatmates, partner, or your 'authorities' be that a boss or a tutor would have prioritised the same list; any differences and you've got issues that may need resolving.

Planning
"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

A few key methods here:

Routines
By setting up a pattern for your regular events it'll help you manipulate your time around them. Use your diary to help you plan a routine. At first thought it seems a bit boring, but it'll help you remember where you're supposed to be. If you have a routine you also know when you don't have anything to do and you effectively have space as part of your routine for doing spontaneous activities, safe in the knowledge you don't have to be doing something else. Routines are also easy to maintain, easier than a changing, unpredictable collection of events, activities and commitments. One of the worst sensations is that nagging feeling you ought to be somewhere else; if you've got a routine that makes sure you have Friday nights off then you can really let yourself go then – free from guilt!

Long-Term Planning: Gantt Charts – Time-lines
Another useful way of planning your time is to draw a Gantt chart or time-line. It's a useful and graphic way of showing what work you'll be doing when and how they all fit together, you may then decide to lighten the load of heavy weeks in the future by starting work earlier. It also helps you structure how you'll order some of your work. It helps stop bottlenecks of work and helps fit in new commitments.

See over for example.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10
Proj 1										
Proj 2										
Proj 3										
Proj 4										

Similarly you could draw out a timeline, fix your final deadline and then work backwards along it marking all the tasks that need doing at progressively earlier stages if you're actually going to make your deadline – it should give you something that needs doing tomorrow even if the goal is years away!

Mid-term planning: Diaries
Don't just own one, use it. This means carrying it anywhere you're likely to pick up commitments on your time. You must also write everything important in it and refer to it regularly. This should allow you to know what's coming up and avoid double-bookings and allow you enough time to get places on time and advance warning of upcoming deadlines.

Some tips:

- Get into a habit of reading it the night before.
- Use a week-to-view so you always have a picture of how the days of your week will pan out.
- Use colour and graphical devices to differentiate between types of events and commitments and show how activities might interrelate. Box round areas for particular activities.
- Write in '2 weeks until…' warnings just as a way of keeping longer-term commitments in mind.
- Don't write so much in it you can't read it and try not to scare yourself with it!

The other thing you can do is **action-plan**:

Action Plan:

Task	**How**	**When**
Complete Essay	Do Research Write Body text Write Intro/Conclusions Write bibliography etc	End of week By next Tuesday By next Friday By next Monday + hand in.
Sort out finances	Look at bank statements –	Tomorrow night

	where can I make savings? Look for a job Sort out CV and apply	Next Monday – Friday Next Weekend

By listing all our tasks we can get a better focus on them. You can also them prioritise them (maybe A, B, C, etc). Listing how you'll go about dealing with them will give you an idea of the likely time commitment you'll have to make. Then list a deadline so you know what you've got to work towards. Once you've got an action plan you can convert it to a Gaant chart or into your diary.

Personal 'to-do' lists

Having a daily to-do list can be really useful but you can make it more effective by doing the following:

- Actually referring to it and ticking things off.
- Fit it all onto JUST ONE LIST (not lists of lists!) and preferably just one side of A4 because that makes it look just a bit more manageable.
- Write it the night before so you can relax better that night and start the day quicker.
- Separate out tasks from emails that need sending or phone calls that you need to make – then work through them systematically.
- Use colour to help differentiate and prioritise.
- Be realistic about how long tasks will take.
- Group items that are linked by time or geography so you can avoid wasting time travelling around unnecessarily and that things get done in the right order.
- Again you could prioritise this list and try to work through it in a particular order if that helps.

Creating change

Hopefully by now you've identified some key areas to change about the way you currently manage your time and you've got some practical steps you can take to actually make those happen. It's worth focusing on just a few things to start with and then build that up.

Sometimes making changes is about more than simply doing things differently, and sometimes it's difficult even to enact those changes because of the circumstances you're in. Rather than struggle with change or get frustrated by circumstance think about these questions as you plan to make changes so you're ready for adversity:

- How will these changes impact on your work/study life?
- How will these changes impact on your home/social life?
- How will these changes impact on those around you?
- Who else needs to be involved in these changes?
- What do you need to do to start this process?
- What do you need to maintain this change, to keep it going?

In all these cases the answers can be good or bad, there may be by-product plusses to all kinds of time-management changes you make! What is important about all these questions is they help you start and protect any changes you make – troubleshoot first rather than struggle later.

If you're struggling to make changes think about whether you're motivated *towards* a goal or *away* from a problem – *Away* motivators are good for getting started but its easy to lapse, *Toward* motivators are much more likely to help you maintain changes.

For more information and comprehensive advice on setting and realising goals see the 'Targeting Success' document referenced below.

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Further reading
Targeting Success – Dave Jarman. Resource available from www.bristol.ac.uk/studentskills