

Time Management

10 Strategies for Better Time Management

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The term Time Management is a misnomer.

You cannot manage time; you manage the events in your life in relation to time.

You may often wish for more time, but you only get 24 hours, 1,440 minutes, or 86,400 seconds each day. How you use that time depends on skills learned through self-analysis, planning, evaluation, and self-control.

MUCH LIKE MONEY, TIME IS BOTH VALUABLE AND LIMITED: it must be protected, used wisely, and budgeted.

People who practice good time management techniques often find that they:

- Are more productive.
- Have more energy for things they need to accomplish.
- Feel less stressed.
- Have more free time to do the things they want.
- Get more things done.
- Relate more positively to others.
- Feel better about themselves. (Dodd and Subdheim, 2005)

Finding a time management strategy that works best for you depends on your personality, ability to self-motivate, and level of self-discipline. By incorporating some, or all the ten strategies below, you can more effectively manage your time.

1. Know How You Spend Your Time

A time log is a helpful way to determine how you use your time. Record what you are doing in 15-minute intervals for a week or two. Evaluate the results:

- Did everything you needed to do get done?
- Which tasks require the most time?
- What time of day when you are most productive?
- Where is most of your time is devoted (i.e. job, family, personal, recreation)?

Identifying your most time-consuming tasks and determining whether you are investing your time in the most important activities can help you to determine a course of action. Having a good sense of the time required for routine tasks can help you be more realistic in planning and estimating how much time is available for other activities. Many apps exist to help you keep track of your time, as mentioned in Strategy 3.



2. Set Priorities

Managing your time effectively requires a distinction between what is important and what is urgent (MacKenzie, 1990). Experts agree that the most important tasks usually aren't the most urgent tasks. However, we tend to let the urgent tasks dominate our lives. Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1994) categorize activities into four quadrants in their Time Management Matrix: urgent, not urgent, important, and not important. While activities that are both urgent and important must be done, Covey et al. suggests spending less time on activities that are not important (regardless of their urgency) to gain time for activities that are not urgent but important. Focusing on these important activities allows you to gain greater control over your time and may reduce the number of important tasks that become urgent.

Example Time Management Matrix

| | Urgent | Not Urgent |
|---------------|---|---|
| Important | <p>Do these tasks as soon as possible. <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit job application by 5 p.m. • Pick up sick child from school • Call plumber to fix leaking toilet | <p>Defer these tasks until all urgent and important tasks have been completed. <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule dentist appointment • Reply to coworker's email regarding future event • Plan family reunion |
| Not Important | <p>Delegate these tasks to the appropriate people who can manage them. <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help son with homework • Pull weeds from flower beds • Make dinner for family | <p>Delete these tasks – they are often time wasters. <i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to social media comments • Online shopping • Finish watching TV show |

Creating a 'to do' list is an easy way to prioritize. Whether you need a daily, weekly, or monthly list depends on your lifestyle. Be careful to keep list-making from getting out of control. List manageable tasks rather than goals or multi-step plans. Rank the items on your "to do" list in order of priority (both important and urgent). You may choose to group items in categories such as high priority, medium priority, or low priority; number them in order of priority; or use a color-coding system. The goal is not to mark off the most items, but to mark off the highest priority items (MacKenzie, 1990). A prioritized "to do" list allows you to set boundaries so you can say "no" to activities that may be interesting or provide a sense of achievement but do not fit your basic priorities.

3. Use a Planning Tool

Time management experts recommend using a personal planning tool to improve your productivity. Personal planning tools include planners, calendars, phone apps, wall charts, index cards, pocket diaries, and notebooks. Writing down your tasks, schedules, and items to remember can free your mind to focus on your priorities. Auditory learners may prefer to dictate their thoughts instead. The key is to find one planning tool that works for you and use that tool consistently.



When using a planning tool:

- Always record your information on the tool itself. Jotting notes elsewhere that must be transferred later is inefficient and wastes more time.
- Review your planning tool daily.
- Keep a list of your priorities in your planning tool and refer to it often.
- Keep planning tools synchronized. If you keep more than one, make sure your phone, computer, and paper planning tools match.
- Keep a back-up system.

Apps on your phone can be great planning tools. Apps typically fall into one of the following categories:

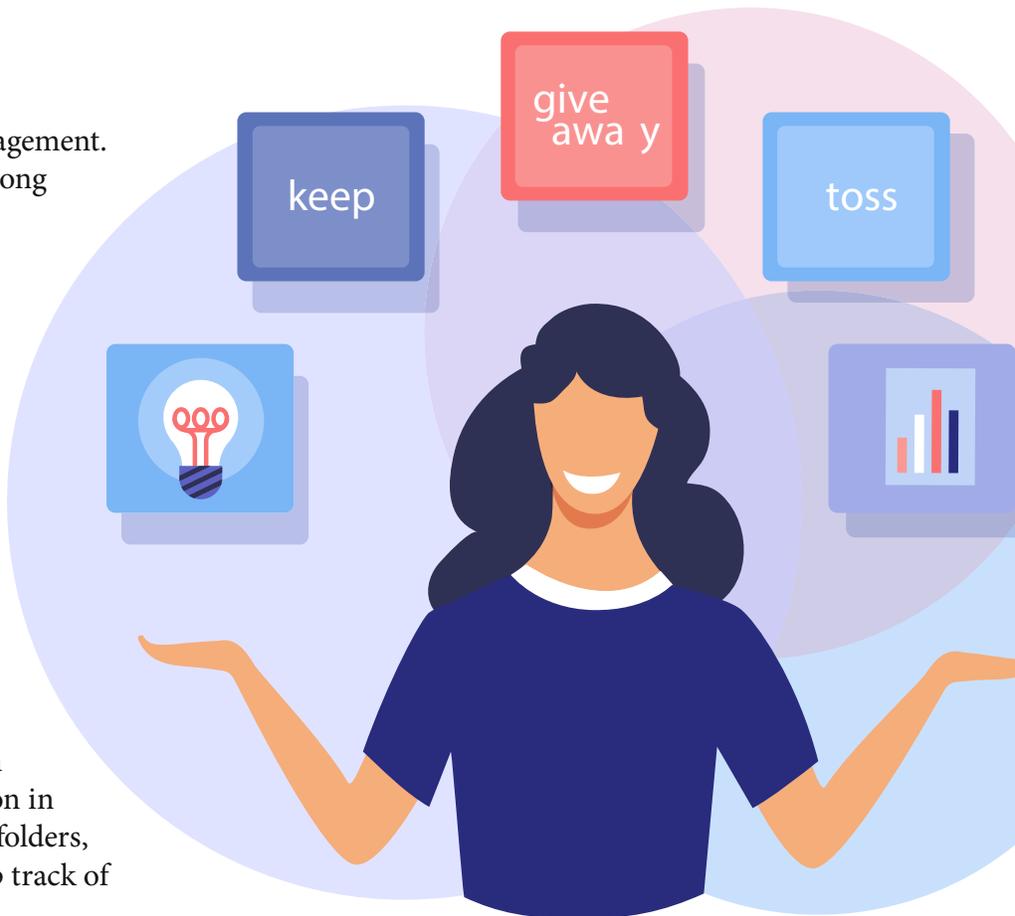
- Time Trackers – Gain an awareness of how you spend your time.
- Time Savers – Increase productivity and break time-wasting habits.
- Task Managers – Prioritize and organize tasks to improve time management.
- Habit Developers – Create healthy habits to encourage time management.

4. Get Organized

Disorganization leads to poor time management. Research has shown that clutter has a strong negative impact on perceived well-being (Roster, 2016). To improve our time management, get organized.

Set up three boxes (or corners of a room) labeled “Keep,” “Give Away,” and “Toss.” Sort items into these boxes. Discard items in your “Toss” box. Your “Give Away” box may include items you want to sell, donate, or discard.

The next step is to improve the time you spend processing information. For example, tasks such as email can eat up your day. To combat wasted time, implement an email organization system that allows you to process the information in each email as efficiently as possible. Use folders, flagging, or a color-coded system to keep track of what’s what.



5. Schedule Appropriately

Scheduling is more than just recording what must be done (e.g., meetings and appointments). Be sure to build in time for the things you want to do. Effective scheduling requires you to know yourself. Your time log should help you to identify times when you are most productive and alert. Plan your most challenging tasks for when you have the most energy. Block out time for your high priority activities first and protect that time from interruptions.

Schedule small tasks such as drafting an email, creating a grocery shopping list, reading, watching webinars or listening to podcasts for long commutes or when waiting for a call or appointment. Capitalize on what would otherwise be time lost. Avoid nonproductive activities, such as playing games or scrolling through social media. Limit scheduled time to about three-fourths of your day to allow for creative activities such as planning, dreaming, and thinking.

6. Delegate: Get Help from Others

Delegating means assigning responsibility for a task to someone else, freeing up your time for tasks that require your expertise. Identify tasks others can do and select the appropriate person(s) to do them. Select someone with the appropriate skills, experience, interest, and authority needed to accomplish the task. Be specific. Define the task and your expectations while allowing the person some freedom to personalize the task. Check how well the person is progressing periodically and provide any assistance, being careful not to take over the responsibility. Finally, reward the person for a job well done or make suggestions for improvements if needed. (Dodd and Sundheim, 2005).

Another way to get help is to “buy” time by obtaining goods or services that save time. For example, paying someone to mow your lawn or clean your house, or joining a carpool for your children’s extracurricular activities frees time for other activities. The time-savings from hiring someone for specialized projects is often worth the cost.

7. Stop Procrastinating

People put off tasks for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the task seems overwhelming or unpleasant. To help stop procrastination, consider “eating the big frog first.” A quote commonly attributed to Mark Twain says, “If it’s your job to eat a frog today, it’s best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it’s your job to eat two frogs, it’s best to eat the big frog first.” Unpleasant tasks we procrastinate completing are “big frogs.” Complete these tasks as your first action of the day to get them out of the way. Another option is to “snowball” your tasks by breaking them down into smaller segments, completing preparatory tasks, and eventually completing the larger task at hand. Whether you choose the “big frog first” or “snowball” method, try building in a reward system for completed tasks to help stay motivated.



8. Manage Time Wasters

Reduce or eliminate time spent in these activities by implementing some simple tips.

Handheld Devices

- Take advantage of voice-to-text features such as transcribed voicemails or to make notes or draft emails and text messages when you are on the go.
- Avoid small talk. Stay focused.
- Take any necessary action immediately following a call.
- Impose screen time limits and regularly monitor your digital wellness (see Strategy 10).
- Schedule breaks from your devices.

Email

- Set aside a specific time to view and respond to email, but don't let it accumulate to the point it becomes overwhelming to sort.
- Turn off notifications for email.
- Handle each item only once if possible.
- Immediately delete or unsubscribe from junk emails.
- Keep address books up-to-date and organized.
- Utilize built-in shortcuts to sort email.

Unexpected Visitors

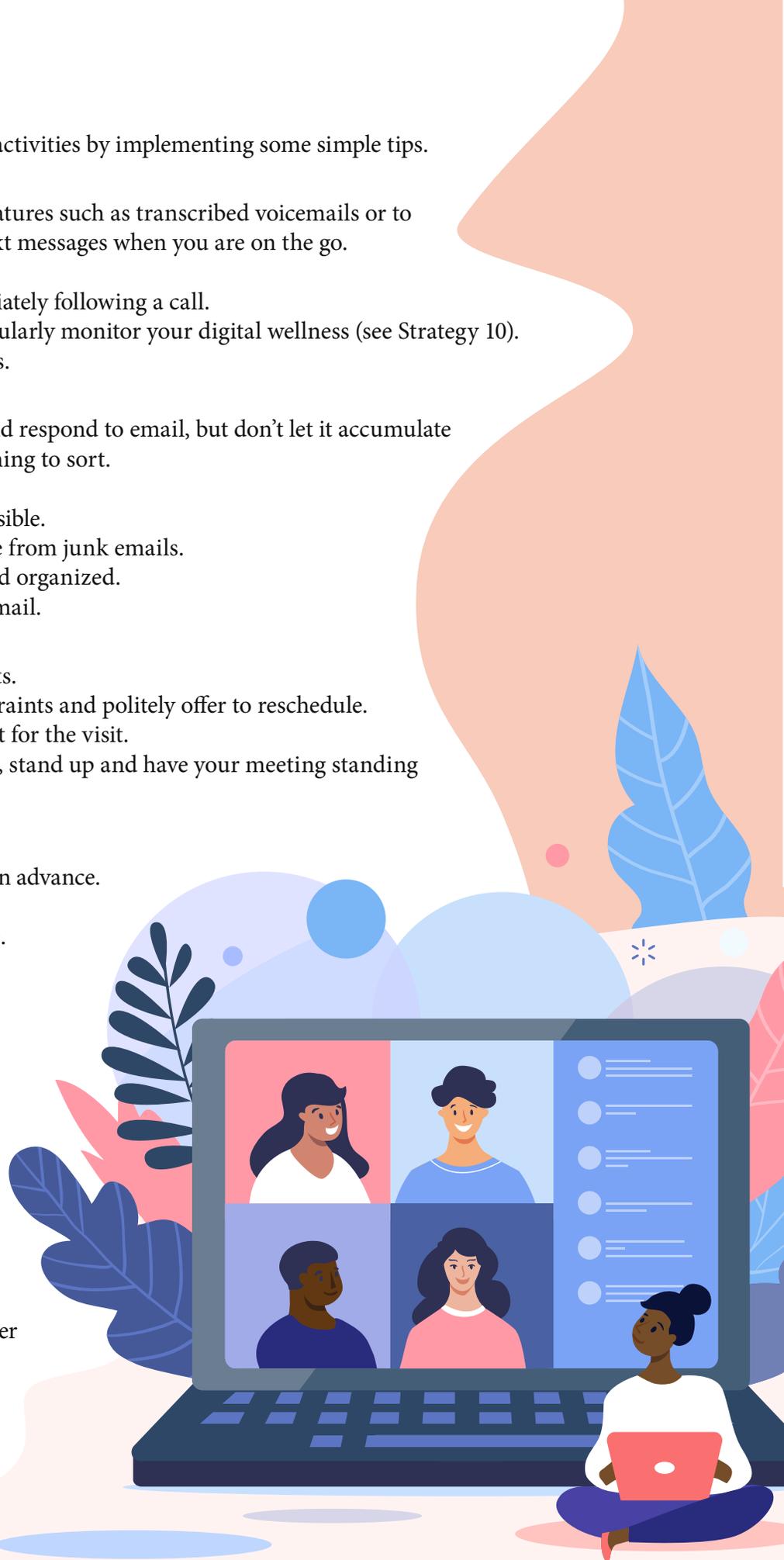
- Schedule time for face-to-face visits.
- Inform visitors of your time constraints and politely offer to reschedule.
- Set a mutually agreeable time limit for the visit.
- When someone comes to the door, stand up and have your meeting standing to help keep it brief.

In-Person and Virtual Meetings

- Know the purpose of the meeting in advance.
- Arrive early.
- Start and end the meeting on time.
- Prepare an agenda and stick to it.
Use a timed agenda, if necessary.
- Don't schedule meetings unless they are necessary and have a specific purpose or agenda.
- Use recording software or designate a note-taker.

Family Obligations

- Use and sync virtual calendars for easy sharing between busy family members.
- Make each family member responsible for consulting the master calendar for potential conflicts.
- Create a central area or agreed upon app for posting communications such as appointment reminders, announcements, and messages.



9. Avoid Multi-tasking

Psychological studies have shown that multi-tasking does not save time. In fact, the opposite is often true. You lose time when switching from one task to another, resulting in a loss of productivity (Rubinsteim, Meyer, and Evans, 2001). Routine multi-tasking may lead to difficulty in concentrating and maintaining focus. Do your best to focus on just one task at a time by keeping your area clear of distractions, including turning off notifications on your devices, and set aside dedicated time for specific tasks.

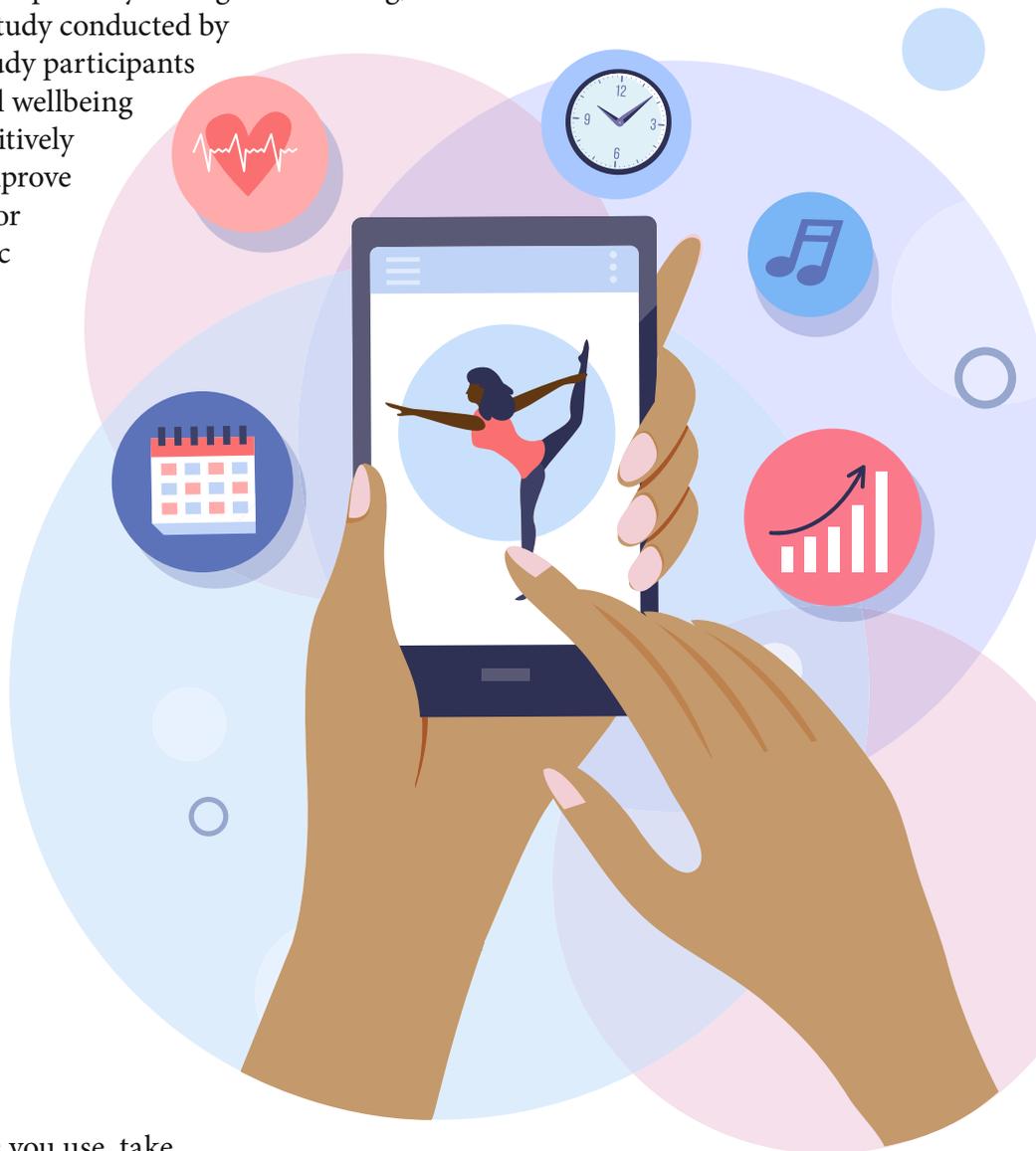
10. Stay Healthy

The care and attention you give yourself is an important investment of time. Scheduling time to relax or do nothing helps you rejuvenate physically and mentally, enabling you to accomplish tasks more quickly and easily. Be sure to monitor your screen time as a part of your digital wellbeing, setting boundaries to stay healthy. A study conducted by Google showed that four out of five study participants who took steps to improve their digital wellbeing believe their overall wellbeing was positively impacted as well (Google, 2019). To improve your digital wellbeing, set time limits or utilizing built-in software on electronic devices such as phones and tablets to help maintain your digital wellness. Blue light blockers and grayscale mode may also help you improve your digital wellbeing. Set a time each night to shut off all digital devices to give your mind time to relax; this can also help improve your sleep schedule.

Unfortunately, poor time management and too much screen time can result in fatigue, moodiness, and more frequent illness. To reduce stress, reward yourself for time management successes. Take time to recognize that you have accomplished a major task or challenge before moving on to the next activity.

Conclusion

Whatever time management strategies you use, take time to evaluate how they have worked for you. Do you have a healthy balance between work and home life? Are you accomplishing the tasks that are most important in your life? Are you investing enough time in your own personal wellbeing? If the answer is “no” to any of these questions, then reevaluate your time management strategies and transition to ones that will work better for you. Successful time management leads to greater personal happiness, more accomplishments at home and at work, and a more satisfying future.



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