

Time-Squeeze Tips

Overview

Advice on handling the time-squeeze problem.

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In today’s fast-paced world, we all wish we had more time. Without enough time to do the things we need and want to do, we feel dissatisfied. And that’s what creates feelings of stress. But there are strategies you can use to handle the time-squeeze problem so that you feel a greater sense of satisfaction in your life.

Questions to ask yourself

We don’t always realize how hurried and overwhelmed we feel until we take the time to reflect and look at our lives. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- *Are you always in a rush?* When you’re waiting in line, sitting at a traffic light, or waiting for your child, are you less patient than you once were?
- *Are you trying to pack more and more things into each day?* Is it more than you can realistically handle?
- *Do you feel pulled in a million directions?* Do you overbook yourself and take on more commitments than you can handle well?
- *Do you have little time for friends and family?* Have you forgotten important dates with people you care about? Do you have a best friend you never see because you’re too busy?
- *Do you always feel that you are behind and need time to catch up?* Do you feel guilty sitting down and enjoying a cup of coffee?
- *Are you feeling the physical symptoms of stress?*
 - Do you have trouble falling asleep at night?
 - Are you experiencing heart palpitations?
 - Are you experiencing headaches, stomachaches, indigestion, irritability, weight loss, or weight gain?

If you answered “yes” to some or all of these questions, you probably are trying to do too much. It’s time to make some changes in your life.

Making time for the important things

Most of us know what’s really important to us. But when we’re busy and time gets away from us, we sometimes neglect the important things -- staying connected with friends, spending time with family. Getting clear on your

values and priorities will help you feel more satisfied and less squeezed for time. Here are some suggestions:

- *Take stock and decide what's important to you.* What are the big and small things that you want extra time for? Regularly attending your child's soccer games? Paying weekly visits to a friend who is ill? Taking your mother to her monthly doctor's appointment? Spending an evening out with your spouse? Working out at the gym?
- *Make those important things a priority and schedule them into your life.* Put them on the calendar. Write them into your date book. Then you won't forget or neglect them.
- *Set realistic goals.* And remember -- even the most organized person can't do it all.
- *If you can't connect in person, try scheduling regular calls with the people you care about.* Write on your calendar: "Call Aunt June, Friday 8 p.m." That way, you won't forget to call her.

Learning to say "no"

If you are a conscientious and committed worker, chances are, you say "yes" to too many tasks. Sooner or later, you start to feel overwhelmed. While saying "no" is hard, it's an essential time-management skill. Here are some tips:

- *Begin with one or two positive statements.* For example, if your boss asks you to take on another project right away, and you know you can't, begin by responding with one or two positive statements. You might say, "I really want to work on that project. It really needs to get done. And it's important to our customers."
- *Follow the positive statements with a diplomatic "no," and then propose an alternative.* Follow your positive statements about the project with something like this: "I have four reports due next week. With that kind of workload, I'm concerned that I might drop the ball. Could I start on the new project the week after next? Would that work?" This demonstrates that you want to make a contribution that you can commit to 100 percent. But you're not able to do it this week.
- *When saying "no," choose your words carefully.* Using the right words can mean the difference between a successful negotiation and antagonizing a co-worker, friend, or family member.
- *If the new project continues to be a high priority, ask your supervisor whether other tasks could be re-prioritized to make room for it.*

Five timesavers

Here are five timesaver tips experts recommend that really work:

1. *Connect in person when you can.* You know how much more connected you feel to other people when you meet face to face and make eye contact. It doesn't take time from your day, but it can save you time in preventing misunderstandings and miscommunication.
2. *Do the most difficult tasks at your best time of day, when you are the most focused and have the most energy.* For example, if writing is hard for you, schedule that task at a time of day when you are more focused. Save the easier tasks for another time.
3. *Keep interruptions at work to a minimum.* They're the biggest time waster of all.
 - Arrive at work early, or leave late, to get work done when others aren't there.
 - Put up a sign outside your workspace explaining what you're doing and when you'll be free.
 - If possible, face away from the door of your office or cubicle while in your work area to reduce interruptions.
 - If you're at home, don't pick up the phone.
 - Politely ask co-workers not to interrupt when you're working. Instead, arrange a time to have coffee or lunch together.
 - If possible, forward your calls to voice mail when you need to finish a project uninterrupted.
 - Don't stop to constantly check your e-mail. Instead, check it once an hour, or at specific times, like first thing in the morning, after lunch, and before going home.
4. *Cut back on other commitments in your life when you are in a period of work overload.* A general rule of thumb is that when you take on a new commitment, you should drop an old one.
5. *Involve your family in helping solve the time-squeeze problem.* Perhaps there are changes you could make to your morning routine so that you all get out the door more quickly. A weekly talk with your spouse to plan the week ahead can make a big difference in helping everything run more smoothly at home. If you're frazzled because your children are involved in too many activities, you might talk about limiting the number of activities per child. Children need to feel less time squeezed, too.

Technology, multitasking, and the time squeeze

With all the ways to stay in touch -- cell phones, laptops, pagers, fax machines, and e-mail -- doing a number of things at once has become a way of life for many of us. Is technology a timesaver for you, or is it adding stress to your life? We spend our day multitasking, and as a result, we have less and less “down time.” We watch our child’s soccer game while talking on a cell phone. We access e-mail on vacation. Some of us even take our laptops to bed. How can you use all this technology to your advantage? Here are some tips:

- *Ask yourself if multitasking is making you feel more stressed.* While some of us do our best work when we handle several tasks at the same time, that’s not true for everyone. Here are some signs that multitasking may be making you feel more stressed:
 - You have trouble focusing.
 - You find it hard to concentrate on a single task for any length of time.
 - You sometimes can’t remember what you were about to say or what you were about to do.
 - You don’t sleep well and sometimes wake up in the middle of the night worrying about all the things you have to do.
 - You have trouble relaxing at the end of the day.
 - You are losing things that are important to you, such as bills, checks to deposit, letters.
 - You are missing important events for your children’s school or outside activities.
 - You rely on drugs or alcohol to help you “unwind.”
- *If multitasking is making you feel more stressed, it’s time to cut back and simplify.* Here are some suggestions:
 - *Try adopting a “one-thing-at-a-time” policy.* It’s often best to focus on one task at a time, get that one thing done well, and then move on.
 - *Give the person you’re with your full attention.* If you are holding a meeting with a co-worker, don’t interrupt it to answer the phone, e-mail, or your pager, unless it’s absolutely necessary. If you are reading a bedtime story to your child, don’t interrupt your time together to take a telephone call. Don’t talk on the cell phone while watching your child’s sports game.
 - *Catch yourself the next time you find yourself doing two or more things at once.* It takes time to break the habit, but it’s worth it if multitasking is adding stress to your life instead of making things easier.
- *Find ways to make your home life a little more organized.* Teach family members to separate laundry into different hampers. That way, when you have a spare minute you can throw in a load without needing to sort. Mark tags for clothing with a “w” (warm) or “c” (cold) to help speed time with laundry. Also, marking

tags with different colored markers for different children will help with sorting out of the dryer. Get out breakfast non-perishables in advance to ease the morning rush. Have your own in box at home for mail and school papers from your children. This gives everyone one place to put things that need to be dealt with each day.

- *Establish a “no-answering-the-phone-during-dinner” policy.* Focus on family time, or quiet time for yourself. The message will be there on the machine or voice mail when you finish your meal.
- *Make every click count when searching for information online.* With all of the information available online, you may find that you spend more time than you want to on Internet searches. Stay focused by scanning each page for the information you need. If you don't see what you are looking for, go right back to your search. You'll save lots of time on your Internet searches by learning to surf the Web efficiently.
- *Turn your pager and cell phone off when you're off duty.*
- *Turn off the telephone and TV at home for an hour or more each day.* You'll be surprised by how much you get done with totally uninterrupted time. And your child or other people in your family will appreciate having your undivided attention.
- *Set work/home boundaries.* Ask co-workers not to call you at home after hours to discuss work issues unless it's absolutely necessary. If you checked your e-mail before you left the office, do you really need to check it again at night? Is it really necessary to take your laptop with you on vacation?

Taking care of yourself

Here are some ways to take care of yourself and reduce feelings of stress when you're feeling squeezed for time:

- *Get regular exercise.* Research studies show that exercising for 10 minutes three times a day gives you nearly the same cardiovascular and health benefits as one 30-minute session. Maybe you could ask a friend to join you for a 10-minute walk before or after work or during breaks. Most offices have stairs. If you took the stairs instead of the elevator several times a day, you would burn the same number of calories as a short session on the stairclimber at the gym.
- *Eat a nutritious diet.* Don't skip meals -- it just makes you focus on hunger instead of on the work at hand. Even getting up five minutes earlier allows you to eat something quickly for breakfast.
- *Build short breaks into your workday.* Studies show that stretching breaks or quiet breaks, even when they last only a few minutes, can help relieve tension.

- *Limit your intake of caffeine.* It's a stimulant, and will only make you feel more rushed. As the caffeine is metabolized by your body, you may actually feel more tired than you had before.
- *Get however much sleep you need to feel fit and focused.* Most people need seven-and-a-half to eight hours of sleep a night.
- *Avoid watching TV that is over-stimulating at bedtime.* If there is a program that you really enjoy that is on late, tape it and watch it earlier another evening.
- *Do something that you love doing.* Maybe you like to hike, crochet, read, or do crossword puzzles. When you do something you love doing, it gives you an energy boost and is a stress reducer.
- *Build a pause into your day.* It gets harder and harder with all the stimulation around us to have quiet moments. Find a way to build a pause into your day, whether it's a quiet coffee break at work, meals together as a family, or a walk before or after work.
- *Give yourself credit for all that you are accomplishing.* Many of us fall into bed at night thinking only of the things we did not get done. That tempts us the next day to double dip and do even more. Instead of focusing on the things you haven't accomplished at the end of the day, give yourself credit for all that you have done.