How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life

Three Parts: Developing Healthy Habits  Having a Manageable Routine  Making Your Life Easier

Do you find yourself tearing your hair out because you can’t find time to have lunch – or return a call – or even breathe? If so, then you may feel like you’re losing control of your time and your life. If that’s where you find yourself, then it’s time to change not only your routine but the way you approach your time. Here’s how to get started.

Part 1 of 3: Developing Healthy Habits

1. **Stop buying stuff you don’t need.** So, a lot of people’s lives look something like this: you work a lot so you can make a decent amount of money, and then you use that money to buy a whole bunch of stuff. You buy the stuff, the money runs out, and back to work you go to rinse and repeat. If you’re having a hard time getting control of your life and your time, then chances are, one of the things you’re doing is working too much. Now, if you cut down on the spending, then you might feel less pressure to keep working so hard or for so many hours, and you’d have more of that free time you want so badly. Here are some tips for minimizing your spending while still having a great life:

   - **Do you really need a car?** Is all the time you spend running maintenance on the car, giving rides to people, and trying to find a parking spot everywhere you go really worth it? Wouldn’t your life be easier if you were more dependent on your own two feet and the bus schedule? If so, then it may be time to let go of your favorite vehicle.
   - **Do you really need five new outfits every month?** Instead of just indiscriminately buying a bunch of new outfits every time you go shopping, focus on quality over quantity. Buy a high quality sweater, a well-fitting pair of pants, and a sturdy scarf that will go with everything so that you leave with a few key items that are made to last. Sure, they may not cost that much less than piles of cheaper new clothes, but they will keep you from having to shop as often as you do.
   - **Going out to eat is one of the biggest wastes of money.** Try not to go out to eat or order takeout more than once or twice a week and spend more money on high-quality ingredients that can make home cooking more fun and delicious.

2. **Avoid multi-tasking.** You may think that multi-tasking is a great way to get your work done faster and to make the most of your time, but the truth is that multi-tasking will actually make all of your work take longer. Additionally, if you’re multi-tasking, then the quality of your work will go down because you won’t be able to be fully immersed in any one task. Think about it: are you really doing that great of a job if you’re Skyping your boss about your plan to improve the company while you’re on the phone with your mother to plan your cousin’s bridal shower? Instead, focus on your work one task at a time and see how much more quickly you get everything done – and how much more you’re able to fully focus on one task.
• This is where making a to-do list comes in handy. Tackle the items one task at a time instead of trying to do three at once and ending up getting nothing done.

3 **Don’t overcommit yourself.** You may feel like you’re struggling to gain control of your time and your life because you’ve committed yourself to way too many tasks: working on a new project for your job, having a “girls’ night” once a week, teaching a yoga class every morning, or spending time helping your neighbor redecorate her home. Think about the things that really matter to you and which you’re doing for yourself, not out of obligation. Sure, you can’t just drop everything because you don’t really feel like doing it, but see what you can cut out of your schedule and see how much of a relief you’ll feel.

• You may be in denial, telling yourself that you really want to do every little task on your social calendar. Before you do something, ask yourself, “How would I feel if this were suddenly cancelled?” If the answer is “incredibly relieved,” then why do it?

4 **Get organized.** Getting organized can help you feel much more in control of how you spend your hours. Having a planner, a calendar, working pens, and a clean notebook where you can make your to-do lists can help you feel less overwhelmed. You may think that you work better on the fly and that you can always find something when you need it, but having an organized desk, bag, or purse can help you relieve stress because you won’t waste time looking for a receipt, phone number, or memo since you’ll know exactly where everything is.

• You may think that you don’t have the time to go through everything in your desk or to organize the contents of your drawers, closet, or trunk, but in the long run, this will save you hours and hours of time.

5 **Don’t drink too much.** Sure, grabbing a few drinks with your guy friends or girlfriends once or twice a week can help you relieve stress, relax, and just get silly after a long day of work or school. But if you get in the habit of working, working, working, and then drinking, drinking, drinking so you don’t have to think about all the stress you’re dealing with, then you’ll only make yourself even more stressed out. You may go out with your girlfriends on a Friday night, drink way too much, and spend half of Saturday in bed, instead of waking up early to go to yoga, visit the farmer’s market, or to work on your poetry collection. That’s how alcohol can make you lose even more control of your time – and your life.

• As a rule, you should only drink when you’re already in a good mood, not when you’re stressed and thinking that drinking will make the problem go away. Alcohol is a depressant and it will only make you feel worse, even if it offers temporary relief.

6 **Cook for the week.** Here’s another quick time saver: instead of spending over an hour each evening on cooking and cleanup, cook on just two or three nights a week, making enough food for the next few days. For example, on Monday, you can make a delicious lasagna that lasts until Thursday, and you can spice it up with a homemade salad or another simple dish instead of cooking something completely new every
How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life (with Pictures)

7 Avoid procrastinating. Ah, procrastination. How can something that feels so right be so wrong? Because it'll keep you from doing what you have to do, that's why. You may think that you really are working because you're spending time on ordering your BFF's birthday present online (who cares that it's three months away?) or responding to those important Facebook messages, but let's get real: aren't there twenty things that you have to do right now that are much more important? If the answer is yes, then get to the task that you've been avoiding all day and see how much better you'll feel once it's done.

- You know how you're going to do four “easier” things before you get to the last thing on your list? Well, try mixing it up: do the last thing first, when you have the energy for it, and then enjoy winding-down and doing easier tasks when you're done instead of saving the worst for last.

8 Show up early. One of the reasons you may not feel like you're in control of your life is because you're always rushing around to move from one task to the next. This will make you feel stressed out and frazzled and it can lead you to make a bad impression on the people who are waiting for you. Even if you've shown up ten minutes early with nothing to do, that's better than running like a madman to get somewhere exactly on time and then waiting for your heart to stop racing. Pretend every meeting is 15 minutes earlier than it really is and aim to get there accordingly. Sure, this may not help you get more work done, but it will improve your attitude about it, and that's the most important thing.

- Part of the reason you may be running late everywhere is because you're so overbooked that you haven't given yourself enough time to move from one task to the next. If that's the case, make sure you space your commitments far enough apart.

Part 2 of 3: Having a Manageable Routine

1 Plan ahead every morning. Every morning when you wake up – or every night, if you're feeling ambitious – wake up and make a game plan for the day. Write down the tasks you will accomplish, whether they are work or school related, and work in the time you will spend eating lunch, exercising, hanging out with friends, or doing whatever else you want to do. You can even make a plan for the week, but having an hour-by-hour account of what you'll do can be a little more challenging.

- Make a to-do list and check off every item and see how good it feels to accomplish every task.
- Plan a reward for yourself for the end of the day, or after you get a few tasks done, so you have more to look forward to.
2 Carve out alone time. You may think that alone time should be the first to go when you set out to plan your day or your week. However, that alone time should be just as precious to you as your time with your dear friends, your family, or your significant other. Alone time will help your reboot your system, get some perspective, and give you the energy you need to jump into your next social interactions or work obligation. Make sure you get to spend at least a few hours all alone each week, and wake up earlier to get that alone time if you need to; don’t let a friend’s last-minute plans keep you from having that date with yourself.

- Take a look at your entire week. See where you can carve out time for yourself; maybe you can walk to work one morning instead of carpooling; maybe you can set aside time to read instead of seeing that movie you didn’t really want to see with your friend anyway.
- Don’t let a friend make you feel guilty about not going out with friends if you need some time to yourself. Develop your ability to recognize what you really want to do. What’s the point of hanging out with friends if they’ll instantly be able to tell that you’d rather be hanging solo?

3 Schedule your work around your energy peaks. Get good at recognizing when you’re the most productive. Most people get the most done in the morning, after they wake up feeling refreshed. Some people do better in the evenings, when they wind down after their long day. Others get a burst of energy after their afternoon coffee. After you figure out when you’re the most productive, plan to do the hardest, most demanding tasks then so you get the most out of your efforts. Additionally, you can schedule the easiest tasks for the hours when you know you’ll be more sluggish, like the hour after lunch or the last hour you spend at work, watching the clock.

- This will not only make it easier for you to achieve your goals, but it’ll make the act of achieving them much more pleasant.

4 Get enough sleep. When people are busy, sleep is often the first thing to get sacrificed. However, if you really want to feel like you have control of your life and your time, then you can’t go around feeling like a zombie as you try to get through your day. Make sure to get at least 7-8 hours of sleep a day and to go to bed around the same time every night and to wake up around the same time every morning so that your body gets used to your sleep patterns.

- Work on having a solid winding-down routine before bed by turning off all visual stimuli, like your phone and computer, at least half an hour before bed so you have an easier time drifting off.
- Avoid caffeine after noon or you’ll be more likely to feel jittery and to have a harder time falling asleep and staying asleep. Remember that quality of sleep is just as important quantity.

5 Eat healthy meals. Make time to have a hearty breakfast, an energizing lunch, and a nutritious dinner if you want to make the most of your day. You may be too busy to eat a full meal, or think that you are, but you have to make eating a priority. Don’t just slam down a muffin on the way to work; instead, have a bowl of oatmeal while you read the paper, even if that means you have to wake up fifteen minutes earlier.
Don’t eat lunch at your desk to be more efficient; take a break to enjoy the sandwich or salad you’re eating at lunch. Eat a dinner that is filling enough to keep you from waking up hungry, but that isn’t so greasy or heavy that it makes you feel lethargic and gives you indigestion.

- Plan your meals at the beginning of the week. This will make you more likely to stick to your healthy-eating routine.

6 **Make time for fun.** Planning fun into your weekly schedule is a must. You won’t feel at all in control of your life and your time if you don’t have a moment to rest from all of the hard work you’re doing. You may think that fun is a superfluous part of your week and that it should be viewed as luxury, but it should be viewed as an important part of your routine instead. Plan a mini-golfing date with your best friends, a trip to the movies with your significant other, or bake a pie with your mother on Sunday afternoon.

- Do whatever you want during your fun time, as long as it helps you relax and keeps you from feeling completely overwhelmed.

7 **Take a break every 90 minutes.** The human mind isn’t meant to focus non-stop for eight or ten hour stretches. In fact, almost anyone will need a break after working for 90 minutes straight, so you should not see the need to take a break as showing weakness. Every 90 minutes, have a snack, eat lunch, call up a good friend, take a 20 minute walk, or just rest your eyes for fifteen minutes. Do whatever you have to do to regroup and to be able to throw yourself back into your work. Taking breaks will actually help you accomplish your tasks faster because you’ll be tackling them with more enthusiasm.[3]

- Exercising for 10-15 minutes can be a great way to take a break while giving yourself even more energy to get your work done.
- Take a 15-20 minute power nap if you need to. Napping for this short amount of time is better for helping you regain your energy than napping for 1-2 hours, which will only make you feel groggy.

8 **Make the most of your commute.** Stop looking at your commute as time that you’ve completely wasted. Instead, listen to an audiobook while you’re driving to work, or get a headset and call a close friend or family member to catch up after work. Or just turn off the radio and use the time to reflect on your life and to see what changes you can make to improve its quality. If you want to shorten that commute, try waking up a little early to miss the worst of the traffic or leaving work a little early or late to do the same.

- Commutes are often a time when people feel angry, out of control, and stressed-out. Listening to a great book you love is a way to make this time of your day be something you look forward to, instead of something you face with dread.

9 **Minimize your distractions.** If you really want to make the most of your time, then put away your phone, stop g-chatting your friends at work, and set aside a specific time for personal communication. Get away from Facebook; if you’re really addicted,
then set aside a 15-minute period each day when you can check your Facebook, post updates, and see what your friends are up to. You may think that having ten browser windows open isn’t really slowing you down, but it is.

- Set aside “email time”. Instead of checking your email every fifteen minutes and responding to emails sporadically throughout the day, set aside “email time” each day, which will be time for you to go through your email every day and to send back those emails. You can do this two or three times a day, or more often if your job requires it, but don’t keep that email window open so you can read every new email the second you see it.

10 Always make time for exercise. It’s easy to sacrifice exercise – and sleep – when you’re in the middle of a busy week. However, exercising is great for your mind and body and it will give you energy and make you feel more capable of doing everything you need to do. Drop the temptation to say you’re “too busy” to work out this week and see what you can cut out instead of exercise. Do you really have to watch two hours of TV today, or can you make time for a thirty-minute run instead? See how much room you can make for improving your body and mind.

- If the hour-and-a-half yoga class is too time-consuming, see if you can take an hour-long barre class or go for a quick walk instead. Even if you don’t have time for a longer workout like you’re used to, you can still find something that works for you.

Part 3 of 3: Making Your Life Easier

1 Consider getting a work-from-home job. If you’re really feeling overwhelmed and feeling like there just aren’t enough hours in a day for you to get everything done, then consider getting a job where you can work from home or have more flexible hours. Though you will have to work just as hard at home, you will have the luxury of avoiding a long commute and you may be able to find more flexible hours that fit your schedule.

- Working from home isn’t for everybody. You have to be hardworking and self-motivated to be able to take the work seriously.

2 Consider a radical change. Maybe working a 70-hour-a-week job just isn’t the thing you want. Maybe you want to switch career paths all together. Maybe your relationship isn’t bringing you satisfaction anymore but it’s sucking up all of your time. Maybe you love your job, but the 2-hour commute a day is killing you and you may need to move. Take a look at the big picture and see if there are any major changes you can make that can help you feel in control.

3 Be more selfish. That’s right. Stop doing things because your mother/best friend/co-worker/neighbor really need you to do them. Do them because it’s what you want to do to make your life feel meaningful and manageable. Commit to yourself before you commit to anyone else and make sure you don’t overbook yourself just to fit
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Try to monetize your passion. Do you really love photography, writing, interior decorating, or cooking? It’s a pretty radical step, but see if you can actually make money doing it, if not making a full living out of it. It may seem like a stretch, but if you have the talent and are willing to put in more time to pursue your dreams, then imagine how rewarded you’ll feel when you get to spend more time doing what you love and to make money from doing it.

- You may be feeling overwhelmed because you’re trying to make time to succeed in a career you don’t really care about as well as make time for pursuing your passion. This is a great way to change that.

Do a “time audit” on your life. At the beginning of your week, start tracking how you spend every hour of your life. Be honest: if you spent half an hour texting your BFF or deciding what to wear, write it down. If you wasted forty-five minutes gossiping over gchat, write it down. At the end of the week, take a look at what you’ve done with your time and see where you can be more efficient, which things you can cut out, and what you’d like to do more. Then, create a “dream week” for yourself and try to follow it the following week.

- You may find that you spent a total of two hours emailing people. Can you cut that down to one hour and make an extra hour for exercise?
- If you see that you’ve spent sixty hours doing work, it may be time to think about taking down your hours.

Ask yourself, “What is the most important thing I can be doing right now?” In the classic time management book, How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life, by Alan Lakein, he asks his readers this very important question. It’s a simple question, but it’s very effective in making you see what you should really be doing – instead of what someone else thinks you should be doing – to get the most done and to feel the most in control of your day.

- The next time you feel overwhelmed, take a minute to breathe and ask yourself this question, and you may be surprised by what you discover.
When you use your time wisely, new doors of opportunities open up and your life falls into place. You are no longer running, and out of breath. You're more composed, relaxed and stress-free. You then start seeing life in a different angle, a more optimistic one.

Sources and Citations


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