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Procrastination is one of the biggest traps that adults can fall into. Inevitably there are projects at home or tasks at work that we just don't want to do. They're boring, difficult, or just seemingly unimportant. Even as kids we had moments of procrastination, after all, how many times did your mother have to hound you to clean your room?

We live in a world where quick entertainment is at our fingertips. Switch on the television, turn on the radio, or plug in the iPod. All of these fun alternatives can ultimately prevent us from completing the tasks at hand. But of course, this gets us nowhere, fast!

What is Time Management?

All people are granted only 24 hours in any given day. **How you choose to use that time** is what differentiates the procrastinators from the proficient time managers.

Learning time management techniques will help you plan your day so you know exactly what has to be accomplished. It's much easier to get motivated in the morning if you know what your day holds. Otherwise you'll spend valuable time puttering around in your pajamas, trying to decide what you *feel* like doing, and all of a sudden it's lunchtime and your morning was wasted.

Denial won't cause your work to go away; rather, it only makes your life more stressful if you have to hurry to meet a deadline. So rather than stress yourself out, let's discuss some ways to kick the procrastination habit and become more productive with some time management tips!

Time Management Requires ACTION!



All procrastinators beware: to succeed at managing your time and being more productive during the day, **you MUST take action!**

It's simple, really. But finding the *desire* to take action is usually when we procrastinate.

Let's start off easy with a few basic tips. Start making just one change a week and you'll see results quicker than you think!

1. Start your day early. Do you roll out of bed each morning after hitting the snooze button 5 times, only to discover you're already running late for work? How about on the weekends? Do you sleep in both days?

- Forcing yourself to **get up on time**, without rushing, will leave you refreshed and less stressed. Keeping this schedule on the weekends will grant you more hours of productivity. So get up, get dressed, and get going!

2. Prioritize your tasks. It may be best to get the hardest task out of the way first. If you start early in the day, you'll have more energy to complete the task and you'll feel more accomplished and less stressed when the big project is out of the way. Others believe that finishing a lot of smaller jobs first is better because you'll be able to build momentum and cross more off your to-do list, which will help you feel more productive.

- In the end, there is no right or wrong way to **prioritize your tasks**; whichever way motivates you to do the work is the best way. Once your spirit is lifted, you'll feel more optimistic and be more productive.

3. Use calendars or daily planners. With the wide variety of calendars and planners on the market there is truly no reason to be disorganized or miss deadlines. Not everyone will benefit from the same type of planner so take your time and discover which system is best for you. Whether it's traditional paper, an electronic PDA, or a web-based application, **mark all of your deadlines and activities** on it and discover where you have gaps so you can take some time to treat yourself.

- Calendars or planners are only useful if you **use them consistently**. Bring your planner with you to mark down important appointments. Schedule your exercise classes on the planner and check your calendar before booking lunch with a friend. After just a few days you'll have a new habit and using a planner will become second nature.

4. Set and respect deadlines. If you're one of the many people who stresses out when a deadline is looming, **build in some extra time** so you can finish the job well ahead of time.

- At work, your boss holds you accountable if you miss a deadline, but what about all those projects at home that you put off until tomorrow? Enlist the help of a friend or spouse to hold you accountable for completing these dreaded projects. It's difficult to admit your mistakes so you'll end up working harder to avoid having to tell a partner that you missed a deadline, yet again.

5. Focus on one thing at a time. For years, experts have been touting the benefits of "multitasking," praising those people who can accomplish ten different things at the same time. What has been discovered recently, however, is **multitasking very often diminishes the quality of the work**, even though it may be finished before a deadline.

- Which sounds more productive: writing a 5-page report in one hour's time or spending three hours writing the report while also answering emails and phone calls? Just focus on one thing at a time to get things done and off your plate.



6. Limit your distractions. Are you addicted to computer solitaire or have a habit of checking your email or instant messages every 5 minutes? Keeping email and IM turned off and keeping background distractions to a minimum while working can help you focus on the task at hand. **You'll be surprised how much more you accomplish when you're not distracted every five minutes.**

- Some people will argue that music helps them to think and concentrate. If that works for you, then there's no reason to turn the music off... unless you find yourself singing more than you're working. That's a pretty clear sign that you need to refocus your efforts without the music.

7. Take frequent breaks from long and arduous tasks. While this might sound counterproductive, taking frequent short breaks can break the monotony of a task and can give you some new energy. If you're just staring at the computer screen without typing the report that's due, you may as well awaken your brain with a brisk walk.

- **Stepping away from a project for five minutes** will relieve your stress and you'll feel more refreshed to come back and finish the job. Do some simple stretching exercises at your desk, go to the water fountain, or simply turn off your computer monitor and close your eyes for a moment. Just don't get trapped in office politics or other time wasting activities – that just zaps you of your energy.

8. Set a specific time to check emails or return phone calls. Limiting your distractions does not mean you can't communicate with the outside world. If you're expecting client emails, allow yourself time to check and answer them every 90 minutes or so. If you're dying to chat for two hours with your best friend in California, schedule that time in your planner. Once something is scheduled, allow yourself that time and activity.

- Setting these boundaries is especially important if you own a home-based business. Your clients need to know your business hours and when they are allowed to call. Not many business owners or their families appreciate client calls during dinner or family time.

9. Use a kitchen timer and set limits. Still having a hard time convincing yourself to tackle that big project? Set a kitchen timer for 30 minutes and work intensely during that time to accomplish as much as possible. When the timer goes off, allow yourself time for a break or to move on to a smaller project. When the timer chimes again, move onto yet another project. This is perfect for those people who like a constant change of pace.

- Keep the timer with you as it ticks away the time. The ticking sounds might be annoying but it just may be the nudge you need to **avoid procrastination and keep moving.**

10. Outsource tasks to others. If your budget allows, outsource – or hire – an expert to do the task you're dreading. This is not the same as living in denial because you're taking the steps to hire an expert! Experts very often have the right tools and equipment to make the job go faster and they also need to move quickly to get to the next customer on their schedule.

- Hate raking leaves? Hire a landscaper. Hate cleaning your house? Hire a house cleaning service. Hate shoveling your driveway in the winter? Hire the teenagers down the street looking to earn some spending money.

11. Set reasonable goals. Which is more likely to get you motivated: cleaning out the basement or cleaning out a corner of the basement? If you haven't gone into your basement in 20 years, what makes you think you'll clean it out all in one day?

- **Strive to break down seemingly unconquerable tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks.** So for example, when it comes to a messy room, choose one small corner and clear out only what's in that corner. If you move quickly, you might have the energy to conquer another small section. If not, cross that task off your to-do list and be proud of yourself!



12. Utilize commuting time wisely. While it may be tempting to catch some extra sleep on the train or bus, use this time to catch up on emails or put the finishing touches on that report that's due. By the time you get to the office your inbox will be organized and you'll have a clear plan of attack for the day.

- You can also use the time to read your favorite book or magazine during your commute. Life doesn't have to be all work and no fun! Time management is all about using your time wisely so you can enjoy your free time.

13. Use automated electronic equipment to save you time. Your time is valuable, no matter what job you have. If there's an easy, automated way to do a particular task, there's no shame in using that technology to give yourself more free time with your family. There are plenty of ways to automate repetitive tasks. Ask your colleagues or family for some ideas.

- Some writers dictate articles into a small, digital recorder while on the treadmill, then voice recognition software transcribes the articles! Pretty neat, huh? Another example: if you send people the same emails over-and-over again, create a template so the computer does most of the heavy lifting for you.

14. Organize your desk and computer files. A clean desk with properly labeled files will save you countless hours when you're searching for answers. Instead of checking multiple folders for that one piece of paper, you'll check just one folder because it's properly labeled. And you'll know exactly which directory to search on the computer for your client's missing file.

- Don't know where to begin? Refer back to tips #10 and #11. Either hire a professional organizer or just tackle one drawer of your desk to start.

15. Reward yourself for a job well done. There will always be certain projects or tasks that we despise doing, no matter how positive our mindset is. When faced with this scenario, schedule something fun right after you complete each of those negative tasks. You'll tend to work faster if you know you have something to look forward to.

- Go on a family hike after a morning of doing yard work. Allow yourself a phone call with a friend after cleaning the bathrooms. Grab a coffee after finalizing the client's report.

16. Be decisive. Rather than debating for 15 minutes over whether you should keep your 20-year-old college textbooks, set your timer or a stopwatch and **make the decision**

in less than one minute. The longer you think about your options – and the more options you allow yourself – the less likely you will make a decision.

- Make a game out of it by letting your kids time you. Take turns with the stopwatch and have a friendly competition to see who can fill up their donation box the fastest. However, if your kids are still clinging to their beloved toys, it's best to sort through them while they're sleeping or at school.

17. Don't micromanage. If a colleague or family member is working on a project, avoid asking 500 times if they need help or want to know other ways to do things. If you're focused on other people's work, then your own work suffers.

- **Lead by example by focusing on your own project and working efficiently.** You'll also give others the space they need to accomplish things by themselves.

18. Learn to say no. This isn't about being rude to clients or friends; rather, this is about taking control of your life and your free time. When asked to take on another responsibility, consult your calendar and then decide if you'll enjoy it or stress out over it.

- Most people would prefer an honest answer of *no*, rather than overburdening someone who'll only do a less than acceptable job. If you feel awkward saying no, suggest a better time for you to help or try to find a suitable replacement.

19. Take advantage of energy bursts. There's no right or wrong time to start a project, unless you'll get in trouble for breaking your neighborhood's noise ordinance! But if you feel like mopping your floors at 10 pm when your family's asleep, then do to it. Want to battle your insomnia by organizing your kitchen pantry? What's stopping you?

- Even if your energy is short-lived, you'll feel much better having accomplished a small task.

20. Be affirmative. Negative thoughts permeate our minds very easily when we get discouraged with a challenge. If we carry these negative thoughts with us, we start to believe that all challenges are impossible and it's okay to give up and leave projects unfinished.

- The same can be said of positive thinking. So instead of saying to yourself: "I will *try* to get this done," be positive and say: "**I will get this done.**"

The Final Lesson

Everyone has the capabilities to change what we don't like. If you're a procrastinator, **you have the ability to change your ways** but only you can take these action steps to become more productive.

By practicing just one of these tips every week (or every day, if you're ambitious) you will soon develop lifelong habits and these **time management techniques will become second nature to you**.

Engage your family to join this challenge with you. What a life lesson this will be for your children – their future spouses will surely thank you for teaching them the value of time!



