The passage of time is not just represented by hours passed over by the hands on a clock face or days checked off on a calendar. Time spent represents energy, effort and resources—our energy, effort and resources. How we spend our time today influences everything we do in the future. For example: if we study hard today, we pass the test tomorrow; if we plan for the trip, our packing is easy; if we get enough rest tonight, our presentation goes well tomorrow; if we exercise today, we feel healthier and stronger for the rest of our lives. Consequently, how we manage our time impacts our lives. Unfortunately, in life, we don’t get minutes to rollover, or second-takes, and we can’t bottle time and save it for later—so it’s important for us to make the best of the time we’ve got.

Catch me if you can!

You could probably use some help with time management if you experience the following:

- constant rushing and frequently being late
- low productivity, energy, and motivation
- frustration and impatience
- difficulty making decisions and procrastination
- difficulty setting and achieving goals

Most of us who experience these symptoms think we just have too much to do. This may be true, but the reason we usually feel overwhelmed and overbooked is because we have not established priorities for ourselves or set boundaries with other people. We haven’t committed to making the best use of our 24 hours, and we’ve let other people’s expectations influence our behavior and take advantage of us. When we value our lives, we value our time. Managing our time helps us live a more balanced life and offers us a less stressful one by allowing us the opportunities to do what’s important to us.

Time Management 101

Time management is a skill. We are not born with an innate sense of how to use time to our advantage. Changing the way we manage our time requires an attitude adjustment about what and who is important to us, and a commitment to understanding that learning time management will take time and possibly require an investment of money. It’s a developmental process, and we are worth the investment. So, you need to consider this as a journey—like any change that you set your mind to—and before beginning this journey to better time management, there are three things you need to consider:

1. Your end goal or ideal life—What would your life look like if you were managing your time well? Would your house be organized, would you get enough rest, would you delegate some responsibilities, and would you have more time to take better care of yourself? Can you imagine a life where there are fewer demands on your time and you have time to take a breath, complete a sentence, or complete a thought? Can you imagine facing unexpected challenges with confidence and a sense of calm? We all encounter unexpected challenges from time to time that force us to change our plans, but when we manage our time well, we are able to respond to challenging situations with confidence, and our days are satisfying and productive. Try to imagine a life like this. You are worth it!

2. Current status—are you overwhelmed and in a constant state of crisis management? Are you...
stressed and disorganized, and do you feel like your life is spinning out of control? Think about your current style of managing your time and energy, or the way you cope with challenges. Is it working for you, or are you making bad choices because you are constantly running out of time? Understanding how you are currently managing (or mismanaging) your time—and the effects your behavior has on your emotional well-being and your physical health—is essential to making changes in your thinking and in your behavior patterns. Be honest in your self-assessment. That’s the only way this will work.

3. Your plan—You need to develop a plan for learning time management skills and for making the necessary changes in your life. Your plan should include setting tasks, establishing deadlines, and giving yourself rewards for your successes. In the beginning, you may feel overwhelmed and disorganized. Also, people who count on you for doing things for them may feel threatened when you start to change your behavior and establish some boundaries with them. Be assured that each small step toward owning and managing your time will help you to feel more relaxed, fulfilled, efficient, effective, productive, successful and happy. And who doesn’t want a life like this?

Success in practicing time management depends on understanding what you’re doing now, comparing your current daily activity to what you’d like to be doing, and then planning a strategy on how to get to your ideal state—which is spending your time wisely.

Write It Down

Before you can start to make changes in your life, you need to understand how you currently spend your days. You need to identify your patterns of activity, work flow (at your job), behavior and emotional state. An easy way to do this is to use a notebook to keep track of what you do during the day and the reasons for your activity. For now, you may want to think about your time in two different categories—work and personal—and tackle one of them first. If you choose to address your personal use of time, just record the number of hours that you are working as “Work.” You can address your job-related time management skills later.

Once you have a few months of activity recorded, you can think about the percentages or parts of your day that you spend doing things. An easy way to visualize this is by thinking of a clock face with 24 one-hour sections and by coloring in the hourly sec-

Figure 1—We all get 24 hours a day.

Figure 2—Example of a typical day.

Figure 3—Example of my typical day.

Once you have colored in the activities that honestly reflect your day-to-day usage of time, you should then think about how you would like to spend your time. Take some quality time to reflect on what’s important to you. You can write down a list of the top 10 to 15 things that are important to you in your life. Compare your list with your colored-in representation of your time. It may come as a surprise to you that your clock diagram and your list of things that are important to you are not similar. In fact, they may be very different.
One way to identify what’s important to you is to be mindful of your legacy. What do you do and how do you spend your days? How would people remember you?

For example, you may want to be spending time with your family or friends, being outdoors, working on your hobby, or developing a new skill—and the truth may be that you are spending four hours each weeknight watching television, talking on the phone, or being involved in activities that are not your favorites. None of these activities are bad, in moderation, but if they represent a significant portion of your time and keep you from doing what’s important to you, you may want to rethink your behavior.

Although logging your time “takes time,” the benefits of understanding your habits are significant, because you can’t manage what you don’t understand. Recording your time helps you to realize where you are focusing your efforts and energy, and you’ll discover that, if your activities are not in line with your dreams and values, you’ll be disappointed with the end results. Your life will not measure up to your expectations. People who effectively manage their time have disciplined themselves to focus most of their energy on what is most important, and they minimize their focus on what has little value to them.

**Clarifying Your Values**

Knowing what is valuable to you provides direction and guidance for you on your time management journey. Sometimes we can get so busy in our lives that we no longer know what is important to us. Thankfully, there are several ways to help us to remember.

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### My Favorite Things

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Read to my children</th>
<th>Listen to music</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spend time with my spouse</td>
<td>Ride horseback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat dinners together</td>
<td>Attend plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax on Sundays</td>
<td>Become more spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the art museum</td>
<td>Volunteer work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk the dog</td>
<td>Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go on hikes</td>
<td>Enjoy my hobbies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### What Is Important to Me?

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- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]

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### How Do I Want to Spend My Time?

- [ ]
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### What Are My Dreams?

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Another way to set priorities is to imagine you have only six months to live. Most of us would dramatically change our lives and how we spend our time if we heard this news. The reality is that none of us know how much time we have, so why wouldn’t we want to start living our best life right now?

You could also imagine that you just won the lottery and that there were no obstacles to you accomplishing your dreams. If money were no object, what would you do differently? Our dreams should not change, based on our financial resources. Our dreams and values represent who we are!
All of these exercises require a little daydreaming and some serious reflection on what makes you happy, but they will help you understand what’s important to you. You need to know this information before you can decide how you want to spend your time.

**Setting Goals**

Once you understand your values, it should be easy to set some goals for yourself. All of your goals in life should be aligned with your values and dreams. When you set goals, you need to plan how to achieve them. Striving to achieve goals requires action of some kind, and action takes time. Achieving goals takes your time and, sometimes, additional resources, like help from others or a financial investment of some type. You should make sure that your goals allow you to have a balanced life—satisfying personal needs and addressing relationships, work, health and finances.

**Get Organized**

It’s important to understand the role of being organized in practicing effective time management. You can become more organized by following these strategies:

- Purchase a TOPS Journal that will help you to write down ideas and keep track of your progress.
- Plan for efficiency and minimize behavior that wastes your time and energy.
- Learn to say “no” to requests that steal your time and are not aligned with what you value.
- Arrange your environment to support your values and goals. Get rid of clutter, because it drains energy. This may mean that you need to buy some storage boxes, donate unused items to a good cause, redesign rooms for better functionality, or create a special “quiet” room that you can go to and simply relax.
- Post your goals to remind you of your dreams.

**Get Off the Fence**

This may sound funny, but many of us waste time by being indecisive. Don’t waste time on decisions that have ambiguous results. If you really don’t care where you go to dinner, or what movie you watch—just choose one option and move forward. Don’t get stuck in the decision-making process. You’re wasting time!

**Schedule Some “Me Time”**

Many of us feel stressed because, at the end of each day, we have spent very little time doing things of value to us or taking care of our own needs. It’s important to schedule some “me time” in our daily lives. It’s been proven that, when we feel like we’ve had our needs met and have had appropriate rest, we perform at a higher level and become more efficient and more creative in what we do. When we don’t take care of ourselves, we get burned out and “the law of diminishing returns” enters our life. Although we are busier, we seem to be less productive. Everyone needs some quiet time, appropriate rest, or a chance to “recharge their batteries.” Make sure that you respect and love yourself enough to provide yourself with appropriate “down time.”

**Stop Multi-tasking**

Although many of us feel proud of our ability to do more than one thing at a time, it’s been proven that we actually are less productive when we focus on multiple things. Our brains were designed to focus well on one thing at a time. You will do a better job if you only focus on the task at hand. When you are engaged in the moment and in the present task, all your attention is directed towards doing the best job you can, and you can accomplish the task quicker and in a more appropriate manner. This may be hard to do but, with practice, you’ll soon see positive results from your efforts.

**It’s My Time!**

In summary, it’s important that you take responsibility for each day. You may feel that other people are taking your time and taking advantage of you, but it’s up to you to manage your time by making choices that reflect your interests and desires. You can do this by understanding your values, being fully engaged in the present, and by admitting to yourself that time is a gift. We all get the same 24 hours in a day—some of us just manage it better. Make the choice to invest your time wisely! You’ll be happy you did.

Manage your time. Don’t let time manage you!

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**About the author:** Patricia Amborn is an adjunct instructor at Ottawa University in Brookfield, Wisconsin, and in the online environment. She has a Master’s Degree in Science in Management. She is currently a freelance writer who writes about wellness and business-related issues.