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Sticking to the Schedule
Time Management

What It Is

The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

What We Know about It

Time is complicated. Here's a brief summary of how we develop our grasp of time. Very young children live "in the moment," estimating time only when prompted to pay attention to it and then gauging time based on their own actions (how long it takes them to do something). Around age 5 or 6, they begin to be able to equate one time span to another (how long it takes to eat breakfast compared with how long it takes to get dressed). Their ability to mark time increases when they are taught to "count time," although their counts don't exactly line up with the seconds that pass. It's not until about age 10 that children count time on their own without prompting from an adult. From that ability to count time comes the ability to estimate time. And time estimation is a key skill that underlies time management.

It turns out that time perception and time estimation activate different parts of the brain depending on the length of the time interval involved. If we're talking milliseconds, the motor system, governed by the cerebellum, is

implicated. If we're talking hours or days, circadian rhythms take over (controlled by the suprachiasmatic nuclei). But if we're talking seconds and minutes (required for counting and estimating time), the prefrontal cortex comes into play—that is, executive skills.

Other skills that impact time management include several of the executive skills we've already talked about: task initiation, sustained attention, and planning are integral pieces of time management. This suggests that if an individual is weak in any one of these skills, there's a good chance that time management is also weak. It also happens that emotions affect time perception as well. Fear distorts time and leads people to perceive fearful events as lasting longer than they really do. And severely depressed individuals tend to perceive time as being slower than it is. On the other hand, people who experience strong positive emotions, such as happens in the early stages of falling in love, tend to feel that time flies by faster than it really does.

Here's another fun fact about time: dopamine is the main neurotransmitter involved in time processing. This means that if dopamine levels are low (as is the case in individuals with ADHD), time perception distortions arise. ADHD experts such as Russ Barkley have maintained for some time that an attention disorder, at root, involves time distortions—which is why people with ADHD chronically run late, lose track of time, or underestimate how long things will take. The relationship between dopamine and time perception likely helps account for this.

What We Can Do about It

First of all, because other executive skills are involved in time management, make sure this is the skill you want to work on. When we talk about time management weaknesses, we generally focus on people who struggle with time estimation or who lose track of time. Some people who struggle with time management get so caught up in what they're doing at the moment that they fail to notice when they've run out of time and their schedule calls for them to be somewhere else or to be doing something else. Others have only a vague notion of how long it takes to complete a task or get somewhere, and they're chronically running behind schedule. It's conceivable that some people who can't estimate time get tasks done faster than they thought they would or arrive early for appointments, but in general this is not seen as a problem either by them or by the people with whom they live or work! And then there are some with a

combination of the two problems. These people often insist that they have time to *do one more thing* before they have to leave or get to the next scheduled event.

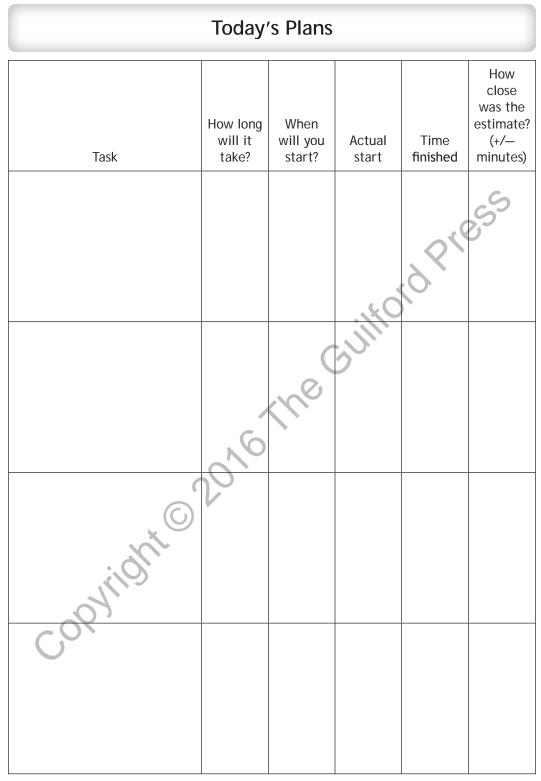## How to Modify the Environment to Make Time Management Easier

(For detailed information about environmental modifications, refer to Chapter 3.)

- **Modify the physical or social environment.** We know people who set every clock in their house and their car ahead by 10–15 minutes to help them compensate for being chronically late. (You might think this wouldn't be effective since you'd know you had set your clocks ahead, but most of us depend so much on quick glances at our watch or phone that we forget easily. It's worth trying.) We know friends and family members of people with weak time management who achieve the same end by deliberately telling them the wrong time for the start of an event (such as a dinner engagement or family party). Another strategy is to build in alarms to go off 10–15 minutes before a scheduled activity is set to begin. Bear in mind that if you set the alarm too far in advance, you may once again lose track of the transition point because you go back to being fully engaged in what you're doing at the moment.

- **Modify the task.** We suggest you do this first by creating a daily schedule. You don't have to plan out your whole day—in fact, we recommend that you don't, since people with time management weaknesses tend to find this aversive. Write down the day's "have-to's," and next to each, write when you hope to start the task. Then estimate how long you think the task will take (we think time estimation can be improved through practice). Later, when you do the task, write down the actual start and stop times. Finally, compare your estimate with the actual time. A sample scheduling chart is shown on page 203 and is also available for downloading and printing at

 If keeping a chart seems daunting, choose one task a day to try this with and see how it goes. If your actual start time consistently is much later than the time you plan to start, you may want to read about task initiation in Chapter 11 and begin with that skill. If you find that you frequently fail to complete the task despite starting it on time, you may want to read about sustained attention in Chapter 12. And if in the course of doing this you realize that poor planning or prioritizing is an interference, check out Chapter 13.

- **Solicit help from others.** Ask someone to cue you. Of course, you can

Today's Plans

Task	How long will it take?	When will you start?	Actual start	Time finished	How close was the estimate? (+/— minutes)

use technology to do this, but if you feel you might respond better to a live person than to an alarm on your smartphone, ask a partner or a coworker to check in with you to see how you're managing your time. We worked with a physician once whose difficulty sticking to a schedule put his job at risk (the perils of managed care!). We arranged to have his nurse interrupt him 5 minutes before the scheduled end of his appointments. She gave him a random message, but the point of the interruption was to cue the doc that he needed to wrap up the appointment within 5 minutes.

How to Improve Your Time Management through Practice

(For detailed information about skill improvement strategies, consult Chapter 4.)

• **Identify a task or specific activity that reflects your time management weakness.** There are several ways to think about how to identify a place to begin, and your choice may depend on your analysis of your biggest time management problem. An *If . . . , then . . .* chart to help you make the decision follows:

If . . .	Then . . .
You are chronically late getting started on tasks.	Focus on starting on time.
You get started on time but underestimate how long it will take to do the task.	Work on improving time estimation skills within a task.
You get lost in whatever you're doing and don't make timely transitions between tasks.	Work on finishing tasks on time.
You have trouble with all three of these.	Choose *one* recurring task or activity and focus on all three in your intervention design.

• **Set your goal.** In all three of the time management scenarios, your goal can be stated in terms of time. Examples:

- ◆ "My goal is to start a task within 10 minutes of my planned start time."
- ◆ "My goal is to estimate accurately to within 5 minutes of my 'guess.'"
- ◆ "My goal is to finish a task within 10 minutes of my anticipated finish time."

As with other executive skills, we always suggest you start small and work from there. Choose one task or one activity to start with (for example, getting to a weekly staff meeting on time, being in the car ready to take the kids to school by 7:30 every morning, being home from work within 5 minutes of the stated time 4 days out of 5). When you achieve 85–95% success with your first goal, you can move on to another one.

• **Set a deadline.** We don't mean a deadline by which you'll have corrected all your time management problems, but a deadline by which you will have achieved success on the first task you decided to handle in "Setting Your Goal." As you meet the first deadline, decide on a next step and set a deadline for that.

• **Make a specific plan.** Use the Action Plan form provided in Chapter 4 to make your plan or devise one of your own. The time and frequency of your practice will depend on what task or activity you've chosen to start with. If getting to a weekly staff meeting on time is the goal, you'll practice this on staff meeting day (although if you wanted to fit in some extra practice, you could build in the same prompts or transition strategies the other 4 days of the work week just to get used to what it feels like). For time management, as we've defined it, the cues you build in will be critical to your success. Setting a recurring alarm on your smartphone might be the easiest cue.

• **Externalize the time management behavior you're working on.** Visual cues (signs, Post-it Notes) or auditory cues (smartphone alarms) can be created as reminders, but we also recommend using visual imagery as a rehearsal strategy. If you're working on getting out the door on time in the morning, then when you climb into bed the night before, walk yourself through the process in your mind: getting up when the alarm goes off (rather than hitting snooze), going through your morning routine step-by-step, checking your watch from time to time to determine whether you're on track, picking up speed if you're not, and turning on your car engine and looking at the clock on the dashboard to see that it reads the time you were shooting for.

• **Select a reward.** This could be tied to the time you've saved by doing things efficiently. For example, if you get to work on time, you could reward yourself by scanning the headlines on your favorite news website before you begin your day's work. Or check the Reward Menu in Chapter 4.

• **Write down two or three encouraging statements.** What are you working on? Why are you working on it? What will you gain if you can improve on this skill? Answer those questions and refer to the answers daily.

Technological Supports

We referred to using smartphone alarms earlier, but the productivity section of your app store may give you other ideas. Here are a couple that we like:

• **Pomodoro.** We described this technique/app in Chapter 12 because it helps with sustaining attention, but it's worth mentioning again here. Breaking your workday into 25-minute segments, with 5-minute breaks, may help you learn to manage your time more effectively, especially if you combine it with practice estimating how much you can accomplish in each 25-minute segment. Check out the website, pomodorotechnique.com, for more information.

• **ATracker/ATracker Pro** is an iPhone or iPad app that enables you to track how you spend your time based on your own customizable categories. It's easy to set up, you can set alarms to prompt you to begin an activity at a certain time, and you can easily track how much time you spend on any activity by tapping the activity to start and stop it.

• **RescueTime** is a desktop application that keeps track of how you spend your time across the workday. It records what websites you visit and tracks how long you spend on each at any given time. There's a free version as well as a paid subscription service that issues weekly reports with time breakdowns. It classifies websites as either productive or wasteful and lets you know how much time you spend on each. You can also set goals and limit your access to wasteful sites according to your own rules.

What It Looks Like in Practice: Meeting Deadlines and Getting to Things on Time

Gabriel enjoys his job and his coworkers, and he is valued by his company as a skilled analyst. But his last two performance reviews noted his problems with time management. His manager told him that these issues could impact future opportunities for promotion since his tardiness impacted the work of others on his team. Gabriel resolves to improve his time management skills (he hopes!), but he doesn't want to take on too much at once. He meets with his manager and asks her what area she thinks he should address first. She says his weekly product and cash flow analysis that is due at 10:00 A.M. on Monday is a priority because the rest of the team needs this information to complete their reports. Gabriel has typically been late with this report because, although the

information he needs is available, he usually gives himself insufficient time to complete the report because he is trying to get some other task done first (just one more thing and then I'll start!).

His first step is to get a reliable estimate of the time he needs for preparation of the report. Since the task is pretty familiar, he is able to establish a minimum/maximum range of 80–100 minutes. He sets up reminders on both his computer and phone calendars for Mondays at 7:45 A.M. He then sets up two alarms on his phone. The first is at 8:00 A.M., and it signals to him that he has 15 minutes to finish or close out of any other projects he is working on. The second is at 8:15 and signals that he needs to stop what he is doing immediately and begin working on the analysis. His manager and one of his team members have agreed to be "timekeepers" for him and will give feedback on the timeliness of his report. Gabriel sticks with his plan, but he notices that for the first 2 weeks stopping 5 minutes before it's time to start the report makes him feel like he's "wasting time." His coworker reacts with humor to this and points out that he "gains" the time on the other end, a thought, oddly, that has not occurred to Gabriel until now.

Home is a different issue. Gabriel's wife is already the timekeeper, and his lack of time management is a source of near constant frustration and irritation to her. Being late for both leisure and social events, in addition to being frustrating, is an embarrassment and has made his wife reluctant to make plans with their friends. When she does make plans, friends routinely ask if the plan is for "real time" or "Gabriel time." Since Gabriel really enjoys going out with his wife and friends and has noticed her hesitation, he is definitely motivated to address the problem.

Gabriel tells his wife that he wants to work at being on time, or at least more on time, for social events, and he fills her in on what he is doing at work. She agrees to help him, but she is hesitant to rely on his good intentions, at least when the plan involves other people. They agree to start with social events (for example, dinner out, movies) that involve only the two of them. Gabriel makes the first dinner reservation and leaves it to his wife to decide on the departure time for the restaurant. He follows the same strategy as at work, setting two alarms, one at 20 minutes before departure to wrap things up and a "drop everything and go" alarm at 5 minutes. It works, and they celebrate this accomplishment, albeit small, at dinner. The next event, a movie, doesn't go as well for Gabriel, and they arrive late, having to choose a different movie from the one they'd planned on seeing.

Since the social events are their own reward, Gabriel decides he needs some additional incentive or disincentive to be on time. He regularly plays golf

in a foursome after work on Wednesdays. To his wife, he commits that if he is more than 10 minutes late for any event that they plan, he will forgo his golf date for the week. His wife is stunned, given his passion for golf, but it signals his intention to work on this, and it proves to be the incentive that Gabriel needs to be motivated.

Why It Worked

• **Gabriel was willing to recognize he had a problem.** Some people find this hard to do. They tend to make excuses or decide it's not *their* problem because they're not the ones getting upset. Gabriel's performance reviews helped him face the reality, and when your friends start talking about "Gabriel time," it's hard to ignore. Putting aside defensiveness for some is an important first step in coming up with a plan to address the problem. In Gabriel's case, it made it possible for him to approach his manager and enlist her help. At home, Gabriel was willing to listen to his wife and accept her advice to start with events that involved only the two of them rather than moving on to social events when friends were involved.

• **He established a baseline.** This was an important component of his work intervention plan because he needed to consider how long it took to write the report he chose as his first time management problem to tackle. In his case, he'd had a lot of experience with the task and could come up with a fairly reliable estimate for how long the report took to write. If he hadn't been sure, he could have timed it a couple of times to answer that question.

• **His plan was built on self-knowledge.** Gabriel knew that transitions were hard for him, so he built in two alarms to facilitate this. One alarm acted as a warning, and the second served as a *stop everything* signal. And because he knew that technology alone might not be enough, he sought the assistance of a coworker to provide encouragement and feedback.

• **His home plan incorporated successful elements from his work plan.** Gabriel found that the alarm system worked at the office, so he took it home when it was time to begin that piece of the intervention.

• **He revised his plan when his first effort didn't achieve 100% success.** Gabriel's work plan worked well, but he struggled a little more at home. When he failed on his second attempt, he decided he needed to up the ante.

• **He was willing to build in a negative consequence for not following his**

plan. Whenever possible, we recommend using rewards to shape behavior. But let's face it, sometimes the imposition of a negative consequence works better and faster. Giving up his golf game was a huge deal for Gabriel. Knowing that the game was on the line helped him keep his goal in his mind (or in his working memory, to be more precise). When that second alarm rang, he might say to himself, "Remember the golf game," and that would be enough to help him drop what he was doing.

• **He built in accountability.** By letting his wife know that his golf game was on the line, he knew he couldn't get away with cheating. This presumes, of course, that his wife is willing to hold him to account—probably a safe bet in this case, since it's evident she had become very annoyed by his chronic tardiness.