

Time Management: A Health-care Perspective

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Time has become a precious resource that is often limited by the large demands placed on us both in our work lives and personal environments. As health-care providers, how often do we say "... so much to do, so little time"? Does your workload require that you put in long hours, work on scheduled days off, or work while on vacation in an effort to complete your tasks?

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. According to Statistics Canada, 31 per cent of adult Canadian workers described themselves as workaholics. Thirty-nine per cent of workaholics admitted working more than 50 hours a week, and 65 per cent felt they did not spend enough time with family.¹ Even more astounding is that Harris reports, "... in a 10-country comparison of time use, Canadian young people ranked first in terms of hours spent on unpaid and paid labour during the school week. Averaged over a full week, including school and non-school days, Canadian teens performed 7.1 hours of labour per day in 2005—a virtual 50-hour work week comparable to that of their adult counterparts aged 20-64."²

Time is a social construct that guides us through our lives. Individuals are programmed from birth onward to learn about time as both a measurement and a concept within social institutions. Historically, our predecessors measured time by the position of the sun, the seasons, and later by the mechanical clock. Their daily tasks were demarcated and performed based on these points of reference. Awareness of time is individual and, according to Allan, there are three different perceptions of time: "...clock time which is linear, sequential, and scheduled phenomena; time as an all-at-once event sometimes referred to as living in the present; and also natural, biological or cyclical time."³ One factor remains constant; there are 24 hours in each day, 168 hours in a week. Each

day, the sun rises and sets, and it is not possible for us to invent, extend or recapture time.

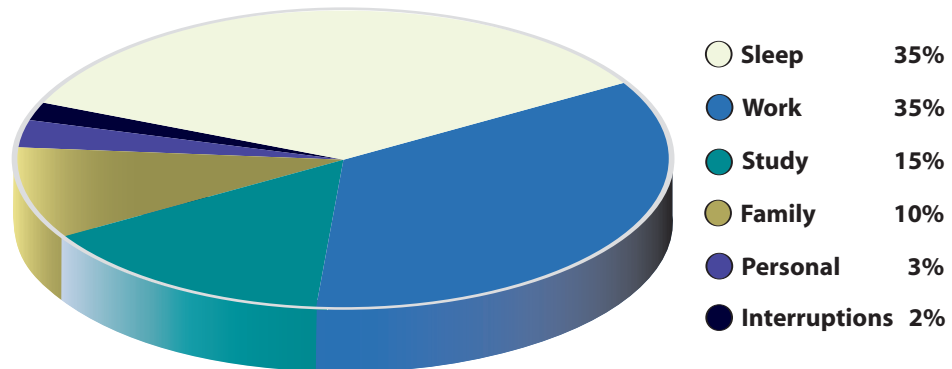
In today's society we are being forced to do more, and to do it in a more timely and efficient manner. Health-care providers as well as all sectors within the workforce are being pressured to improve productivity by better managing their time. Time management by definition is, "... a conscious attempt to control and allocate finite resources."³ Over the last few decades the concept of time management has taken a new perspective. No longer are we constrained to time by geographical boundaries, time zones and language barriers. The result is that we have become accustomed to accessing information and individuals 24/7. If you feel caught in a time trap, Leucke offers eight questions you can ask yourself for self-reflection⁴:

- When you get into an elevator, do you press the close button rather than wait for the door to close?
- Do you regularly calibrate your watch or clock?
- Are 30 per cent of your dinners either take-out or heat-and-serve?
- Do you find yourself multitasking at work (i.e., reading a report while a colleague is making a presentation)?
- Are you too busy to take your midday walk even though you know it is healthy?
- Do you eat lunch at your desk while working or checking your voicemail?
- Do you eat in your car while driving?
- If you got a call about an illness in your family, would your first thought be to go to them immediately, while your second thought is that this is creating a mess in your schedule?

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar? If you have answered yes to any of the above, it is time to seriously evaluate how you manage your time at work and at home.

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Time Allocation in a Day



Getting Started

Goal-setting is the starting point of effective time management. Goals are "... actionable tasks that focus on what is important, provide direction, limit energy to non-critical tasks, avoid time-wasters, motivate, and can boost overall satisfaction."⁴ Leucke emphasizes that goals differ based on time frames and importance, and he categorizes them as, "... critical goals, enabling goals, and nice-to-have goals." He expands on these terms to define them as, "... critical goals are those essential to success, enabling goals create a more desirable business condition or take advantage of a business opportunity, and nice-to-have goals can enhance your business by making things faster, easier, or more pleasant."

“The bad news is time flies.
The good news is you are the pilot.”

— Michael Altshuler

Once you have written out your goals, you can now begin carrying them out. The following is a checklist of specific steps you can take:

- **Prioritize your goals:** Group them into long-term, intermediate and short-term goals.
- **Break them down:** Begin with the most difficult parts of a project and break them down into manageable, realistic tasks.
- **Schedule:** Write down when you will accomplish your goals and set deadlines for projects or key steps. Don't

forget to allocate personal time, including family commitments. Household duties, maintaining relationships, special celebrations and other family duties should be jotted down in your calendar.

- **Schedule leisure activities:** Exercising, playing music and going out to dinner are activities that will help you recharge.
- **Get started:** Start taking the necessary steps to accomplish your goals.
- **Identify and avoid time wasters:** Keep an activity log, which is a daily list of how you spend your time. Doing so can help you detect areas where persons with whom, or times of day when, you are most vulnerable to wasting time.
- **Reflect daily on your accomplishments,** and assess what you need to accomplish the next day. Tasks may include (1) work responsibilities (2) family responsibilities (3) social commitments.

Don't forget to leave yourself time to manage unforeseen events.

Time-wasters

Time-wasters and interruptions are common occurrences during the day. Collins and Collins suggest, "... when developing a plan for more effectively managing time, ...carefully analyze where time is currently being used and lost."⁵ Activity logs can identify areas, times of day, and people that contribute to wasting your most precious resource: time. Many of our day-to-day activities as clinicians can be time-wasters. Meetings, phone calls, e-mails, project development, preceptoring and mentoring clinicians, and committee

work can all absorb time. Prioritizing your workload and identifying the areas that will hinder you from completing your tasks will improve your time management skills. Have a plan to set timelines for each assigned task throughout the day (e.g., checking your e-mails, returning phone calls, and attending meetings with a set agenda).

Watch out for “switching costs,” which is the term used in the business sector to describe the time it takes to return to an activity once it has been interrupted. According to Leucke,⁴ “...the more complicated the task, the longer it will take for you to become fully engaged, and the greater the cost.” The next time a co-worker is standing in your office discussing a detailed account of their children’s sporting event, consider the cost of getting back on track with your project.

Procrastination is something we can all claim to be guilty of from time to time. Remember your mother saying, “Don’t put off till tomorrow what you can do today”? Your mother’s words still hold true. Procrastination is just another form of wasting valuable time and is a cause for undue stress. To avoid these intervals of evading the tasks at hand, “... focus on getting the job done in order to give yourself more free time when it is completed, and reward yourself for completing the task on time.”⁷

“ You will never find time for anything.
If you want time, you must make it.”

— Charles Buxton

A New Perspective

Stephen Covey is a well-known motivational speaker and author whose programs and books offer a new approach to time management. Covey defines clocks, daily planners, and personal digital assistants (PDAs) as first- and second-generation techniques of time management. Third-generation techniques focus on planning and prioritizing goals that unify our values. Fourth-generation techniques suggest that rather than manage time, we need to manage ourselves. Covey recommends, “... rather than focus on things and time, fourth-generation expectations focus on preserving and enhancing relationships and on accomplishing results. Understanding your “compass” (the inner direction) is to know your true meaning or purpose and to stay focused on the direction in which you wish to go.”⁶ As clinicians, professional goals demand that we focus on our work and the value we place on accomplishing career objectives. While health-care providers are cog-

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nizant of promoting a holistic approach for our patients, we often neglect this same paradigm for ourselves. To quote Dr. Marla Shapiro, "... life is about striking a balance between work life and personal commitments."⁸

Conclusion

Getting organized is a skill that requires a concerted effort to master. Staying focused on your goals, putting them in priority, and achieving them while balancing work and family life is a rewarding experience. So the next time you are feeling over-extended and attempting to manage your time effectively, remember the words of a nine-year-old child, "... you just need to get organized, stay focused and get 'er done."⁹ ☺

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