

# Productivity at Home

How to do Your Best Work in Not-the-Best Circumstances

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## First, think like a shrink.

The psychological starting point for productivity goes like this: The universe, such as we experience it while we are conscious, is divided into things we can control and things we cannot control.

### Stuff We Cannot Control:

- The earth rotates on its axis once every 24 hours.
- The weather varies, both daily and seasonally, regardless of our home region.
- Human beings have physical and cognitive limitations—typically more as we age.
- Human beings need time to sleep—typically less as we age (but all need *some* sleep).
- The probability of death is 100%. For US males, ALE = 75.6 years; for US females, ALE = 80.8.

### Stuff We Can Control:

- Everything else.



If it's true that we can control what we think and do (at least while we are awake), then time management is about how we exert control.

It is sometimes said: "There are those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened."

Which are you?

## Truths about PRODUCTIVITY

- **Choices** are always trade-offs. When you choose to think or do one thing, you are also choosing *not* to think or do a whole pile of other things. (See: Prioritization. See also: Procrastination.)
- **Positive emotions** flow from feelings of control, competence, achievement, especially in service to others. Spending your time in ways that make you happy will extend your life expectancy. More time!
- **Negative emotions** flow from feeling out-of-control, overwhelmed, incompetent, helpless and repeatedly failing to reach goals (both self-imposed and other-imposed).

### Logically, then:

- One solution for feeling bad (i.e., one key to happiness) involves making deliberate choices about:
  - What you do (e.g., prioritize; drop; delegate; revise goals). See: *Deliberate Decision-Making*.
  - What you think (e.g., change mindset; apply principles of positive psychology)
- People must also take care of themselves—spiritually, mentally, physically—in order to function at optimal levels. Each person's wellness formula is a bit different. See: *Therapeutic Lifestyle Change*.



- ➔ **Successful, happy people are deliberate. They intentionally chose what they think and do.**
- ➔ **Time Management = Choices about how you spend your time. Your choices shape your future.**

## OBSTACLES TO PRODUCTIVITY

What are obstacles to **PRODUCTIVITY** (i.e., efficient time management), and how can they be overcome?

- **Obstacle #1: ADHD**
  - The biggest obstacle to improving time management is neurogenetic. People with ADHD have a disconnect between their knowledge of skills and their ability to perform those skills. In other words, they know what they need to do. They say things such as, “I just have to write a to-do list” or “I just need to get organized.” However, they cannot perform these necessary time-management strategies because they cannot sustain goal-directed behavior. (Sustaining goal-directed behavior is the essence of what are called “executive function skills.”) Someone with true ADHD might look as if they are not trying, but they are. They lack the capacity to self-regulate in a planful manner.
  - If you feel that you have a chronic inability to sustain goal-directed behavior, then you should get an evaluation with a psychologist or psychiatrist who specializes in the assessment and treatment of ADHD. A combination of medication and behavior therapy effectively alleviates the most significant symptoms of ADHD in 80% of those with the disorder.
  
- **Obstacle #2: Old Habits**
  - It is true that old habits die hard. Your established behavior patterns have built-in reinforcements. (If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have lasted.) It takes humility and serious introspection to figure out what has been reinforcing an old habit that you don’t like. In most cases, you’ll discover a short-term reward that is thwarting a long-term goal. For example, it may be fun to watch Netflix *now* but that pile of bills and mail will be even larger *later*.
  - Establishing new habits, such as standing over the recycling bin with today’s mail, will take time to sink in. Most new habits are uncomfortable and unrewarding at first. We experience this as effort. We have push ourselves to behave in a new way. Over time, the new habits become rewarding and are easy to maintain. The commitment is always heaviest at the start.
  
- **Obstacle #3: Priority Perjury**
  - If you keep calling something a priority but keep not doing it, it’s not really a priority. You are lying to yourself to serve some secondary purpose, such as postponing the guilt that might go along with jettisoning a pet project. That’s called *Priority Perjury*.
  - Cut your losses and take that item off of your list today. Sometime in the future, if it becomes important enough for you to deliberately carve out the time and map out the steps to complete this item, then you can put it back on your list and truthfully call it a priority.
  
- **Obstacle #4: Time Blindness**
  - Adults sometimes behave like children, who have an underdeveloped sense of time. This is manifest in at least four ways: (a) Gross underestimation of how long a project will take; (b) Gross overestimation of how many tasks you can achieve in a given block of time; (c) Not tracking how much time has passed (neglect of the clock); and (d) Failure to arrive on-time for appointments or end your own appointments on-time.



- Good time management requires accurate estimation (which comes with practice) and conscious attention to the passage of time (which takes a deliberate commitment, the setting of alarms, keeping a detailed calendar, and revising your estimates as needed).
- **Obstacle #5: Skill Thrill**
  - Talented people overcommit because showcasing what they can do is rewarding.
  - Avoid the temptation to overcommit simply because you know you can do something well.
- **Obstacle #6: Fuzzy Goals**
  - Research has shown that procrastinators have poorer mental and physical health than people who complete tasks on-time. Simply put, procrastination causes stress, which leads to feelings of anxiety, depression, insomnia and a resultant dip in immune functioning. Yikes!
  - One powerful way to stop procrastinating is to bring one specific goal into sharp focus. State out loud and write down the very next thing that you aim to accomplish and by what time.
  - After clearly articulating a specific goal, bring all of the pleasurable elements of goal attainment into sharp focus. How will it feel to complete this task? What are you most looking forward to doing immediately after the task is complete? Increasing your awareness of the psychological rewards and benefits of finishing a job is highly motivating.
- **Obstacle #7: Distracting Environments**
  - The whole idea behind using the time you've been given wisely is to not become derailed by another task. Easier said than done. Here are some practical tips:
  - Unless the task involves one of these things...turn off your e-mail; turn off your phone; close the door; clear your desk; turn off your computer. Basically, shut out, close off and remove from your sight and reach any possible distraction. Create a work environment that is maximally conducive to task completion.

**Besides addressing these 7 common obstacles, what else can you do to be PRODUCTIVE? Here are 7 more tips:**

- **Snappy Tip #1: Glucose**
  - Your brain needs fuel and glucose is what it craves the most. If you are low on energy, a bit of glucose—in the form of fruit juice or a sports drink—can help.
  - Remember, neither sugar nor caffeine is a substitute for sleep. If your eyelids are drooping, that's your body's way of telling you to get some sleep.
- **Snappy Tip #2: Quick Nap**
  - A 20-minute nap helps to recharge your batteries. Sleeping longer than that in the middle of the day leaves most people feeling groggy because your brain dips into a deeper sleep.



- Snappy Tip #3: **Affirmations**
  - Corny as it may seem, telling yourself that you are worth it will make a difference. The choices you make about how you spend your time speak volumes about your principles. Remember to pat yourself on the back when you've made a good choice; one that affirms your core beliefs.
  
- Snappy Tip #4: **Rewards**
  - Simple as it may seem, rewarding yourself for completing part or all of a task is a reliable way to keep your motivation high.
  - Rewards may include: a modest purchase, time with a friend, recreational screen time, a hot shower, a cold drink. Remember, it doesn't have to cost much or take much time. It just has to mean something positive to you and be logically connected to your completing a task.
  
- Snappy Tip #5: **Breaks**
  - Some people are most efficient when they work for 10 minutes and take a break for 2. Others can work for 50 minutes and take a 10-minute break.
  - Try some different work-break rhythms to discover your personal sweet spot. Just be sure that the planned 5-minute break doesn't expand into 5 hours.
  
- Snappy Tip #6: **Write it Down**
  - Writing down your plans for the day, week, month or year will increase the likelihood that the plan is carried out. Writing makes it real. Psychologists say that writing "concretizes" time, which is an abstract construct.
  - When your commitments are concrete, you can protect the time necessary to fulfill them.
  - My personal favorite is cheap, reliable, battery-independent, and fits into any pocket: 3"x5" index cards. Write up a new one each evening, in preparation for the next day.
  
- Snappy Help #7: **Become Accountable**
  - When someone else is counting on us, we are more likely to fulfill a particular commitment. Because of this sense of responsibility, most people are most efficient working to complete projects for *other* people. When a project is *your own*, you can still create a sense of responsibility to others by sharing your goal and methods with someone you trust.
  - Enlisting the assistance of an executive coach (also called a "life coach" or "professional coach") can also boost your sense of accountability. Moreover, executive coaches can push you to clarify your goals and methods in a way that makes achievement most likely.
  
- Snappy Help #8: \_\_\_\_\_ (Design your own, based on what you know works for you.)

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