

Question: Do you have any tips for organizing my time? I get overwhelmed by my schedule and feel like I never have enough time.

Time is the great equalizer. Rich and poor, young and old, we all get 24 hours a day. We can neither spend it nor save it, loan it nor borrow it. Time is the one organizing challenge with which we all wrestle.

For all my organizing abilities, time management has been my prize fight, too. So last year I hired a time management coach and climbed into the ring. I trained with some of the best books on the market. Then I sparred with over-commitment and procrastination. Inertia, boredom, and fuzzy goals proved formidable opponents as well. By the end of the year I had honed some great techniques. Here are what I consider the essentials to good time management:

The Calendar: choosing the right calendar is pivotal to your time management success. Decide between electronic or paper, and then customize it to your needs. I like electronic for its portability and flexibility, but paper calendars are great if you like to see the big picture. Either way, stick with *one* calendar for both home and work. Input all birthdays, holidays and recurring appointments at the beginning of the year. Use your calendar every day and block out time for scheduled events, like a meeting; *and* unscheduled events, like dinner prep.

The Task List (or To-Do List): constant companion to your calendar is the task list. Use sketch pads, sticky notes or scrap paper, but get all those pesky tasks out of your brain and down on paper. Keep an ongoing list of everything that needs to get done. Carry it with you and knock out little tasks whenever possible. The key to success: move your tasks *off* your to-do list and *onto* your calendar.

The Stop Watch: most people over estimate or under estimate how long certain tasks take. Use a timer for a week and see how long it *really* takes to drive to work, finish your morning routine, make a phone call, compose an email, or unload the dishwasher. Flipping a load of laundry is less offensive when you realize it only takes six minutes. Your punctuality will improve once you acknowledge it takes 17 minutes to get to work, not ten.

The Next Step: if getting started is your greatest hurdle, practice the art of “next steps.” Paper piles, unfinished projects and long to-do lists are really just delayed decisions. Rather than getting overwhelmed with the whole project, just designate the *next step*. Several “next steps” will eventually result in project completion.

The Master List: once you’ve integrated the above steps into your life, bring value to your life with the “master list.” Note everything you would like to accomplish – the big things and the little; the financial, social, physical and intellectual. Review the list weekly or monthly. By performing an occasional “next step” you’ll watch these longer term goals come to fruition right before your eyes.

Since time is the ultimate in “use it or lose it,” its no wonder trying to manage it sometimes feels like a fist fight. I went a few rounds with it last year and discovered all I really wanted was to be a good steward of each 24 hour gift. I personally practice all of the steps I recommend and can say I’m becoming a welter weight champ in time management. Sure, I get sucker punched every so often by a nasty bout of perfectionism or procrastination, but the truth about time is that none of us will ever have enough – and that’s simply what makes the fight worth fighting.

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