

part

one

make time

planning and priorities

1

eight steps to regaining control of your life

We all know there are only so many hours in the day, but one of the reasons why we feel we don't have enough time for ourselves is that we *let* time run away without us.

You already know that you're feeling time-pressured and stressed, so rather than spending several pages explaining why you are feeling so badly (and wasting your time in the process), I'm going to jump in with solutions to help you begin finding time for yourself right away.

The secret to finding the time you want and need is to take control. Here's how.

step one: track your time

If you are like most of my clients, you would like to be able to snap your fingers and instantly gain more time. Unfortunately, we all have responsibilities, so immediate change may be what we want, but it's not always possible to achieve. You *will* find the time you crave, but first there is some work to do.

Tracking your time to discover what is happening to it is a very easy and beneficial exercise. Within a week, you will be ready to start making some changes. By simply going through this process you might become so aware of time-wasters that you could be ready to make some changes by later today!

You've probably heard of keeping a food journal when you're trying to adjust your diet. The same philosophy works with identifying how you are spending your time. It is difficult to determine how you can better manage your life if you don't take a look at what is happening in it.

Create a time chart for one full week to document how you are spending each twenty-four-hour period. Keep track of what you do on a half-hour basis. Note everything from showering and eating to e-mail and errands. You need to track your weekends as well. I've rarely had a client who hasn't remarked to me: "I just don't know where my weekends go." Well, now you'll find out.

Some people like to highlight their time charts with colors to better visualize how their time is distributed among various pursuits. You might select four colors to highlight work time, home-related tasks such as errands and chores, family time, and finally time spent doing something just for you.

Although creating a time chart may sound like it will take a lot of effort, it's really not that difficult once you set your mind to it. By the end of the week you'll begin to understand where your time goes.

step two: identify goals

During the week that you're keeping track of your time, you also have another assignment, which is to reevaluate your priorities. Although we all have certain priorities that we are committed to and that take up a lot of our time, such as work or family obligations, you bought this book because you aren't finding time for something that is important to you, so start listing what you would do "if only you had time."

This list's contents could range from getting a massage to going back to school to earning additional professional accreditation. Write down anything and everything you think of. Once you have finished, you'll begin to see what is missing in your life. For example, if your list is about twenty items long and five are items like "Play tennis more often," "Get

to yoga class more regularly,” or “Take time for Sunday walks,” then you obviously need to find more time for exercise.

Although this “I wish I had time for . . .” list will provide you with several short-term goals, you should also think ahead—first, five to eight years ahead to take into account what your dreams are, and then two years ahead to see about changes you would like to make on the way to achieving those life goals.

five- to eight-year goals

This should be your “dream” page for your long-term goals. Write down what you would like to be doing five to eight years from now—for example, working in a different field, raising children, or retiring. Take several days to consider what you want your future to hold, and then settle on the one or two long-range plans on which you’d like to focus.

Be specific as you note your goals. If your goal is to learn a new language, do you want to speak like a native or to learn enough phrases to get by? The more specific you are, the easier it will be to act on your goals.

two-year goals

Record on the next sheet of paper what you would like to be doing in two years. Perhaps you would like to switch careers or to have more time for a specific hobby such as photography. If your long-range goal requires advanced education, such as going to business school or getting a Ph.D., then you should write down what you need to be doing during the next one to two years to accomplish this long-range goal.

Research may be required before you can move ahead with a goal. If you don’t know the steps necessary to get an advanced degree or to become a life coach, for example, you will need to investigate the requirements before knowing what steps you need to take to prepare for this goal.

step three: evaluate your time and your goals in preparation for some changes

In step three you are going to combine the work you have done in steps one and two.

First, we're going to take a look at your time chart. Awareness is the first step toward change. If you have highlighted your activities by color as previously described, you'll be able to quickly assess certain factors. For most people, job and family are going to take up the bulk of their time. Although those are usually "givens" in our everyday lives, you can still take a closer look at both of those categories. If your workday is extended because of overtime or a long commute, are there remedies? For example, you might prefer to bring work home or ask if you can telecommute one day per week rather than stay late at the office, or you might have a long-term goal of moving closer to your job, which would save you commuting time. Family activities are generally time well spent, but even there you might consider whether responsibilities are appropriately shared. For example, your spouse might be able to pick up the children from day care at least one night per week to free you up to take a course or go to the gym.

Take a look at your time chart and consider these questions: What percentage of your time is being spent in areas that are not on your priority list? Where are you spending too much time? How can you be more efficient or cut back in the areas that are less important? All of us also find that chores, errands, home paperwork, and home miscellany take up a lot of our time, so this book is filled with suggestions for reducing time spent on the busywork of life. But there may be other changes as well. Perhaps you've been cleaning your house yourself but a recent promotion means that it would be possible to hire someone to clean twice a month. Think about changes like this one that would make your life easier.

step four: make your goals manageable

Set priorities so that you can focus on the most important tasks first. Otherwise, you might invest your energy in insignificant matters instead of what is most productive. To establish these priorities, look at your two-year and your five- to eight-year goals as well as your "I wish I had more time for . . ." list that holds your short-term goals.

Plan how you will make your goals manageable by breaking each one into smaller steps. If one of your short-term goals is creating a more nutritious way to feed your family without spending a lot of time on it, you might want to take a class in healthy cooking or visit a nutritionist for

a consultation on how to make some simple changes in your meal plans. A longer-term goal such as moving to a new community would involve researching the job market, contacting real estate agents, investigating schools (if you have children), and so on.

Set realistic deadlines for various steps on the way to reaching your goals. There is something about a “finish by” date that makes a task very real. (A goal without a deadline can become nothing more than an unfulfilled New Year’s resolution.) If you want to join a health club and haven’t investigated any yet, write down a deadline in your notebook for having called or visited three or four.

(If you’re fairly certain you still don’t have the extra time you need, keep reading. I have a lot of solutions—both in this chapter and in the rest of the book.)

Plan to reward yourself for meeting deadlines. Mini-rewards such as a new paperback book or meeting a friend at your favorite coffee bar can be things to promise yourself for achieving several small steps and can provide a nice boost for work well done.

Review your goals weekly, selecting a reasonable number of tasks to undertake during the upcoming week. Realize that you can do anything you want, but you can’t do everything. Be selective.

Stay on track. Sometimes circumstances prevent us from following our own priorities. For example, your child is sick, so you have to reduce your workweek, or the boss has required extensive overtime, meaning that you’ve missed some of your night classes that are part of another goal. When you need to tend to other matters, just do what you can to get back to your priorities as soon as possible.

step five: simplify with systems

The two primary ingredients for better time management are keeping an objective eye on what is wasting your time (step one) and remaining mindful of your goals and ideal lifestyle (step two), and then combining these two in steps three and four.

If you’d like a sports analogy, these first four steps are your offensive plays. Because there are so many things pulling at us for our time, the rest of the book will focus on “defense!” And trust me, you need to stay on top of your defensive maneuvers, otherwise you’ll be flat on the field

because you've been laid low by clutter, whining children, other people's priorities, and all those "should do" things to which we sometimes fall prey without considering our own responsibilities and preferences.

Step five is your first defensive maneuver, and the message here is "simplify with systems." Systems are perfect for all the tasks that must be done but aren't original, creative, or gratifying—such as grocery shopping, packing school lunches, weekend errands, and so on.

A system can be as simple as a grocery list (see chapter 9) or as regular as the fact that you are always on time with your bills because you pay them on the last weekend of the month (see chapter 11). (Actually, almost all the chapters in this book involve systems.)

Systems allow you to do things automatically so you don't have to spend time figuring out how to complete certain routine tasks. Once you have a system, you'll find you perform the chore almost reflexively. You wouldn't dream of forgetting to pick up milk because you always do it on Tuesdays and Fridays, and your bed is always made because you do it as soon as you get up. Systems require time to create and discipline to maintain, but they make life much easier in the long run.

Whenever you are stuck on how to accomplish something, think about creating a system. Although the process may go a little slowly the first time you do a particular task, you'll find that your pace will speed up as your system becomes familiar.

These are the things you should do when going through a new task.

- *Notice the current flow of the process.* This way you can maintain what works and refine what slows you down.
- *Create a beginning and designate an end.* From cleaning a room to doing a work project, structuring the job will help you to stay on task. For example, weeding out your files could be a huge job, to the point that it could consume all your free time. Instead of setting yourself up for failure because you've become so overwhelmed, you might opt to clean one drawer each month. That way the job gets done, but there is a beginning and an end to the project within a reasonable time frame.
- *Think sequentially.* If you intend to clean the garage, start on one side and work clockwise. Don't hop around. An orderly attack will help you to keep track of your progress, and it will be rewarding to



TAKE BACK THE WEEKEND

Americans are working longer hours and taking fewer vacations. Evenings and weekends are often spent catching up on work, cleaning the house, or taking care of errands. Instead, you need to take back the weekend and make it be the break in the week that it is supposed to be.

For many, the ideal weekend is spent with family or friends. Others like to do something completely different from their week-day routine, whether it's community work, trying a new recipe, or taking a class.

If you have to do some errands, catch up a bit on some work, or squeeze in time for a dental cleaning, just make sure that you limit the time on these must-do activities. If weekends are to provide a respite from the week, you need to plan for a break and build in the fun you want to have.

In addition, schedule actual down time. While the idea of scheduling time to relax seems counterintuitive, it's actually necessary, or most of us will let that peaceful time slip away. So whether you want to nap, putter in your garden, or put on your MP3 player and listen to music, plan out some time for relaxing and enjoy it.

look to the left of where you park and see what great progress you've made.

- *Make the process become organic to the task.* When you get up in the morning, you can adopt the habit of automatically making your bed and hanging up your pajamas so that these things don't need to be done later. The moment you step into the office, you can do three or four things that need to be taken care of immediately upon arrival—such as checking your e-mail, reviewing your to-do list, and listening to any voice-mail messages that came in overnight. If a work crisis comes up shortly after your arrival, you've at least taken care of the basics.

- *Designate tasks.* If other people are involved in what is to be accomplished, make sure that responsibilities are outlined and that there is a method for the handoff of the task—whether it’s getting the kids ready to be taken to school or preparing the monthly report for the staff at the office.
- *Include checkpoints.* Depending on the task, set deadlines as to when other people should check in with you, or set a time when you want to reevaluate how this particular system is working for you.
- *Write it down.* Any task that is slightly complicated—or one that you don’t do frequently—can be written down in steps. The information sheet you create can be kept as a handy reminder.

Here are some quick basic systems you can implement right away that will not only make it easier to get things done but will make you feel as if you are giving your brain a vacation.

- *Keep ongoing lists for groceries, drugstore items, and weekend errands.* (Grocery lists are covered in more detail in chapter 9.) You’d be amazed how much better you feel when you aren’t trying to remember things all the time—and by writing them down, you will find that you get them done. This will eliminate those times when you arrive home only to discover that you forgot to purchase something you need for the next day.
- *Keep a personal notebook with a running list of everything else.* (This master notebook system will be fully explained in chapter 3.) From vacation destinations you’d like to investigate to recommendations for books to read to a gift idea you are considering for your mother, keeping an all-in-one-place running list of your life makes everything easier. Although some people prefer an electronic list in their handheld PDA or computer, I think a lot can be said for a one-inch three-ring binder. You can create categories that represent the different parts of your life; also, a notebook is very adaptable.
- *Use tickler files.* Tickler files are your “action” files—that is, your future to-do list with backup copy, such as tickets you need for an upcoming trip or a memo for an office meeting on Monday. This system provides a logical way to locate needed items and reminds

you of things you must do or calls you must make on a specific date in the future. To create tickler files:

Select thirteen file folders and labels. For a color-coded system, select a specific color for this group of files.

Label a folder for each of the twelve months. Label the remaining folder *THIS WEEK*. (Clients in office settings often like a tickler file for each day, so in addition to the monthly set, they take thirty-one additional folders and mark one with each date.)

These folders are where you will put papers that require action but that you don't intend to take care of today. Here are some examples:

- A flier describing your child's class trip that takes place in two days, complete with directions from the school for exactly how their lunches must be bagged, should go in your *THIS WEEK* file (or, using the expanded tickler file system, in a file for a special date).
- Driving directions to an event you are attending next month belong in the folder for the appropriate month.
- A letter you have written that will require follow-up in a month should go in next month's file.
- A "perfect" birthday card you purchase in April for someone whose birthday is August 15 should go in the August file.
- Reminders to make appointments for your annual physical and six-month dental visit, each occurring at different times of the year, should be placed in the appropriate file for the month when you need to call for the appointment.

step six: say no

I could almost write a complete time management book in two words, and you know what they are—"Say no."

Life today is filled with possibilities. No matter where you live, on any given weekend evening, you could have dinner with friends, go to a movie,

attend a live concert or stage play (there are lots of community theaters around), visit a mall with evening hours, play miniature golf at an indoor entertainment center, go bowling, or stay home and rent a DVD or watch TV, surf the Internet, or read a book—and that’s only one evening! We are fortunate to have so many choices, but managing all your options means that each person needs to constantly set priorities and then say no to all the rest.

Of course, the choices on weekend evenings are generally about personal preferences. For most of the rest of the week, we have to balance what we have to do, what we ought to do, and what we want to do. We have to make some tough choices regarding responsibility versus personal choice: Do you really need to visit your in-laws every weekend? And will the children survive with a babysitter on a Saturday afternoon so that you can go antiquing? And what about that work you told your boss you’d do on your own time? These choices are tough ones, because they involve what you should do versus what you want to do. Although we all need to be dutiful at work and be good family members and helpful members of our communities, we’re no good to anyone if we don’t say no now and then so that we can capture some time for ourselves. Burnout is real.

So go back to your time sheet and your priorities list at least once a week and remind yourself, “It really is okay to say no.”

step seven: organize

No doubt about it, being organized saves time. Again, you’ll learn many of my secrets on a subject-by-subject basis as you go through the book. However, for the purposes of this chapter, you just need to know that if you want to find more time for yourself, you need to get and stay organized. Here’s why.

Organized people can get things done in less time. The person who is well organized and has a grocery list doesn’t need to run back to the store for the ingredient he or she forgot. The person who knows when the car inspection is due doesn’t need to call the service station in a panic, trying to get a last-minute appointment. And the person who plans ahead for a party can do a little bit each week, never getting bogged down with a long list of things that have to be done right before the event—or right before the invitations need to be mailed out.

Throughout this book, you'll find lots of advice that will tell you how to get and stay organized—just remember it's worth making the effort to get organized if you're trying to find more time for yourself.

And be realistic. Because staying organized takes time, you'll need to build in time to focus on getting and staying organized (see chapter 2).

step eight: shake things up

You may be thinking that all this stuff about finding more time for yourself sounds very buttoned up, but it's not. The eighth and final step in this chapter is to remind you that we really appreciate our time the most when we do things differently every now and then.

Although you could certainly put the fun back into grocery shopping by taking a friend along or making a scavenger hunt out of it with your kids, most of us simply want to get the must-do items of life out of the way quickly and efficiently—and as pleasantly as possible. Here are some simple ways to make small changes that will let you have a mini-vacation each time you discover something new.

- *Do old activities a new way.* Take a different route home, or, if you live reasonably near work and usually drive, consider riding your bike. Walk the dog at a different time. Go out for dinner on the night you usually order in. Call a friend and meet for a spur-of-the-moment walk. If you usually have dinner with friends on Friday night, have a potluck party with a larger group instead. Take one child away with you for the weekend; let your spouse and the other child find things they want to do.
- *Rekindle old dreams.* If you've always dreamed of being a dancer or playing professional baseball, it may be too late to go pro, but there is no reason not to continue to enjoy the activity. Sign up for a dance class or join a community baseball team.
- *Check your town's cultural listings.* Chances are there is a museum or a performance space you've never visited. Make an effort to do so now.
- *Establish some quiet time that is all your own.* If you have children or work full-time, calling a time-out for thirty minutes to two hours

on the weekend is understandably necessary. And whether you nap, read, go for a swim, or take a long walk, that time is yours—so protect it.

- *Treat yourself to a quiet evening in preparation for a good night's sleep.*
Now that's a rarity in this day and age!