

MORE FREE TIME

Want some? Here's how to tame your schedule – and claim carefree minutes for yourself.

IF THESE BREEZY IMAGES of summertime bliss are as far from your reality as winning the lottery, you're not alone. The majority of the surveys we've conducted reveal that you don't have time for fun. But wait. With so much more flexibility on offer these days – flexitime in the workplace, your own business, working from home – you should theoretically have far more free time available. So what gives? Blame your hectic, full-to-bursting life. It doesn't feel very leisurely when you're simultaneously blessed with endless possibilities (career, kids, Madagascar!) and bombarded with countless distractions (cellphone, email, cellphone!). Until *Real Simple* can stretch 24 hours into 25 (patience – invention pending), use this expert strategy to free up some time. Deciding what you'll use it for is up to you.

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'A simple question to ask is, are you happy with how you have spent the last hour? Once gone, it's gone forever, so make it count,' says clinical psychologist, Dr Colinda Linde.

**Time can be on your side** – if you reshape your schedule. With the help of a number of experts, *Real Simple* has come up with a three-part plan to re seize the day.



**Step 1: STEP BACK (FOR A SECOND)**

Figure out why you want more free time. 'You can't win a game you haven't defined,' says David Allen, a productivity expert and the author of the bestseller *Getting Things Done* (Penguin Books, R154). You'll be more motivated to change if you have a specific goal.

**Make a wish list.** Write down all the activities that you long to do more of – whether they're things that make you feel happy, relaxed, sane(r), or all three. For example: going for a swim, sleeping until you're no longer tired, volunteering on a project you care about or getting an hour all to yourself. Rank the items in order of importance to you, then pick one or two to focus on first. (Make your pick before you read on.)

**Now write down how you really spend your time.** Odds are it's all one rush-rush-kids-to-school-tennis-shopping-cooking-work-deadlines blur. To get some idea of what's going on, keep a detailed diary for a few days. 'You may be surprised by how little time you spend doing things you love most,' says Dr Colinda Linde, a clinical psychologist and mother of five-year-old twins, who transformed her life after a diagnosis of ovarian cancer. She put her techniques for regaining balance, especially how to use your time, into her book, *Get the Balance Right – Coping Strategies for Working Moms* (Metz Press, R139). Says Linde, 'A simple question to ask is, are you happy with how you spent the last hour?'



**Step 2: SEE WHAT YOU CAN GIVE UP**

This is the hard – but liberating – part: rethinking the way you spend your time. As you sit in front of your daily diary crammed full of busy-ness, consider that recreation and relaxation is necessary for motivation, which means less procrastination and more creative productivity. If you're skimping on R&R because you've come to believe that leading a balanced life



is selfish, or if slowing down evokes fears of falling out of the (rat) race, think again. 'Not only have we developed an addiction to success, we are in fact addicted to speed. We convince ourselves that the hurrying is to save time. And what do you do with the time you save? Fill it with more hurrying!' says Dr Linda Friedland, a medical doctor and author of *Having it All* (Tafelberg, R130). 'The cost of this "hurry sickness" is neglected relationships, bad health and possible premature death, for apparent success. Give up some tasks – you'll be busy – with more energy.' Since you can't manufacture time, you need to find ways to free it up. So take another look at your list of current activities and ask yourself four questions:

**What can I delegate?** Okay, so maybe your 11-year-old can't load the dishwasher as well as you can. But if you hand over that task, you'll have 10 minutes to spend on something more fulfilling. The fact that you're teaching your child responsibility – with, yes, an occasional chipped dish – is a bonus. If you've reflexively been handling most of the household duties – dry-cleaning drop-offs, filling out school forms – turn some of them over to your spouse. (No, this does not make you a bad wife or mother.) Then, try similar strategies at work: give junior staffers projects that stretch their capabilities and ditch that compulsion to step in and do the job yourself.

**What can I outsource?** Gardening and catering are obvious answers, but what about making use of online shopping, suggests clinical psychologist Mandy Rodrigues, coauthor of *Faster, Better, Sicker; Time*





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*Urgency Perfectionism Stress and Your Health* (available online at [www.timeurgency.com](http://www.timeurgency.com)), especially when it comes to monthly bulk items. Also consider a lift club or getting a driver for your children – time spent in traffic knocks you financially and emotionally, not to mention the guilt you feel for snapping at the kids under pressure. Remember that all the little things (making school lunches, packing sport bags) add up too. Asking dad to do this once or twice a week will give you some quality time with your children.

**What can I do less well (at least sometimes)?** We’d all like to be ‘perfect’ at everything we do, especially if other people are involved. But is the time (and energy) worth it? When something you’re working on is good enough, stop. ‘It’s a waste of time to do everything perfectly, such as totally reworking a whole presentation when you can simply alter certain items,’ says Linde. ‘Instead, focus on doing the important things adequately – like showing up at your friend’s birthday party even if you haven’t found that just-right present, or making a simple pasta dish for a special dinner instead of going all-out gourmet. Not only will you gain more time but you’ll have energy to actually enjoy these events.’

**What distractions can I limit, if not eliminate?**  
 ■ Eliminate senseless worry. Identify the distractions you place in your own life, says Rodrigues, who suggests spending a week writing down your daily ‘hooks’ – anything that causes you stress or worry, like a deadline or an argument. Some hooks are too senseless to spend time fretting over – like traffic,

reading emails and interruptions at work. Minimise them. Leave earlier or later to avoid traffic, stick to a certain time during the day when you read your emails and alert colleagues to your uncompromised focus for the day. ‘Choose your worries,’ she adds, ‘Worry is worthwhile if it resolves a problem.’

■ Try to make your day predictable. In general, we respond to unexpected events far worse than those we know are going to happen. Rodrigues says, ‘Look at your week and try to imagine what the week ahead will be like. For example, if it’s the end of the month, understand that shops and banks will be busy and work will be rife with deadlines. This way, when things happen you’ll feel less overwhelmed.’

■ At home, give your cellphone, laptop and email a rest. ‘Innovative technology that “demands” 24/7 accessibility has resulted in very diffuse boundaries between work and home life,’ says Maureen Kark, a psychologist who specialises in corporate wellness programmes. You may think you’re an efficient multitasker but all this ‘spillover’ is provoking and exacerbating feelings of anxiety, elevated levels of stress and higher chances for mismanagement.

■ As for TV, some shows help you relax and some keep you informed, but take control of the remote before you spend precious time engaged in the stresses of other people’s lives. ‘People achieve balance and more psychological reward when they engage in the things that have real meaning to them,’ says Debbie Blackburn, a life coach and founder of Own Choice wellness centre. Translation: go for a walk to unwind, or share a family meal.



**Step 3: RESCHEDULE YOUR SCHEDULE**

Now that you’ve freed up minutes (hopefully lots of them!), it’s time to reshape your days. ‘Focus most of your efforts on what you do well – your talents and strengths – and your energy will naturally flow,’ says Emma Tyrrell, life coach at The Coaching Centre.

**Establish one or two ‘non-negotiables’ and work your schedule around them.** ‘Decide what exercise you love doing, or how many nights out are vital to your sense of freedom and fun,’ says Tyrrell. These aren’t ‘nice to haves’ – they are essential to your health and wellbeing; they stimulate the feel-good chemicals in your body that contribute to your sense of balance – and lead to all-round good performance.



‘When you’re realistic about how much you can do in a day,’ says Gina Trapani editor of Lifehacker.com, ‘you’re so much happier.’

**Create a daily to-do list with a difference:** Firstly, write down the tasks that are important each day of the week – a maximum of three to five items. That’s realistic and doable. Leave the rest for the next day, or to another person. Then consult your wish list and make sure that items from the top of the list are part of your weekly plan. Yes, that means writing in ‘30 minutes on the hammock with my book’.

**Schedule a quick and brainless task first.** This will allow you to cross something off your list right away and to start the day feeling accomplished.

**Schedule your most onerous task second.** Whether it’s a difficult conversation with a friend or a tedious email to a colleague, plan to get it over with next. ‘Doing tasks in this order is like having a bite of your favourite item in a meal first, before a “mandatory” intake of your least favourite veggie,’ says Linde.

**Challenge the list. Ask yourself:** ‘What is the most important task on my list and when does it need to be done by?’ says Tyrrell. Break the task down into bite-sized chunks so you can tackle each part of it successfully before the deadline. Sometimes all it takes to focus (and keep sane) is to knock an item off your list. To decide on that item, go back to the questions in Step 2 (such as, ‘What can I outsource?’)

**Have a reality check every Friday to reassess.** Gina Trapani, editor of Lifehacker.com, a website dedicated to time-saving technology tips, is a huge fan of this approach. Each Friday afternoon, she sets aside half an hour to go through what she has accomplished, personally and professionally, and map out the next week. (Even a five-minute version of her ritual can do the trick.) ‘This helps me remember my priorities,’ says Trapani. It also reminds her that it’s impossible to do everything. ‘When you’re realistic about how much you can do in a day,’ she says, ‘you’re so much happier.’ Isn’t that the point?

**Embrace the five-minute rule, says Friedland.** Tomorrow morning, at 10am (or 11am or 12pm for that matter) do nothing for a full five minutes. That means no emails, no SMSing, no coffee break, no chatting, no worrying thoughts – do absolutely nothing for a full five minutes. You’ll find that five minutes is really a lot longer than it seems.



**TOOLS TO KEEP YOU ON TRACK**

If only it were all plain sailing from here on. But let’s face it: your new-and-improved schedule is going to be under siege – attacked by everything from unexpected projects to good old procrastination, which is, according to British poet Edward Young, the thief of time. To avoid getting derailed, try the following:

■ **Do just a bit of whatever it is you’re avoiding.** ‘Force yourself to work on the task for a short while – perhaps as little as one minute,’ says Merlin Mann, creator of 43folders.com, a time-management blog. ‘When you realise how much of the anxiety was created in your head, you’ll give yourself the jolt needed to follow through with the task.’

■ **Categorise your tasks each day.** Rethink what is urgent, important, necessary and optional, suggests Friedland. The root of burnout is often the self-imposed pace and urgency that you set for yourself.

■ **Take rest and recharging seriously.** After 40 or 90 minutes spent doing a task, get up for a breather. Also, work out how much sleep you need – aim for seven to nine hours. ‘When you’re sleep-deprived you’re unable to concentrate properly,’ says Tyrrell. ‘Just trying to remain focused consumes a great deal of time.’

■ **Don’t worry, be happy.** According to a survey done by Women24.co.za, women who say they’re very happy are those who make time for themselves. So which comes first, the time or the happiness? Impossible to say. But the odds are good that the more time you make for yourself, the happier you’ll be. ■

