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Time management

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In his wonderful tale, The Little Prince (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943/2000), Saint-Exupéry’s central character observed that the most important things in life are those we cannot see. Time is one of those invisible things that is central to our lives. Along with our health and the company of others, time is perhaps the most precious commodity we have. Active people and high achievers in sport, exercise, the performing arts, and elsewhere recognize the usefulness of taking advantage of the limited time we have on the planet. They find ways to accomplish the things that are meaningful to them and those that are not so significant. Many, however, do not take advantage of the time they have to live fully. How can we best use our time to make the most of our lives?

We are often asked to do more, often with less – sometimes with little at all. Multi-tasking is the norm for many of us. Multiple responsibilities and distractions challenge the focus that high-achieving people want and need to do their best. Technology has evolved at a dizzying pace with the evolution of the internet, email, personal digital assistants (PDAs), cell phones, and so forth. The conflicting demands of the interests and the work-related tasks of helping professionals, and those they serve, may lead to achievements below personal potential, discouragement, and disengagement from potentially rich life experiences.

A case from the world of work and sport

Geoff, a semi-pro golfer, had been consulting sport psychologist, Dr. Ann, for performance reasons for several months. He had been relatively successful in his sport but struggled with consistency of play in tournaments. His work responsibilities included being an assistant pro at a country club golf course, giving lessons, working in the pro shop, and running tournaments. During one session, Geoff lamented to Dr. Ann that it was “real tough” for him to squeeze in training and competitions with everything else. He felt tired most days and sometimes was unmotivated to “get himself into gear.” Members at the club thought he appeared to be insufficiently engaged (feedback provided by the head pro).

Geoff was also recently engaged to be married. In his sessions with Dr. Ann, he revealed some personally dysphoric pressure from his soon-to-be spouse to spend more time with her.
In one session, Geoff revealed that he was thinking about giving up his competitive aspirations in golf and the golf business. He said, “I just don’t know where I’m going to find enough time to get everything done that I need to do these days! I’m not really enjoying golf as much as I used to. My lifestyle’s made me act kind of moody. I don’t have the sense of being able to be successful I used to have – even a year ago, and I’m certainly not getting as much done. I worry about how my relationship will be affected if I continue.”

**Time management as stress management**

Sound familiar? With all of the responsibilities people have, it can be difficult to get so much done – let alone done consistently well. There are costs associated with having a full plate in life, such as this ambitious young man had. What could one do to help Geoff help himself?

One of Geoff’s complaints surrounded the multiple responsibilities in his life as an employee, golfer, and soon-to-be husband. One source of stress shared by high achieving people is taking on too much. Some see being extremely busy as part of the lifestyle of winners, but biting off more than one can chew has consequences. A busy life of work and outside personal activities is usually filled with a mix of both negative (distressful) and positive (eustressful) thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Geoff sensed that aspects of his life were progressively slipping out of his control, increasing his distress. From a positive perspective, however, he was looking forward to his marriage and still enjoyed many aspects of his work.

Dr. Ann suggested that Geoff consider the things in his work, sport, and outside life that were in his control as well as those things that were not so much in his control. After a review of his responsibilities and activities, they determined that much of his day was often controllable (i.e., he mostly had choices in these matters), and that there might be some practical benefits of improved time management in his life. She suggested that more effective time management might take the edge off of some of Geoff’s distress so that he could feel more in control of his life, work and train more efficiently, and regain some satisfaction in his work and personal life. Geoff agreed with Dr. Ann’s suggestions and expressed interest in further addressing his time management skills.

**Self-monitoring**

It is often useful for sport psychology professionals to initially inquire about, and assess, how their clients organize their days. Just as we frequently do not have a good sense of how we spend our money, we often do not think about how we spend our time. Our daily experiences can become a blur as we rush from task to task. Self-monitoring can be an enlightening experience that can foster change. Awareness of our priorities, responsibilities, and realities of how we are actually spending our time can help us determine the best use of the time that we have. Writing down what we have to do (i.e., “to-do” lists) or logging what we have done for a training/work day or week in a planner or log can be useful. Geoff sensed that he had lost some control over time, and investing even a week in this tracking activity might well lead to increased awareness, life reorganization, and possibly stress reduction.

Another simple exercise is to have a client create a three-column list of daily experiences on a sheet of paper. Consultants may want to craft such forms to give to clients in advance.
They are asked to assign daily experiences to: (a) distressful (negative), (b) eustressful (positive), or (c) neutral columns. In the following session, consultants can examine and discuss this material with the client. It is often constructive to discuss which activities are “life required” (e.g., Geoff having to show up to the golf course at 6.30 a.m. Tuesday through Sunday) versus those that are “personal choices” (e.g., practice, tournaments, cooking dinner with his fiancée). It may also be useful to discuss the following questions: (a) What was it like to engage in self-monitoring? (e.g., was it boring, easy to do, frustrating?) (b) How meaningful was this activity to the client? (c) How does the client perceive and react to the organization of daily activities as recorded? (d) Are there any patterns, useful or otherwise, that emerge? (e) What are the chances that the client might continue to do this type of practice in the future? and (f) How might this practice be useful for meeting the client’s needs?

From the above activity, Geoff and Dr. Ann would likely learn useful things to help him gain an increased sense of control over his moments, days, and weeks. Another important task for Dr. Ann would be to help Geoff invest more of his time in constructive and meaningful activities, and less in unimportant tasks. Designating time for responsibilities that Geoff sees as essential may help him feel more in control. Self-monitoring and determining his priorities may reduce the negatives and likely increase the positives in his busy life.

Time management and goal setting

There are only 24 hours in a day – realistically, only about 10 to 12 hours at most – for the high achiever to be productive. Lakein (1997a) emphasized that every moment during the day is a potentially manageable gift and opportunity to contribute to one’s life purposes, goals, achievements, and change. Like Geoff, high-achieving people would seem to benefit from deciding what is most personally important and meaningful. Given the time pressures and limitations each day, setting goals – very short, short, medium, and long-term – is instrumental to success and often provides a feeling of accomplishment.

Using goal setting to deal with time pressures should come as no surprise to students and practitioners of sport psychology. The psychology and sport psychology literature contains abundant support for at least the moderate effectiveness of goal setting (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2001). Generally, goal setting has been established as a reliable and effective technique to enhance motivation to achieve (Locke & Latham, 2002). See Chapter 51 for more information about goal setting.

In concert with Dr. Ann, Geoff learned some things from his self-monitoring activities. For example, he learned that he spends time talking with club members and staff at the pro shop and around the course. Although a somewhat constructive part of his job, this chatting cuts into precious time that he could be using to attend to other tasks. Talking with members left him less time to practise his golf game before work. Geoff also observed that his golf practice habits at the club were unfocused and inconsistent.

These revelations led him to set simple goals linked to his time management work with Dr. Ann. For example, Geoff decided that it would be useful to create a training schedule. As part of this task, he would arrive at work 30 minutes earlier each day (6.00 a.m.) and train for an hour uninterrupted. He would stretch for 5 minutes, hit one large bucket of golf balls as he worked on his swing, digitally record his daily range practice with equipment at
the course, review his swing tapes at the end of each session (possibly with feedback from the head pro, with whom he did not regularly consult), and play at least one competitive practice round per week with a player of comparable skill.

What can the reader take from the above? As creatures of habit, we frequently engage in activities that are familiar but not necessarily useful to our goals. Perhaps it would be helpful to regularly reassess what our purposes are. What do we really value and need to invest our time and effort in? What have we become accustomed to doing but could change or get rid of with some benefit? We can also glean from Geoff’s plan that, even though one may not have a lot of time to devote to important tasks, taking advantage of small segments of quality time can be an efficient approach.

Overall, it appears that high-achievers in sport and other areas of challenging endeavor have to become efficient time managers. They also have to commit to the regular practice of time management skills and habits to work toward realistic goals in meaningful areas of achievement. Regular reassessment and readjustment of daily habits are of considerable value for this purpose.

**Time management as a transferable life skill**

High achieving individuals often learn that time management can help them achieve their goals and reduce distress in their lives. Time management is not only useful in situations such as the one Geoff was facing, but can also be helpful in future athletic and non-athletic situations. As employees, parents, students, or athletes, our clients will most likely encounter circumstances where their responsibilities outweigh the time they have to dedicate to them. Teaching the fundamentals of time management helps clients develop a life skill that can be transferred to other situations that they may face throughout their lifetimes. Clients can use their time management skills to negotiate new responsibilities and demands. As Geoff’s life roles change – perhaps he moves to a higher level of competition or welcomes a new baby into his family – he will need to adapt his schedule to meet his needs and the changing needs of others around him. With the help of time management tools and strategies he developed with Dr. Ann, Geoff can be in greater control of demands and outcomes in his life because he can make adjustments whenever he sees fit.

Some people may not recognize that they have already experienced success with time management that can help them with current challenges. Taking time with a consultant to examine how they have been successful in managing their responsibilities in the past can help clients understand that they have the capability to take charge of their lives in the future. Mapping out situations in which clients have had to manage their time to accomplish their goals can help them to apply this skill in future situations and benefit from this life skill beyond sport.

Many people maintain that sport is a microcosm of the real world, teaching athletes skills that they can use in other areas of life. For example, athletes who are entering the work force or transitioning into different careers can use their time management skills as selling points when interviewing and negotiating for jobs, internships, or positions in graduate school. The ability to manage time demonstrates maturity, is an attractive skill to employers, and may set the individual apart from other candidates. Whether it is in a sport transition, a new career, or a job as a parent, time management can be used to make our lives more enjoyable and less stressful.
Barrier to efficient time management

Even if we are motivated to be better time managers, several practices and personal factors can get in the way of doing so. Impediments to effective time management include: (a) taking on too much, (b) being too accessible to others, (c) perfectionism, (d) fear of failure, (e) distractibility, and (f) procrastination (George Washington University, 2009). Modern technology, although useful, can also be an impediment to effective time management. These issues are often topics of concern to sport psychology consultants and their clients. Given the limitations of this chapter, we have chosen to briefly discuss two common obstacles (technology and procrastination) below.

Technology: making it work for us rather than against us

Our world is swimming with technologies designed to make information sharing more accessible. Email, cell phones with internet access and media libraries, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and online media sites such as YouTube have become common time-consumers in the lives of today’s athletes. The benefit of these technologies is that people have instant access to a vast array of information while not needing to be in a certain place to acquire and use it. These tools permit flexibility while traveling, and many life responsibilities can be addressed through these modalities. For example, PDAs and organizational software can help arrange and simplify schedules, creating a visual representation of the athlete’s responsibilities and reminding them when and where they need to be. Athletes who struggle to maintain personal and professional relationships while they are away can update friends and family about their training and competitions through webcams and blogs. Athletes enrolled in universities can take online classes during the course of a competitive season. Because they can access information for courses and submit homework assignments online, athletes who travel can keep up with their studies without having to be present in classrooms.

In many cases, these technologies help save time and energy by allowing athletes to multi-task and keep in touch electronically. Nevertheless, the potential for technology overload is a real threat to time management skills. Here are a few examples of technology overload and suggestions for how to overcome it.

Time wasters

Surfing the internet, visiting social networking sites, repeatedly checking email and sports scores, or playing videogames may turn from recreational activities into time wasters. Email, cell phones with internet access and media libraries, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and online media sites such as YouTube have become common time-consumers in the lives of today’s athletes. The benefit of these technologies is that people have instant access to a vast array of information while not needing to be in a certain place to acquire and use it. These tools permit flexibility while traveling, and many life responsibilities can be addressed through these modalities. For example, PDAs and organizational software can help arrange and simplify schedules, creating a visual representation of the athlete’s responsibilities and reminding them when and where they need to be. Athletes who struggle to maintain personal and professional relationships while they are away can update friends and family about their training and competitions through webcams and blogs. Athletes enrolled in universities can take online classes during the course of a competitive season. Because they can access information for courses and submit homework assignments online, athletes who travel can keep up with their studies without having to be present in classrooms.

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Time wasters

Surfing the internet, visiting social networking sites, repeatedly checking email and sports scores, or playing videogames may turn from recreational activities into time wasters. Sometimes we may use these activities to distract ourselves from our priorities; at other times we may not even realize how much of our day is being taken up with meaningless activities. Although we may perceive that we do not have enough time in our day, activities that we designate as time wasters may be expendable and can lead to the opening of available time that can be used for something more productive. Examining a daily log of activities and how much time is being devoted to each of them can help identify problem activities. Once people recognize that we do not have enough time in our day, activities that we designate as time wasters may be expendable and can lead to the opening of available time that can be used for something more productive. Examining a daily log of activities and how much time is being devoted to each of them can help identify problem activities. Once people recognize their time wasters, they can begin to minimize them. They can set limits on time wasters (e.g., check email only twice a day, surf the internet for 5 minutes as a time-out and then return to work responsibilities.) When people catch themselves in time-wasting activities, it may be helpful to stop what they are doing, return to the moment, encourage themselves to adhere to their established limits, and engage in
meaningful activities. The more individuals can catch themselves in a time-wasting activities and return to more productive ones, the easier it will be to minimize technological distractions.

**Communication overload**

If clients are high achieving individuals, they probably have many people with whom they would like to be in contact and vice versa. Prior to many of the new technologies, individuals were less likely to experience communication overload because they could be unavailable while traveling, training, vacationing, or working. Email, electronic chatting, cell phones, and text messages, however, make us accessible to anyone at any given time. Pressure to maintain communication can become overwhelming for some people and impede their abilities to manage their time. To avoid communication overload, here are a few tips:

1. Stick to your priorities. Ask yourself, what will happen if I don’t respond? Is this important? Is this time sensitive? If not, either ignore it or wait until you have finished your most important tasks rather than distracting yourself from your priorities. If it is important and you make the mistake of ignoring it, you will surely hear about it again.

2. Train others to understand your communication style. Instead of trying to be on top of all modalities, let people know what type of communication you prefer. Do you like to answer emails or have people leave messages so that you can call them back at your convenience? If others have a clear understanding of when and how you are likely to communicate with them, they will be prone to adhere to your communication pattern.

3. Choose a time of the day that you check and respond to your email. Instead of replying as soon as you receive a message, which may distract you from your priorities, designate specific times for returning emails. Set limits for the length of time you will dedicate to replying to messages.

**Procrastination**

Procrastination is an avoidance behavior that involves intentionally delaying responsibilities even when a person is aware of the potential consequences (Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008; Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007). Although procrastination can be adaptive in the short term (e.g., delays stress and anxiety, increases motivation and productivity), it may come at a cost in the long run. High levels of procrastination have been linked to distress, anxiety, illness, fear of failure, and under-achievement (Klassen et al., 2008). Research has shown, however, that even as little as a month of time management training can help reduce avoidance behavior and worry (Van Eerde, 2003). To be excellent in work, sport, and elsewhere, individuals such as Geoff must become master time managers and learn to resist the impulse to put things off until later.

So how can athletes learn to become champions of self-regulation? First, they need to become aware of when they are procrastinating and what they are doing in place of their responsibilities. Good time managers are able to identify their priorities and attend to the activities that are most important and time sensitive. Great time managers plan ahead and attend to activities that are important before they become time sensitive.
Procrastinators often choose to attend to activities that are neither important nor time sensitive.

Coming up with ways to make avoided tasks less threatening or more enjoyable may help people feel more motivated to address them. With a goal or an attractive outcome in mind, people can focus on what they need to complete to achieve an outcome. In the case of Geoff, training may take the backseat to work or socializing, but reminding himself that attending to his most important tasks will give him an opportunity to return home earlier to his new fiancée, and may help motivate him to stay on track during the day. Another way Geoff could address procrastination is to set a goal for his golf game. If he wanted to reach a certain competition or score by a certain time, he may become more motivated to attend to the tasks that will lead him to success. Breaking the cycle of procrastination and building on time management successes can help develop self-efficacy and reduce procrastination behavior.

Practical time management tips

Pinkney (1991) observed that acquiring and using effective time-management habits involves a commitment to a personal attitude shift about what we choose to do with our days. He noted that many of our responsibilities tend to be less attractive than others. Clearly, most of us are more readily inclined to invest time and energy in activities we find meaningful and enjoy doing, such as being around family and friends, watching a movie versus working on a project, doing an extra workout, or practising mental training. The first, and perhaps most important, step in taking control of time is making a simple yet challenging commitment to deal with the mundane tasks that are not so stimulating versus other more meaningful, higher priority activities. For many people who have not developed useful personal organizational skills, or who have limited experience regularly applying them, this first step is quite difficult to take.

Several simple practices can help people become efficient time managers. For example, many portable scheduling tools are currently available. Perhaps the simplest example is the personal planner. Although there are many sophisticated electronic planners, an inexpensive planner in small book form is a useful start. Not only does a planner help individuals create to-do lists and serve as a physical reminder for them to do things, it also serves as a record of what they have done. Using a simple planner can reinforce useful time choices and behaviors. Like any tool, a planner is helpful only if one regularly uses it and does not lose it! Dr. Ann’s client Geoff warmed up to the idea of using a small pocket planner versus a less convenient and more expensive PDA. He began keeping one in his back pocket and believed that it helped remind him of what he needed to do to stay on track during his busy days at the course.

What else could be useful to a person like Geoff? In his practical bestseller, How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life, Lakein (1997b) offered tips consultants can pass on to their clients to assist them in managing their time. They are: (a) recognize the time of day that clients are most productive, and encourage them to work on priority tasks during these prime periods; (b) work on less challenging, simple tasks (e.g., domestic responsibilities) during non-prime time; (c) if possible, reserve some daily free blocks of time to attend to unexpected responsibilities; and (d) invest some time daily to recover and recharge their personal batteries.
Geoff found these suggestions helpful. He reported to Dr. Ann that he was probably “a morning person” who accomplished more from the time he arrived at work until around noontime. As noted earlier, Geoff decided that he would train early in the morning and devote his time in the afternoons to more mundane responsibilities. Geoff further decided that he would take care of personal responsibilities after work or on weekends, versus running off at noon to attend to these things. Although he felt his time was too limited to set aside an entire hour to rest a bit and recover during the day, Geoff did get permission from his boss to take 20 minutes at noon to rest and take a power nap.

Conclusions

Time is one of our most precious commodities, but we do not always know how to manage it. Poor time management skills can lead to distress and can affect a client’s work, performance, and personal well-being. Sport psychology consultants can help clients regain satisfaction in their lives through the development of time management skills. Self-monitoring activities can help clients identify priorities and current behavior patterns. Goal-setting can help clients develop new habits that align with their priorities. Planners can help to visually keep track of responsibilities so that they do not become crises. Finally, working during their primetime hours and setting aside recharging time can help clients maximize efficiency so that they can approach or reach peak performance in their most important roles. Nevertheless, clients may encounter barriers to achieving their time management goals. Learning how to identify time-wasting activities, limiting distracting technologies, and committing to completing both exciting and unexciting responsibilities can help clients stay on track with their time management goals. Time management is also a transferable life skill that can help clients achieve short-term success and may also help them succeed throughout their lives. See Box 55.1 for take-home messages from this chapter.

Box 55.1

Take-home messages about time management

- Time is invisible but central to our lives and every momentary experience.
- Individuals can attend to their priorities by addressing the most meaningful activities first and minimizing time wasters.
- Sticking to priorities, helping others understand one’s preferred communication formats, and establishing specific email or message time periods can help individuals avoid communication overload.
- Use of a planner can help athletes keep track of short- and long-term responsibilities and events before there is a time crunch.
- Efficient time management is a marketable life skill that can be applicable and useful in future situations.
References


