

4.1 Coping – time management

Slide 1

One definite way to feel stressed or frustrated and lack resilience is when we feel overwhelmed by too much work or feel that we are not managing our time well or achieving as much as we could.

We may genuinely have too many commitments, in which case, you might find it useful to think about the triaging idea in the presentation on coping skills and proactive choices.

In this presentation we will look at some ideas that can help us to see that, with careful prioritising, implementing some rules, and really noticing when we get into poor time management habits, we can find it is possible to fit more into our working hours than we might have thought possible.

Slide 2

We'll start with an idea taken from the work of Stephen Covey – the author of *The 7 habits of highly effective people* – you'll find a link to this in the online resources.

Imagine that this glass jar represents a container for your time – the larger the jar, the more time we have available in our day. We use up our time by filling the jar. In this idea, we use rocks to represent packages of time spent.

Some rocks will be large ones that require a lot of time, focus or energy - they represent the important work that will be beneficial to us in some way – they will help us to learn, develop, advance our careers. They tend to be non-urgent – in that they are for some kind of future benefit, there may not be a short-term deadline, or there may not be anyone else asking for or demanding them. These tasks are the things that make us feel good when we complete them, and we know they will have a long term benefit for us.

Examples might include writing papers, planning research ideas for proposals, long term career planning, training and networking. Also, training other people to be able to delegate to.

The other way we fill our jar is with small rocks, pebbles and sand. These rocks represent tasks that are usually urgent as they have a deadline, or a perceived urgency – for example, emails that we feel we must respond to within 24 hours, or something that is urgent to someone else. Or real deadlines set by those who delegate to us. They are trivial because they don't have long term importance for us – they have short-term value.

Examples of these small rocks and sand are emails, administrative duties, some meetings and distractions from other people. These small rocks often fill our day and make us feel busy, but often dissatisfied at the end of the day with the sense that we have achieved nothing.

In another useful book and blog, the author Cal Newport refers to these two different ways of spending time as 'deep work' (the large rocks) and 'busy work' (the pebbles and sand)

If we are not being conscious of how we are spending our time, a typical day might look like this:

We start the day with the intention to focus on some important, or deep, work but will start the day trying to just clear off some of the busy work from the to-do-list. So, we think we will just quickly check the inbox, or do some admin, book some train tickets, register for an event, research something quickly online. Before we know it, we will have actually filled most of the morning with

this busy work. The trouble with busy work is that it breeds more busy work: if we send an email, someone replies, and we get seduced into an email conversation. As we respond to emails, we see what is further down in the inbox and start dealing with those, or their contents remind us of other small tasks that we have been meaning to do. If we are in the office, we can be easily distracted by other people when we are doing busy work – so people knocking on the door, or passing can then take up more of our time as we get involved with helping others or chatting.

We will then often find ourselves getting to lunchtime or midafternoon and be wondering where the time went and feeling awful that we STILL haven't started the important or deep work and now we don't have space to fit the large rocks into our day.

This makes us feel frustrated or demotivated, and we can be tempted to either work late into the evening (draining our resilience, and definitely not good for our wellbeing) or we decide that we will forget about the large rocks for today and resolve to focus on it again tomorrow... so the deep work gets postponed again.

Slide 3

If you, like many others fall into this trap, the most important thing is to be conscious of it – to make sure your awareness is raised and that as soon as you notice you have been tempted into spending your time on the pebbles and sand, then stop, regroup and focus again on the large rocks.

What you are likely to find is that, if you are prioritising your important work, and do that first, you will be able to fit more into your day. This is where the rock analogy is relevant. If you place large rocks into a jar first and then add the smaller pebbles and sand, you can physically fit more into your jar.

How this works in terms of our time is that we make the busy work fit the time available, rather than allow it to spread into our whole day.

If we get important work done first, will we feel more motivated and productive, we will more likely stay in a productive mindset, but most importantly, we will be restricting the amount of time available for busy work. If we know we must get the small, urgent tasks done within the space of an hour or two; we will do it more quickly. If we use the margins of our day for this work, we tend to give it the time and energy it deserves. If it is not important, it shouldn't get our best energy and attention.

Slide 4

Finally, here are some quick final tips about time management that have been gathered from other researchers.

1. As we have just been thinking about, know what the important things are and resolve to do them first: protect and defend your time on these tasks.
2. During time on important work, avoid getting involved in solving other people's problems or feeding their expectations that you will reply respond immediately to requests. You can still be helpful, but you can place your own parameters around this: let others know you will help or respond, but within a certain time period, not immediately. Let them know which time of day you will be doing work that can't be interrupted. You are available the rest of the time.
3. Identify the small, urgent tasks (the pebbles and sand) that can be done in the margins of the day – have a separate to-do list for these –only look at this list when you have completed your

important work. Having all tasks on one list doesn't help with prioritising the important work, and you can predict that the important tasks will be the ones left on the list when everything else has been ticked off!

4. Try working in small, focused chunks of time rather than long tiring sessions. This is known as the Pomodoro Technique, which many researchers have found a useful way of working. You will find a link to the idea in the resources list.
5. Try to have your email switched off most of the time. If you deal with your emails twice a day for example for 45 minutes, you will find that you can process a lot of them in a very short space of time – particularly if you set a timer and race against the clock. What's the worst that could happen if you don't look at emails for a few hours? If there is a real emergency, then email is not the best way to get your attention, and you could always let colleagues know your work pattern so they don't expect instant replies and know that if there is a genuine emergency, they should phone you instead.
6. Many of us are more likely to do something if someone else is expecting it, and we feel accountable to them. If your important work has no deadline and no one asking for it, can you create a deadline? For example, tie it into other deadlines such as departmental meetings or seminars where you can present your ideas. Or you could arrange for a colleague to give you feedback – tell them you will get your work to them on a specific date for review, then you will have to prioritise that work so that you don't let your colleague down.
7. Notice which environments best suit your important deep work: is there a specific place where it is easiest to concentrate and screen out distractions? For some people it might be a silent, private room, for others, it could be in a busy café wearing noise-cancelling headphones.
8. Similarly, when are you at your most productive? If you are a morning person, do your deep work in the mornings. If you are more alert and energised in the evening, do it then.
9. Notice what kinds of people or tasks tend to lead you to break your good time management habits. Keep a mental note and try to work out ways to minimise their impact on your time management.
10. Finally – many researchers have a perfectionism habit... if we work many hours on tasks to make them perfect, we will waste a lot of time! Perfection is impossible, and most tasks, particularly the small, less important ones do not need to be perfect. Seek clarification so that you can be very clear about what is good enough, know when you have achieved this and then stop and move on to the important work.

If you were only to commit to one of these ideas, which would have the biggest impact on your time management and productivity?