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Time Management for Educators

By Charles E. Kozoll
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The chapter members sponsor this fastback in honor of Wendell G. Anderson for his outstanding leadership of Pi Chapter. He has had a distinguished career as a public school administrator and as a faculty member at the University of Illinois where he is director of University-wide Projects. He has been a member of Pi Chapter since 1948, serving in numerous capacities including president. He is currently chapter treasurer. He has also served as delegate to the biennial council and is currently on the District V Governance Committee.
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Introduction

"It won't work for me," the teacher said angrily. "How do you find time even to make a 'to do' list, let alone complete the items on it?"

"Follow me around and see what I have to do in 50-minute periods all day long. There isn't time to use time effectively."

"I am not a corporation executive! My job is principal of this school. Managing my time each day just isn't realistic. Each day is unique, with unexpected crises and interruptions by dozens of people who need and deserve my time."

"Special education students need and deserve my undivided attention. Time for me is time away from them."

These statements were made at time-management seminars I conducted for teachers and administrators in several midwestern school districts. The large audiences were attentive but skeptical. As such well-known techniques as "to do" lists, establishing priorities, and expediting paperwork were mentioned, you could sense the hostility. "Time management may be appropriate for business or government but not for education," said many participants. They also mentioned the difficulty they faced in attempting to change their ways of working, when so many activities and priorities competed for limited time. These teachers and administrators sincerely wanted to find more time, but their perception of limited control over their time stood in the way of choosing approaches and taking subsequent actions that could help them improve their time management.
These educators' appraisal of time in their lives is correct. Administering a school and teaching children are demanding and often physically exhausting jobs. The pressures on time are relentless. These educators recognized the reality that schools mean busy days, but they were denying that certain changes in their habits might give them increased control over their time. The busy days will continue; that is certain. It is the purpose of this fastback to show how, through the development of certain habits, time can become a resource instead of a scarce commodity. The approach used capitalizes on one's existing organizational strengths. Once teachers have mastered time-management habits, they can use the same approach to help students improve their time-management techniques.
Self-Analysis: The First Step

For the past 25 years personality has been assessed through a comprehensive instrument developed by Raymond Cattell, now a retired professor of psychology at the University of Illinois, called the 16 PF. This instrument examines 16 different personality dimensions and can be used to learn how individuals will react to stress, make decisions, and relate to other people. The 16 PF is widely used in business, industry and government. Airport flight controllers, nuclear power plant supervisors, and others in high-stress jobs are tested regularly to ascertain their responses to the various conditions they commonly face.

This well-known instrument has been tied to one that looks at how individuals use their time. Questions have been added to the 16 PF to determine how priorities are assigned, work is organized and completed, paper is handled, and interruptions are controlled, among other topics. Researchers using this instrument have identified five distinct time-use personality types. The box below lists these five types along with their characteristic time-use methods. One cluster of traits tends to dominate in the personalities of most individuals. Look at all five types and isolate the one that reflects how you tend to operate. You should observe two or three familiar characteristics within that type that represent your strengths in time use.

Research done on self-improvement programs, such as those undertaken to stop smoking, to control weight, or to manage time, strongly suggests that radical departures from established patterns result in frustration and failure. Many persons who enroll in time-management improvement programs begin with unrealistic expectations. They tend to overorganize; and when they fall short of their expectations, they
Time-Use Personality Types

1. Goal-centered
   • Determine what needs to be done and how they wish to accomplish it;
   • Clearly assign priorities;
   • Regularly measure progress toward established goals;
   • Exclude activities that do not relate to those goals;
   • Are very comfortable because of clear targets they wish to reach.

2. Planning-oriented
   • Operate from a clear agenda or plan;
   • Organize and arrange activities for maximum effectiveness;
   • Exercise control over common interruptors;
   • Deal with the trivial or routine quickly or not at all;
   • Rarely procrastinate and always follow up to make sure what was planned is completed.

3. Completion-focused
   • Define what is needed to finish assignments;
   • Organize workplace to assure prompt completion;
   • Follow through on priorities with self and others;
   • Are very self-demanding and persistent.

4. Emphasis-centered
   • Discriminate among priorities;
   • Establish and maintain a routine as much as possible;
   • Can say “no” to work and people as appropriate;
   • Calmly handle external demands;
   • Make decisions well under pressure.

5. Limits-sensitive
   • Recognize personal energy and involvement limits and don’t go beyond them;
   • Delegate assignments to others easily and well;
   • Can separate from work and job, leaving both at the end of each day;
   • Tend to be relaxed.
see it as failure. However, limited alterations can occur that lead to a major change over time. Therefore, the first step is to recognize the strengths you already possess and to use those strengths as points of departure. Such analysis should also suggest the limits of the changes you will attempt.

A second self-analysis step grows out of William Glasser’s important research in reality therapy. His findings suggest that self-analysis can be used to control one’s environment. Examine the items in the box below and then make your own list of interferences or interruptions. Focus on three or four interferences that you could control to some extent. By using your current organizational strengths and by concen-

**Common School Day Interferences**

1. A colleague asks for information while you are working during a planning period.
2. You sit down to organize an upcoming unit, find that a book is needed, go to the library, and spend the next 30 minutes searching for it.
3. Two parents come to the school and request an immediate conference with you.
4. A meeting is scheduled at the end of the school day when you had set aside time for grading papers.
5. The principal assigns you to assist at a student activity for the next three weeks, eliminating a valued planning period.
6. A sick family member requires time and attention before you leave for school and when you return home.
7. When tabulating monies collected for a field trip, the school secretary discovers an error that you must correct now.
8. The teachers’ lounge is noisy and there are too many interesting conversations going on, which inhibit getting any work done.
trating on just a few of the factors in your environment, you will begin to develop habits that can lead to successful time management.

The techniques suggested in this fastback fall into four categories:
1. Capturing minutes via controlled concentration;
2. Focusing on only the important;
3. Pacing each day;
4. Controlling potentially stressful influences.

From the suggestions presented in these four categories, select only those that appear to be consistent with your personality. By selecting only a few that are simple to do and that call for only minor changes from current behavior, you can mold new habits of time management. As you gain success with these new habits, you can then build on them to achieve even greater success.
Concentration and the Battered Mind Syndrome

Busy educators often suffer from a condition known as the battered mind syndrome, which means that they:
1. Have many thoughts at one time;
2. Worry about what remains to be done;
3. Lose their focus as new concerns divert them from the task at hand;
4. Expect to be interrupted and, as a result, don’t become deeply involved in their work.
The net effect of the battered mind syndrome is a loss of precious minutes that might be used to complete many important assignments. A related and even more devastating outcome of this syndrome is a belief that one has little or no control over one’s time; one is destined to be battered by other people’s priorities.

Controlled Concentration

Educators can blow a mental whistle on these time-distracting conditions that cause exhaustion and eventual burnout. Deliberate and intensive concentration can help you blow that whistle in order to create time you didn’t know existed. First, think about what actually happens to you when you concentrate while involved in a pleasurable and rewarding enterprise such as reading an exciting novel; winning a game of golf or tennis; working on a hobby such as painting, furniture refinishing, sewing, or cooking; playing a musical instrument. These activities captivate you for a time and almost imprison you.
Research conducted at the University of Chicago shows that the following occurs:

- Attention is focused on one activity;
- Surrounding environment is blocked out (this can happen even where there is a great deal of noise);
- Enthusiasm takes hold and increases while the activity is carried on;
- Sense of time is forgotten;
- The mind releases ideas and spurs levels of thinking not previously thought possible.

For most people, concentration occurs when they do something pleasant and rewarding. This same enthusiasm and resulting intensity of effort can be captured and applied to difficult or unpleasant work. With concentration you can become "locked into" doing routine but necessary tasks in seconds. Success begins by developing a feeling that concentration is possible. You can do this through the following:

*Task selection.* Identify two or three relatively short tasks now done well. Routine but not boring activities are best. Filling out a daily form or sending a note to parents are two examples. By starting with a few easily done items, you are experiencing how concentration helps save time.

*Time identification.* Pick one or two periods during the day when

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**Work Area Organization**

1. Remove from the work surface rarely-used items.
2. Cover paperwork that you plan to get to later.
3. Clear a space to serve as a focal point for your work.
4. Keep at arm's reach those books, papers, and equipment used regularly (this step reduces self-interruption to get up and locate items needed).
5. If you have a phone, place it out of sight but within arm's reach.
6. If you have a door, close it; open it selectively.
7. Attempt to get rid of as much paperwork as you can by throwing it out or by giving it to others to handle.

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your energy is high and when there is less potential for interruption—early in the day at home, first thing upon arrival at your class or office, a short time after students and colleagues leave.

*Place choice.* Think about one or two desirable locations, one at school and another at home, where you can work undisturbed. The box (p. 14) shows simple things you can do to increase your concentration.

**The Five-Step Process for “Locking In”**

Selection of task, time, and place enhances concentration. Once this is done, you are ready for the five-step process that leads to “locking in” on one task regardless of its appeal.

1. *Develop a frame.* The frame is a message to yourself that clarifies the importance of centering on one task. Motivation increases as a purpose becomes clear. Tendencies to procrastinate are reduced. Imagine the pleasure of having unpleasant work completed and being able to relax afterward.

2. *Relax for a moment.* A moment of relaxation helps to shut out the environment. Your mind focuses on the one task to be completed. Research shows that this step prevents the mind from wandering to work just finished or yet to be started.

3. *Develop a mental picture.* Imagine yourself actually doing the task. This enables you to see possible problems and helps you to “visualize” the final product. This step helps to focus concentration on the single task.

4. *Take a few deep breaths.* This fourth step begins the process that researchers call “locking in.” Athletes do this before a competitive event. They report it helps them to focus completely on their immediate goal.

5. *Establish “flow” with a directing message.* “Flow,” as used here, is a term to describe what happens when task and person blend together. Momentum is established. Talking to oneself establishes flow. You could say, for example:

   “I’m going to finish this plan of work during my free period.”

   “Before going to visit the classrooms, I shall write this staff memo.”

   “As soon as the students leave, I’m going to grade all of these papers.”
With task, time, and place settled and the locking-in process functioning, there is a heightened intensity. Research at the University of Chicago and at the University of Rochester indicates that adrenalin is actually released when this intensity occurs, resulting in a low level of stress called "eustress." A person experiencing eustress has a feeling of being in charge of the task at hand but also relaxed. This sense of relaxation allows the person to be interrupted momentarily; but after the interruption, a few seconds of relaxation, one or two deep breaths, and a repeat of the message, the intensity can be regained.

The five-step approach described above cannot be employed for great lengths of time; typically, 5- to 30-minute periods can be devoted to a single task. But the important psychic benefit is one's sense of control. Educators and others report using some but not all of the steps. Each individual must experiment to determine what combination of steps leads to the desired levels of intensity. Selective concentration doesn't mean becoming compulsive about one's schedule or becoming a workaholic. Rather, it is a method for directing energy and building enthusiasm. Those who have tried this approach report that it results in making additional time available to them. The process of selective concentration could become a part of your total program for improved self-organization. For the present, determine if it fits your personality and if it addresses the interferences you have identified in your work atmosphere.
Limiting Interferences—
Learning to Say No

In time management workshops that I have conducted for educators, nothing generates greater controversy than the issue of focusing on what is most important to do within the available time. Teachers exhibit greater anxiety over this issue than do administrators, but both groups find saying no at odds with the service orientation of their profession. Educators commonly express feelings of guilt when they resist being accessible to students, colleagues, family, friends, and community.

Focusing on the Important

Always being responsive and available to everyone making demands on your time is a difficult habit to break. A realistic approach is to draw up a limited list of what must be done or who must be served. The following steps can help you focus on the priorities in your professional and personal life:

1. Make a list of your personal and professional responsibilities. Sometimes people will say they are so busy they cannot find the time to make such a list. Frequently these are the same people who accept too many requests for assistance or participation. The list should include: what you must do to carry out your teaching or administrative responsibilities; such duties as committees, supervision of clubs, sports, and student advising; major self-improvement efforts such as completing a graduate degree; significant personal obligations, especially those involving family and friends; community service such as church work or coaching a Little League team. The simple process of making this list makes you stop and reconsider the responsibilities you have taken on. With such a list before you, it becomes easier to say no to some items, which are not nearly as important as others.

2. Use the list to set limits. Ask yourself the question, “How can I
best use the limited time I have available?” Consult others for their opinions. With your list in hand, they can help you decide how to limit what is attempted. The word no then becomes an acceptable response to less important efforts.

3. **Plan for a week at a time.** There are illusions about time. One is the sense of having more control over your time than is really the case. A second is the feeling that the work to be done will take less time than is really the case. A third is that it is only necessary to plan for a day at a time. All three of the illusions can lead to unrealistic expectations, with frustration the end result. A weekly plan can help by:

- Identifying the most important work to be finished or started in the week to come, with consideration given to the daily school pressures and the unexpected events that will take up some of the available time;
- Segmenting tasks into a series of smaller, more manageable efforts, thus encouraging one to start sooner rather than later;
- Providing a week to accomplish major responsibilities, thus relieving the pressure that occurs when trying to complete a long list of jobs made for one day;
- Relating segments of larger tasks to time at hand so that short periods of 10, 15, and 20 minutes can be used to productive advantage. A weekly plan centers attention on what is important and helps us to avoid the procrastinating tendencies we all have. By listing work we should begin but not necessarily complete in the week, we tend to get started earlier.

4. **Attack work in small bites using “real” time.** Real time may be a 10-minute period now or a protected half hour later. With a weekly plan, a major assignment can be started; routine items can be completed in the short time spans available. The box below shows a method for organizing routine. Using this method avoids having to set aside large blocks of time for routine tasks.

5. **Create time for the important.** With really important tasks, motivation to find time builds; time needed is found; moments are stolen; changes in schedules are made; activities of lesser importance are put off. To create time for the important, take a moment each day to think about the time that you know is committed to class, students, meetings,
Organizing Routine

1. Identify all the work to be done and sort it into three groups: A—highest priority; B—important; C—routine or trivial.
2. Take the B items and divide them, putting about 20% in the A group and the remainder in the C group.
3. Now take the large C group and divide it into two groups, perhaps 30% to 40% in C₁ and the remainder in C₂.
4. Take the C₂ items and put them away.
5. Place all C₁ items in a folder; when the folder becomes too thick, work on some of them.
6. Review the C₁ folder one or two times each day to be sure items with a deadline are finished on schedule.

and other events. Then identify one to three time periods that you can protect and isolate yourself from possible interruptions. In this way, time can be created to complete important work.

6. Learn your “completion speed.” Many persons have only a vague idea of their completion speed (how long it takes to finish different types of assignments). Too often time to complete a task is underestimated, and not enough real time is set aside. With repeated tasks such as grading a set of papers, a teacher is likely to have a good sense of completion speed; but new tasks are more difficult to estimate. With experience, determining “how long” can be more precise; extra time can be set aside if necessary.

Saying No

Using the six steps described above will help you to limit what you can reasonably do and to make the best use of the time you have available. The agony of saying no becomes easier, and you are likely to say it more often. Before leaving this section, take a moment to review the steps. Do they complement your time-use personality? Do they address interferences you have previously identified?
Pacing for Time Management

At a time-management seminar for elementary and secondary school teachers, several reported that they felt exhausted and tense each day. For them "the rush was on" from before sunup to long past sundown. The following verbatim comments capture the essence of their daily pace and, indeed, of life in general.

"There is no time to eat lunch—someone or something happens to make that 30 minutes disappear."

"Other people's agendas keep interfering with all of my plans—each day is responding to one request after another."

"I don't stop except to collapse just before the late evening television news."

"You are joking! Finding time to read an article in a professional journal? When is that going to happen?"

"The only time I get work done is under real time pressure—too often the night before. With all the work I have to do, putting off the somewhat unpleasant or difficult is very easy."

All expressed a feeling of being pushed; each day felt like a sprint; time was out of control. The stress experienced by these educators was
essentially a problem of pacing, that is, managing one's time so that one is in control of it. This section will present some pacing techniques that teachers and administrators say work for them.

**Techniques for Pacing**

Many techniques for pacing that have worked for teachers and administrators require only slight modifications in their behavior. The following approaches have worked for some educators. Perhaps they will for you, too.

1. **Control questions.** The following four key words suggest questions you can ask yourself that can be used to slow you down and at the same time maintain focus. Your response to the questions will guide your action.
   - **Whoa.** “What should I be doing right now?” Instead of following a set routine, asking yourself this question makes you stop and think, and relieves the feeling that you must keep moving. It also helps you to temper the forces around you clamoring for your attention (students, colleagues, friends, or family).
   - **Target.** “Am I dealing with what is truly important?” Asking this question draws attention to priorities. Low priority items on your list are put aside for those that will make a difference. You avoid the tendency to pick up easier and perhaps less significant work.
   - **PF.** The two letters signify past and future. “What have I done during the last 20-minute period? What will I do during the next two-hour period?” By looking back you can project ahead intelligently.
   - **Control.** “Am I in control?” If not, why not? Research tells us how tension can escalate and remain high when one feels a loss of control. By asking the question regularly, you provide a screen against stress and prevent the escalation of tension.

2. **Procrastination avoidance methods.** These are ways to cut down the human tendency to put off or forget what must be done. When combined with a weekly plan limited to important tasks, these methods can help to even out the work flow. By reducing major tasks into a series of smaller, manageable ones, you can use small blocks of time to make progress.

Waiting for an uninterrupted long block of time before beginning a
job is a form of procrastination. For example, assembling materials, preparing a file, or asking colleagues for needed information can all be done in a short time span. Completing these small tasks successfully helps to build momentum for taking on the major task of writing a report.

When foods are marinated in spices and sauces, their flavor is enhanced. Likewise, if a report, idea, or proposal has had a chance to “marinate” for a few days, it can be picked up again with a fresh perspective and probably will result in a better end product. But in order for a task or report to marinate, it must first be started early enough to allow time to come back to it before a deadline is closing in on you.

Every job has certain unpleasant tasks. Consider such tasks as “garbage”—something to get rid of as soon as possible. When tempted to put off the unpleasant, look at it and say “garbage.” Then dispose of it as quickly as possible.

Another form of procrastination is the so-called mental block. When a mental block occurs, seek out help. By talking out the problem with a colleague for five minutes, you can generate some new ideas or throw out some old ones. Then you can set to work again with a new intensity, but with a more relaxed attitude.

3. ** Interruption control.** Other people’s agendas that interrupt you can produce a mental state where you expect to be interrupted and, therefore, don’t get too involved in work. “What is the use of trying; the moment I get started something comes up!” To some extent, the ability to concentrate will reduce the number of interruptions; if your head goes down and stays down, people will respect that level of concentration.

An interruption-control strategy can help to limit the imposition of other people’s agendas on your time. First identify and record the major interruptions that occur in a half-day period. Then classify them as self-induced or externally imposed. Examine the list and ask yourself: Which ones are legitimate requests in terms of my job? Which could be controlled somewhat? From those that could be controlled, select two or three and develop strategies for each one. For example:
- Could you come back later?
- I’d love to talk now but this work has to be done.
• Spend a little more time studying it yourself.
• I can’t come to the office now, but I’ll be there before lunch.

Of course, educators have a professional responsibility to respond to certain requests, crises, and other unplanned-for events; but when the person or activity isn’t a clear responsibility, the control strategies described above can work.

4. Time for me. Some educators just don’t believe that moments can be found during the school day to relax, withdraw, plan, and even grow; but finding that “time for me” is not only possible but desirable and necessary. Below are possible periods during the day when you might find “time for me.”
• As the day begins at home think about the day but remind yourself to relax before the action begins.
• Upon arrival at school or office do additional planning or finish some routine work.
• At a midpoint in the morning slow down, relax for a moment, and, if necessary, do some extra planning.
• At midday get away from the class or office to break up the day. Slow down, read a novel, take a walk, or lunch alone or with a friend.
• At midafternoon have another relaxation period. Read some professional literature in your field.
• At the close of day sum up, highlight what has been done and what should be done next.
• Upon arrival at home bring the day to a close by taking a hot bath, taking a short nap, or just sitting quietly with your feet up.

The above suggestions represent a few possible options. They are not realistic for everyone; but even one or two periods at the same time and place each day, for a reasonable time and protected from interruption, can contribute to good mental health. Making “time for me” should become a habit.

5. R³. This is a shorthand for “rapid routines for routine.” Principals, coordinators, and superintendents report that they accumulate low priority paperwork that must be done. They select one or two times each day to get rid of these papers, and they don’t stop until most have
been acted on—read, filled out, thrown out, responded to. In this way routine never gets on the weekly plan; it is isolated in place and time. By using intense concentration, these educators get low priority work completed on schedule; and more primary time is available for their more important responsibilities.

A strategy for time management is beginning to emerge. Concentration is the foundation. You can do work faster and better because of the intensity concentration produces. Techniques that control interference point you toward the few important responsibilities as a focus for each day's efforts. Pacing strategies moderate how you approach each day's events. The next section complements the preceding ones by outlining a method for understanding and handling stress.
Understanding and Handling Stress

In recent years several books have been published that deal with how feelings of limited control over one's life produce stress. The bibliography lists some of these books. Also see fastback 130 Dealing with Stress: A Challenge for Educators. Most of these studies suggest three basic steps for coping with stress: 1) identify the causes of stress; 2) develop a positive self-image; and 3) use simple techniques to control the stress.

Identifying causes of stress. This step calls for an honest examination of what causes tension, frustration, nervousness, and a general feeling of not being in charge of your life. By clearly specifying what causes stress, you can then determine what control is possible over those events, people, environmental conditions, or professional responsibilities that are causing the stress. Many psychologists point out that writing down the causes of stress is itself a healthy activity; but even more beneficial is using the list for discussions with family and friends. This is called "ventilating," and might be compared to steam escaping from a boiler. When held in, an explosion is likely.

Teachers and administrators regularly mention the following as causes of stress:

- A work load that is continually too heavy;
- Classroom discipline problems;
- Making ends meet on one's existing salary;
- A lack of appreciation for one's work;
- Too many forms and reports to complete;
- Declining support for education because of budget cuts.

Clearly, some of these causes are beyond the control of educators; but others are within their control, at least to some extent. Some amount of stress is to be expected from causes over which you have no
control. You live with it or shrug it off. But knowing those causes of stress over which you do have some control can lead to actions or changes in behavior that will relieve the stress.

*Developing a positive self-image.* Persons with a positive self-image are both realistic and optimistic. Recognition and praise from others contribute to a positive self-image, but so does a personal assessment of one's strengths and accomplishments. The following are ways of conducting a personal assessment:

- Make a list showing what you have accomplished over the last six months.
- Review the list regularly to remind yourself of what has been done.
- Take a moment at the end of each day to identify at least one positive thing that has happened to you.
- Take a moment after a crisis occurs to review how well you coped with it.
- Make a habit of relaxing for a short time each day.
- List your hobbies that bring pleasure, involvement, and take your mind away from your job and other responsibilities.
- Identify your coworkers, family members, and friends who will listen to you and provide support in times of difficulty.

These simple self-assessment activities can help to develop your sense of self-worth. It is also helpful to ask yourself the following questions, suggested by the National Association of Mental Health, to determine if stress is getting out of control:

- Do minor problems and disappointments get under your skin and rile you more than they should?
- Are you finding it hard to get along with people? Are people having trouble getting along with you?
- Have you found that you're not getting much of a kick anymore from the things you used to enjoy—watching a sporting event, painting, camping or seeing a movie?
- Do your anxieties haunt you? That is, are you unable to shut them out of your mind?
- Are you now scared of people and situations that never used to bother you?
• Have you noticed that you are becoming suspicious of people around you, even of your friends?
• Is there the feeling that you’re being trapped?
• Do you feel inadequate, just not good enough to hack it?

_Techniques to control stress._ Tension can build rapidly when you are confronted with unexpected situations: an angry parent comes to see you; someone calls an unexpected meeting; your children are fighting over which television program to watch. Researchers on stress suggest specific control techniques that, if used regularly, can help to relieve feelings of tension or stress. Here are a few of the techniques commonly mentioned.

• Ventilate by getting feelings of anger out of your system. Write down how you feel; draft a nasty letter that is never mailed; talk to a friend; find a secluded spot and yell.

• Get away from the tense atmosphere for a moment. This allows you to calm down, to organize your thoughts, and to regain perspective.

• Compromise when a difference of opinion is the source of the stressful situation and go along with the other person.

• Back off from a difficult problem or task because continued efforts will only increase the level of frustration.

• Exercise with isometrics at work to take your mind off the difficulties facing you.

• Avoid striving for perfection when it produces strain. Set a limit on your efforts.

• Walk off tension by getting away from your classroom or office for 10 to 20 minutes.

Increasingly, groups of teachers meet informally to discuss how they cope with the wear and tear caused by their professional responsibilities. The value of such group activity is the realization that you are not facing stress alone.

The techniques for coping with stress, when combined with concentration, focusing, and pacing, increase one’s sense of self-management.
Successful Self-Improvement

Dusty tennis racquets, slightly used jogging shoes, nearly new exercise equipment, half-finished home projects, stacks of unread, how-to books—all are testimony to self-improvement efforts that failed. Despite the initial enthusiasm and resolutions to change, old habits take charge and nothing happens. While many aspire to self-improvement, few find it easy to change old habits.

Elements contributing to successful self-improvement are: building on one’s existing time-use personality; selecting approaches that are simple and compatible with one’s current practices; and doing less rather than more. A useful example is jogging. Books on the subject suggest starting with short distances and gradually adding a half mile or a mile. In this way, each day’s run is a successful experience. Stamina grows slowly with a mild stretch, not with an uncomfortable strain, and the habit of jogging takes hold. Similarly, a successful time-management program should proceed with a mild stretch that will gradually put you in control of your life. It does take time to plan time, but the minutes required will ultimately free hours for you. The following steps are suggested for a successful time-management program for you:

1. *Initial selection and reality check.* Look back through this fast-forward and choose up to six techniques that seem compatible with your time-use personality. You may want to examine books listed in the bibliography for additional ideas. This should take no more than 20 minutes. When the six have been identified, look critically at all of them. To what extent do they address interferences now facing you? Will the techniques work in your school, office, home, and community? Answers to these questions will help you to eliminate the less appropriate ones. Now put aside the list for two or three days (marination).
2. *Review and final choice.* Prioritize the six techniques selected and drop the fifth and sixth items on the list. Share the remaining four with a colleague whose opinions you respect. This person might raise questions about what would work best in your school environment, thus confirming your reality check. More reality will be added. With final choices made, the actual application of a few techniques can now begin.

3. *Daily application.* Don’t take this step for granted. Two reminder cards, one where you work, and one at home on the bathroom mirror or refrigerator door, will help you remember to employ the techniques regularly. The box below is an example of a reminder card. Reviewing the list once or twice each week gives emphasis to your self-improvement efforts and leads to the behavior modification, however minor, that you have selected as your goal for improving your time management.

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**Reminder Card**

Each day, I will remember to:

1. Use “whoa” whenever the action requires a slow down;
2. “Garbage” as many unpleasant tasks as possible;
3. Plan for real-time use with a short list of what is to be done;
4. Find at least 15 minutes to relax and withdraw each day.

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As you use a few techniques each day, they will ultimately become integrated into your daily routine. You will have created a unique personal recipe for managing time. After these few are in place, you may wish to add one or two more following the same selection procedure.
Sharing Time-Management Techniques with Colleagues and Students

As your own techniques of time management improve, you may want to reach out to colleagues and students to share what you have learned. However, it is well to remember that change takes time. Both enthusiasm and diplomacy are necessary to bring it about. Resist the impulse to “come on strong” even though you are “sold” on time-management techniques. Effective change agents go about their tasks in quiet but determined ways. When colleagues see that you are better organized, more able to concentrate, on top of your work, and coping with job stress, interest in the techniques you use will grow. The following are possible approaches for sharing your techniques with colleagues:

- Share what you are now doing with one or two people with whom you have a close working relationship.
- Offer to meet with a small interested group to present what you have learned and accomplished.
- Agree to be a coach of one or more interested colleagues who are serious about improving their time- and stress-management techniques.
- Form a support group, which meets periodically over lunch or at some other time of the day, to share progress and setbacks.
- Suggest to your supervisor that one or more staff meetings be devoted to the subject of time and stress management. Offer to plan the sessions, locate speakers, or volunteer to speak yourself.
• Encourage those who plan professional development for a school district to hold one or several seminars on this topic. Again, you could become involved in both the planning and presentation.

These approaches are likely to gain advocates among colleagues. This is vital for change on an organizational level. Of equal importance is the support of the organizational leader, the school principal. With this person's support, a schoolwide program of time and stress management is more likely. The possibility of success grows when the topic becomes an organizational concern. Communication among personnel increases; realistic strategies evolve; responsibilities are clarified and sometimes lightened as colleagues learn from each other. As your personal recipe for better time management takes shape, your skills as a change agent will improve. Reach out first to colleagues and then to the organization. Small steps taken slowly are best.

Working with Students

If you are a teacher, make time and stress management a part of the process skills your students learn. Teachers who have tried these techniques with elementary and secondary school students report a generally enthusiastic response. "There is greater calm; I'm relaxed and all of us get more done."

The following techniques described in this fastback are, with some minor alterations, appropriate for students: 1) using controlled intensity, 2) focusing, 3) pacing, and 4) controlling potentially stressful influences.

Here are three examples of how controlled intensity could be used.

• Ask elementary students to commit themselves to completing one page of mathematics problems correctly. Suggest to them positive self-talk: "I will do these problems slowly and correctly!" After the page is finished, hold a short discussion with the students concerning how the commitment contributed to their performance.

• Ask students in middle school or junior high to visualize a scene that they must describe in writing. If possible, find class time for students to visualize collectively. Ask the students to comment on what was seen and how that mental picture contributed to the quality of descriptions they wrote.
• Ask high school students in a physics or science class to employ relaxation, deep breathing, and visualization while working on experiments in laboratories. After the process has been used, determine if these steps contributed to successful performance.

Selected use of controlled intensity techniques conditions students to value concentration. Several elementary school teachers have reported that their classes have come to expect times to concentrate and look forward to them.

Focusing techniques can be used selectively with upper elementary and secondary students. Three examples are having students:
• List assignments for a two-week period;
• Divide each assignment into at least three parts;
• Prepare plans for using study periods in school and after school for completing assignments.

Let parents know the purpose of this activity and solicit their support. Parents are usually cooperative in matters dealing with improved use of students’ time.

Pacing techniques most appropriate for students are control questions and procrastination avoidance. For example, you might introduce the class to the term “whoa,” which they can use when they want to draw attention to something that is important in a lesson, or when they want to head off some trouble making in class. Using the concept of “garbage” as a way of doing the unpleasant before the pleasant is a procrastination-avoidance technique that students will find appealing. Again, parents should be informed and their support asked for.

Controlling stress must be approached with sensitivity and restraint. Presenting ways for students to relax is one method for students at the elementary level. In middle or junior high school, the support group method could be useful. Secondary classes might be interested in a talk on stress by a psychologist.
Conclusion and Caution

Because I believe so deeply in time management techniques, I have a tendency to be overenthusiastic. While enthusiasm is definitely necessary, it should be moderated if true change is to happen. As your commitment to improve time use begins, the fable of the tortoise and the hare is offered as a caution. In his heavy shell, the tortoise lumbers on to ultimate success; the hare runs frantically and ends up exhausted before ever reaching the finish line. When efforts to change behavior are attempted, the tortoise is the best role model. Steady and visible progress will achieve the desired result. The change may not be dramatic, but what does take hold is more likely to continue.
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