



Managing Time: Perspectives and Practices

by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D. Copyright © 2011, 2018 by Sheila M. Reindl*

1. Take the "So/And Even So" Approach.

Whenever you find yourself saying "I have only fifteen minutes, **so** I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, **and even so** . . . I could jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing/make a list of some of the challenges or criticism someone might make of my project/brainstorm how I might address those challenges or criticisms."

The "So/And Even So" Approach can also work when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, overwhelmed. A similar strategy was used by a coach to help beginning runners meet their training goals. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day but that on those days they just needed to suit up – put on their running clothes and running shoes. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely/, **so** I can't run today," he asked them to say, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely, **and even so**, I could suit up." The runners found that once they were all suited up, they felt that they were already on their way, and taking a run was not as daunting a prospect. Similarly, if you put yourself in a position to do your work and take even a small step in that direction, you might find that you can, and even want, to keep on going.

The word "succeed" comes from a root meaning "to follow." People who succeed follow an experience of difficulty or disappointment with a willingness to take a next step. They don't let any one experience be the end of the story. Rather than saying "I didn't do as well as I'd hoped, **so** I must be a failure," they say "I didn't do as well as I'd hoped, **and even so**, let me see what I can learn from this experience." They greet disappointment, challenge, and unfavorable conditions with a willingness to learn.

Disappointment and discouragement are not the only challenges to our taking next steps. Progress and promotion can also challenge us. When we get an A on an exam, or get onto the team, or make the comp, we might then fear that we need to keep upping the ante by doing even more and doing it better and faster. We find ourselves wondering if we can ever step off the treadmill of endless drive and achievement. The So/And Even So Approach can be helpful here, too. Instead of saying to ourselves "I did well the last time, **so** I have to stick with this and do at least as well this time," we might say "I did well the last time, **and even so**, this is a new moment with new realities and new challenges. Rather than assume I have to outdo my last performance, let me see what I have to learn here and choose where I want to put my energies now, all things considered."

2. Take frequent breaks.

To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires **timely and attuned breaks** – timely in that you take a break before you reach your breaking point (i.e., the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or find the task so aversive or frustrating that you avoid getting back on task) and attuned in that it hits the spot of what you need to recharge or restore yourself at that particular point in time.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you **a)** develop a **repertoire of refreshing activities**; **b)** experiment with **breaks of different sizes**; and **c)** develop a sensitivity to **when** you need a break and to **what kind** and **what length** of break you need at any given point. Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in your room to a favorite song, reading your email, making a phone call, getting something to eat or drink, taking a walk, taking a brief nap (notice how long of a nap is "just right" for you), reading a novel or a newspaper, doing the dishes, getting fresh air, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. **When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now.** Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to look at a horizon or to work in a friend's room or coffee shop)? A change of perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to watch a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? The taste of chocolate?

* The author grants permission for use of this handout to the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University. Note: Parts of this handout are taken directly from "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed. D., Copyright © Sheila M. Reindl, 1989, 1994, 1996, 2003, 2011, 2012, 2017, 2018, available at the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University, bsc.harvard.edu.

Entertainment? Notice which sorts and sizes of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. **But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.**

If you take an unattuned break – a break that is not attuned to what you need at that moment – the break will not hit the spot. If what would restore you is a breath of fresh air, no amount of watching television will hit that spot. If what you need is to distract yourself with a television show, no amount of chocolate will hit that spot. If what you need is the taste and richness of good chocolate, no amount of running will hit the spot. If you what you need is a run, no amount of talking with a friend will hit that spot. If what you need is the company of a friend, no amount of fresh air will hit that spot.

3. Negotiate with yourself.

When you seem to be sabotaging your own efforts to do what you intend, listen for internal voices that express your **competing needs, desires and fears**. Part of you might be saying, "Me, I really do want to do well in this course. I want to get down to work." But another part might be saying, "Me, I'm going to make sure I get some time to hang out with friends no matter what." And yet another part might be saying, "Me, I'm afraid I'm really not competent to do this project. I'm afraid that if I work on it now, I'll just discover that I really don't know what I'm doing or that I can't do as good as job as I want to."

At times like this, it is as if our behavior is being guided by an internal committee whose members each have a vested interest in their own particular preferred activity. The committee as a whole has trouble either accomplishing a task or enjoying itself wholeheartedly, because its members keep quibbling over which activity should have priority. Worktime tends to be compromised by the desire to rest or play, and playtime tends to be compromised by guilt and anxiety over not working.

To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among the various parts of yourself – for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best, the part that values other things in life besides achievement, and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, **"me/I" voices** join to create a generative **"we/let's" voice** (e.g., "Okay, we have a lot of different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how can we get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play."). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to **live a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are.**

4. Distinguish between what is *important* and what is *urgent*.

One definition of destructive stress is that it is the result of not living in accord with our deepest values. We might end up in such a state because we confuse urgency with importance (a distinction made popular by Stephen Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 2004). Not everything that is urgent is important, in the sense of being personally meaningful. Not everything that is important is urgent, in the sense of calling for our immediate attention. If we are chronically responding to urgent demands on our time and attention, we are apt to be living reactively rather than proactively. As a result, we might be very busy, but we might not be devoting our attention and energy to what ultimately matters to us.

Most of us cannot live a life without some urgency. Some of us might even enjoy the exhilaration that comes from bursts of urgency. But chronically responding to urgent demands will burn us out. To cultivate our creativity and promote our productivity, we need to punctuate our lives with time to reflect on what matters to us and with experiences that help us restore a sense of perspective and purpose.

5. Accept that anxiety and anxiety management are part of time management.

At the completion of his doctorate, a former graduate student commented that 80% of the time and energy involved in writing a dissertation goes to anxiety management. **You can't wait until you are not afraid or not anxious to begin working. You need to find ways to keep yourself company in your fear, to let the fear be there without letting it stop you from doing what you need to do.** Writing about your fear or stuckness, working in fifteen-to twenty-minute stretches, taking frequent breaks, getting regular exercise, meditating, using the So/And Even So Approach, and talking with people are all good ways of managing your anxiety.