TIME MANAGEMENT
FOR MSUCOM STUDENTS

Philosophy, Principles and Best Practices

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It’s time to change the way you think about time management!

Time management:

- Reflects your values and priorities – what’s important to you and what you want out of life.
- Involves setting goals, determining what you need to achieve them, and creating a plan to make them happen.
- Requires flexibility, not rigid adherence to a schedule.
- Enables you to live a fulfilling and balanced life in a way that won’t compromise your values and sacrifice your important goals.
- Fosters self-empowerment through recognition that outcomes, such as getting to class on time or doing well in your courses, are a result of your choices and actions (e.g., having an internal locus of control).

A train or bad traffic may make you tardy, but the real reason you arrived late is because you didn’t leave early enough to allow for a delay. Some people are always early. How do they do it? They plan ahead and anticipate possibilities like traffic delays. Likewise, failing an exam cannot be blamed on bad questions. Failing an exam is about insufficient preparation. Both scenarios, being late and failing an exam result from poor planning.

How you use your time is strongly influenced by a number of different factors, such as:

- Core personality
- Prior experiences
- Current circumstances
- Attitude
- Motivation
- Goals
- Habits

Habits versus Goals

“Most of the time what we do is what we do most of the time. Sometimes we do something new.”

Time management behaviors are largely habitual, and therein is our challenge. We do what we do because we do it. Habits are automatic, triggered by environmental or mental cues – we go on autopilot and stop thinking. We rationalize, after the fact, that what we do is worthwhile simply because it’s what we do, “This must be important otherwise I wouldn’t be doing it.”

There is a fundamental difference between habitual and goal-directed behavior. Habitual behavior is initiated at a subconscious level while goal directed behavior is conscious; different brain regions are involved. A behavior may begin as goal-directed, but through time and repetition becomes habitual. Because habits are subconscious, they are notoriously difficult to break or change.

We need to periodically recalibrate to ensure that what we do really is important and worthwhile and aligned with our goals and values. We need to make sure we’re doing the right things for the right reasons to get us where we want to go and lead the life we want to lead. We need to be aware of and reflect on the underlying motivations that guide our behavior and potentially cause us to spend valuable mental energy and time on things that aren’t really important, and might in fact be self-defeating. Your attitudes, values and goals are the foundation of effective time management and should guide your selection and use of time management tools and tactics. To become good at time management, you may need to break some old habits and start new ones.

How can time be managed?

Time management tools are often useful, even indispensible:

- If you don’t naturally wake up on time, you set an alarm.
- If you don’t know what time it is, you look at a clock.
- If you can’t remember what you need to do, you make to-do lists.

But time management is not about tools. Owning a toolbox doesn’t make you a carpenter. Deciding what to do, when to do it, and even how to do it, that’s time management. Time management isn’t even about managing time. How can you manage something you can’t control?
Time management is about managing yourself. It is a life philosophy, which guides your selection and use of tools, tactics, and strategies as a means of organizing your life and using your time both efficiently and effectively.

For better or worse, your use of time says something about you. You may consider yourself organized and efficient, while others see you as rigid and controlling. You may feel carefree and easy-going, but chronic tardiness may send the message, “My time is more important than yours.”

I’ve known academically successful students who made a bad impression and even failed a clerkship rotation for being late to didactics or rounds. It is beneficial to consider other’s expectations and perceptions of you (especially those who will evaluate you and have the potential to influence your career).

There’s more to becoming a doctor than “wanting to help people” and passing exams. What’s more, passing exams often comes down to how you use your time. You can decide whether or not you’re going to be caught up in your classes or cram for the exam at the last minute. You will develop a study schedule and determine how much effort to put into preparation for COMLEX. These are decisions you can and must make. Your choices, your priorities, what you deem important and worthy of your time – it’s all up to you – and while you cannot always control the consequences of your choices you need to take responsibility for making them.

The M.A.G.I.C. of time management

M = motivation = want it
A = attitude = believe it
G = goals = dream it
I = initiative = plan it
C = commitment = do it

Remember your excitement when you received that letter, email, or phone call offering admission to medical school? Remember how it made you feel when you accepted that invitation? The wording is a reminder that you’re here by your own choice because something drove you to medicine. Now, note your position on the approximate timeline below. You’re probably 6 or 7 years or more from being fully licensed to practice medicine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Between now and then…</th>
<th>Base hospital selection</th>
<th>Residency application deadlines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>BLS, ACLS certification</td>
<td>Writing your CV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying</td>
<td>Level 1 Board exam</td>
<td>Asking for letters of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams</td>
<td>Rotations in specialties</td>
<td>recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More exams</td>
<td>you don’t like or care</td>
<td>Level 2 Board exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSCEs</td>
<td>about</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>Even more exams</td>
<td>Residency match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunizations</td>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Level 3 Board exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBP &amp; HIPAA compliance</td>
<td>Dealing with mean</td>
<td>Subspecialty exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>training</td>
<td>people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fingerprinting,</td>
<td>Long hours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background checks,</td>
<td>Not having control over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and drug screening</td>
<td>schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivation is an essential element of achievement. You really have to want it, whatever “it” is. The more challenging the goal, the more motivation you need to be successful. In medical school, motivation to maintain a high level of commitment often wanes as the day-to-day reality sets in (see above).
“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I feel motivated. I really want to be a doctor, but I can’t get myself to study.”

Now that you’re here, you may find that you’re not always interested in what you’re learning, or that the idealized notion of “being a doctor” doesn’t quite match the reality of the process of becoming a doctor. The fact is that medical school requires sacrifice and hard work and doing things you don’t want to do and yet doing them anyway because you know they’re a necessary means to a desired end. Hopefully, some of it will be interesting and fun, but not all of it will be or should be.

➢ Are your reasons for becoming a doctor sufficiently motivating to sustain you through tough times?
➢ Are you willing to delay gratification and do what needs to be done?

A is for Attitude

Attitude is an amalgam of your beliefs, values, emotions, and disposition that guides your behavior. The following attitudinal characteristics demonstrate a positive correlation with academic success.

Personal responsibility
➢ Individuals with a strong Internal Locus of Control believe their successes and failures result from variables under their own control, and are not the result of external forces or circumstances

Self-regulated learning behaviors
➢ Metacognition – thinking about thinking
➢ Strategic action – goal-setting, planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment
➢ Motivation to learn – the driving force behind academic achievement
➢ Self-efficacy – belief in one’s ability to achieve a goal or complete a task

Conscientiousness
➢ Conscientiousness is a personality trait strongly correlated with academic and career success
➢ Conscientious people are typically meticulous, reliable, thorough, and hard working; they pay attention to detail, seek out important information, and follow through with commitments; hence they tend to achieve their goals

Positive emotions
➢ Enjoyment, hope, and pride

G is for Goals

Goals determine our priorities. Though demonstrated to be beneficial, setting achievable goals is a learned skill that must be practiced.

Academic Achievement Goals
Your academic achievement goals determine how you approach learning, including how much time you allocate for studying. Research has demonstrated a relationship between achievement goals, learning, and performance. Some findings are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Level</th>
<th>Learning / Achievement Goal</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Correlations / Associations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Goal: Learn as much as possible (Internal standard of competency)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>➢ High effort and task focused approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Intrinsic interest and enjoyment of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Deep learning (retention)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Goal: Do better than others (External normative standard)</td>
<td>Positive (mixed)</td>
<td>➢ Competitiveness and test anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Increased exam scores, but low retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Goal: Not do worse than others (External normative standard)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>➢ Low performance, low interest, and low effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Test anxiety, anger, hopelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Self-handicapping behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work avoidance</td>
<td>Goal: Exert minimal effort (No standard of competence)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Similar to above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“A professional is someone who can do his best work when he doesn’t feel like it.”
~Alistair Cooke

“In the absence of clearly defined goals, we become strangely loyal to performing daily acts of trivia.”
~Author Unknown
**Goal-Setting**

- Do you have specific, well-articulated goals?
- Have you written them down?
- Have you told someone about your goals?

To take your goals from an abstract idea to a concrete reality, write them down and analyze them. Are they the right goals for the right reasons? Are they SMART?

What are your long-range, “big picture” life goals? These guide sub-goals, decision-making, and priority setting. Where do you want to be in 5 years? In 10 years? What specialty interests you? Do you want to have your own practice? Do you want a family?

What are your short-range goals? Short-range goals are important because they keep you focused and can make your plan feel more manageable. Short-range goals help with planning and time utilization. Are your short-range goals consistent with your long-range goals? They shouldn’t steer you “off course.”

What are your career goals? Your academic goals? Your personal goals? Are they compatible?

Certain things follow from the goals we set for ourselves, right and wrong ways to approach them, effective versus ineffective ways to attain them. Don’t leave the achievement of your goals to chance.

Share your goals with another person. Discussing your goals accomplishes three important things:

1. It makes them feel more real
2. It makes you more accountable – it’s harder to back out of a goal if you’ve told someone about it
3. It provides an opportunity for others to support and motivate you to succeed.

**I** is for Initiative

**I**nitiative is about strategic planning. In order to plan effectively, we need information; we need self-awareness, but all too often we are completely unaware of how we spend our time. To get a handle on your time utilization, complete the exercise located in the appendix.

**Be Proactive**

- What is under your control?

As your life unfolds, you can choose to be reactive or proactive. Being proactive means looking ahead to see what’s coming, and doing what you can to be prepared; it’s about anticipation and planning.

True story: A distraught second year medical student came to me in a panic because her June wedding and COMLEX test date were only days apart. She asked, “How can I plan a wedding and study for COMLEX at the same time?” I told her, “I don’t know.” I only know what I can and cannot do.

Absolute control is a fantasy. You cannot control other people. You cannot control consequences. But there are things you can control, and one of them is you! There are lots of things you can choose to do or not do. For example, you can choose to not get married during May or June of your 2nd year.

The point is you are not a hapless victim of circumstances. Be proactive not reactive. Between a stimulus and your response there is the opportunity for choice. How you react is up to you.
Urgent versus Important
Every activity can be defined by two factors: urgency and importance. Urgency refers to time frame; urgent things need to be done now. Importance refers to results and benefits; important things enhance your life and further your goals. Although this distinction seems to imply a dichotomy: urgent or not urgent, important or not important, it is more realistic to think of urgency and importance as lying along a continuum from low to high.

It is argued that truly successful and effective people spend more time pursuing activities that are important but not particularly urgent, in contrast to the more common assumption that high-achievers are always dealing with matters of extreme urgency. Success does not require only doing important things – that's highly impractical, if not impossible – but by being proactive through anticipation and planning you can prevent many things from becoming urgent. As with a health problem that, if ignored, can become an emergency, so can other things in your life, such as paying bills, car maintenance, and studying for an exam.

Efficient versus Effective
- You may be “busy” but are you really getting the job done or just wasting time?

Many students choose to not attend lecture. In justifying this choice, they often refer to the concept of “triage,” a medical decision-making process by which priorities are determined. Triage, however, is not about deciding what does need to be done; it's about determining the order in which to do the things that must be done. One cannot choose when to attend a live lecture – it is when it is. Choosing to view a lecture recording or watch the streamed lecture from home is not applying the concept of triage.

Question: Isn’t prioritization an important part of good time management?
Answer: Yes, but the more important question is, “How do you make these decisions?” What are your criteria for distinguishing between what’s important and what’s “got to go”? Is it based on what’s most needed, effective, and important, or on what is most desired, efficient, and convenient?

Out of necessity, medical students become obsessed with efficiency, often to their detriment. With reference to class attendance, the notion is that you can’t do it all, and going to class is believed by many to be a waste of time, unless points are involved. At the same time medical students often overlook the many things they do that really are inefficient.

When you set out to study, how much time does it take to get all your stuff out of your backpack? Do you spend time searching for your highlighters or getting your computer ready? How often have you sat down to study and within a couple minutes jumped up to grab a beverage? Or maybe, just as you were settling in, your phone rang, or you realized the place was too noisy, or too quiet, or you weren’t comfortable? How many times have you set out to study only to have a million little things keep you from getting much done, yet at the end of the night, you look at the clock and think, “Wow, I just spent 4 hours studying”?

Complete the statement: “I waste my time by ______________.”
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

- What can you do to streamline some of your processes?
To become more efficient, we often choose short cuts, but are they worth it? Maybe. Perhaps. Sometimes. The problem is that while short cuts take less time, there’s good reason to believe they are not effective.

Many common study methods might be efficient (take less time), but are not likely to be effective for learning and retention.

- Cramming (a.k.a. massed effort; as opposed to studying/reviewing material in several sessions spread out over a longer time interval, i.e., distributed effort).
- Trying to guess what will be on the exam in order to reduce how much you need to remember.
- Using other people’s study aids instead of creating your own.
- Skipping lecture because it’s “not a good use of your time.”
- Listening to lectures at double-speed.
- Doing multiple things all at once (multitasking).

On the flip side there are also learning techniques that can be effective but are very inefficient, e.g., recopying your notes verbatim or reading your notes over and over again.

**The Myth of Multitasking**

- What is multi-tasking?
- How does it affect learning?
- Do you think you’re good at multitasking?

While reading this, have you checked your email, read or sent a text message, snapped a selfie, checked Facebook, Tweeted, or Googled something? Do you do these sorts of things while sitting in lecture or studying? This is multitasking.

Have you ever been so distracted while you were talking that you said the wrong thing, “T-cells mature in the pizza”? If you were counting, and someone began saying random numbers out loud, would you lose focus?

Distractions divide or divert your attention. They provide a novel stimulus that makes your brain sit-up and take notice. When your conscious attention is drawn to something else, it can be used immediately (e.g., to make a decision) or potentially stored in long-term memory. When a memory is stored it is linked to existing memories. Distractions while studying can produce wrong or irrelevant connections. Because they’re irrelevant and incidental they don’t function as effective retrieval cues; there’s nothing to associate them with the “right” memory. You might remember that the person sitting next to you during lecture fell asleep and drooled, but that probably won’t help you answer a test question. This is similar to being able to recall the color you used to highlight something, but not the information itself. The brain is a peculiar organ.

Multitasking is the (mythical) ability of humans to do more than one thing at a time. We can’t do it; we switch-task. Every time we switch task, time is wasted. People think they’re good multitaskers. They’re not. They might do many things at once, but they don’t do them well. Is it effective? In a word, “no.” Is it efficient? Also, “no.” Research suggests that although we think we’re getting more done, productivity actually declines when we try to do several things simultaneously.\(^5\) In addition, multitasking compromises your ability to acquire transferrable knowledge.\(^6\) Knowledge transfer occurs when stuff you learn in one context can be applied in another (novel) context. This is the type of knowledge you need in order to apply what you learn through studying to answer a test question, or make a medical diagnosis.

Bottom line: Multitasking while studying actually wastes time and prevents you from being fully mentally engaged in the important task, learning your course material.

**Effective study strategies:**

- Focus on one task at a time
- Monitor actual time-on-task
- Control your environment and avoid distractions
- Know which activities can be combined (e.g., socializing and exercise)
- Know which activities require single-minded focus (e.g., studying complex material)
Planning and Scheduling
Planning is an important activity, not an urgent one. Goals without plans are just fantasies. If all you do is plug events into your iPhone, Outlook calendar or planner, then wait for an alarm to go off reminding you where to be, you're not planning, you're reacting.

If all you do is day-to-day scheduling, you lose sight of the big picture of your life, your goals and values. You tend to ignore importance, focus on the urgent, and function in continual crisis mode.

However, strategic planning can be challenging. It does take some up-front time and requires knowing what you need to do, breaking larger tasks into smaller pieces, prioritizing to make sure you actually accomplish what you need to accomplish without wasting time, and being flexible so you can adapt to changing circumstances. Here are some steps in that process as described in an excellent short article by Dr. Susan Johnson.7

Priorities: How to Decide What to Do and When
What to do: Create a written list of all your projects no matter how big or small.
1. Begin by listing everything
2. Then, remove unnecessary items
   a. First, sort projects into categories:
      i. Required
      ii. Promised to someone
      iii. Important
      iv. Just interested (distinguish needs from wants)
   b. Second, remove:
      i. Things not promised
      ii. Things you merely hope to do or wish to do
   c. Third, if the final list is still unmanageable, re-think your workload

When to do it: Develop a Weekly Schedule and a Daily Priority To-do List
1. Create a weekly schedule with time blocked out for lectures, labs, sleeping, and eating.
2. Fill in with other scheduled (important, required) commitments (e.g., appointments, meetings, etc.).
3. Set aside blocks of time for family and friends, exercise, and thoughtful reflection.
4. Set specific time limits for email and other mundane activities.
5. Each day identify a short list (<5) of must-do tasks (alternate between high-priority projects and other categories, such as laundry and mundane chores).
6. Use your time strategically.
   a. When you’re most alert, study your most difficult material.
   b. When you’re brain-fried, perform less cognitive tasks (email, chores, exercise)
7. Review your schedule on a weekly basis to connect your goals with your day-to-day life.
   a. Identify potential new projects, upcoming deadlines, and areas of focus.
   b. Revise schedule as necessary.

“A fool with a plan can beat a genius with no plan.”
~T. Boone Pickens, Sr.

“Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.”
~Parkinson’s Law

Goals → ? → Daily Life
Weekly Review

Goals → ? → Daily Life
Weekly Review
C is for Commitment

Commitment is about getting things done, which requires making and keeping promises to yourself and others. How do you feel when you decide to study but you don’t do it? Or you resolve to attend lecture, but when the alarm goes off in the morning, you hit snooze, roll over, and go back to sleep?

We all have an inner guide that tells us what we should do – our conscience – but sometimes we don’t listen, and ultimately, this can erode our feelings of self worth. If you frequently break promises, pledges and resolutions, it’s time to make some changes! There are numerous potential barriers to action, such as: procrastination, perfectionism, indecision, lack of information, lack of tools and “not enough time.” To overcome barriers and get things done that you need to/should be doing, try the following steps taken from another excellent short article by Dr. Susan Johnson.

Execution: Getting Your Work Done

1. Use next action thinking
   a. Just as goals need to be specific and achievable, projects need to be broken down into actionable pieces. Dr. Johnson recommends using action verbs when itemizing steps.
   b. To determine whether something is really a “next” action, ask yourself, “Could I do this right now if I had the time?” If “no,” why not? Is it because you don’t have what you need to do it? If so, then completing the missing step (e.g., obtaining a piece of information) should be your next action.

2. Use, don’t lose, short unscheduled bits of time
   a. Small time increments, when added up, can amount to hours of lost time every day – 5 minutes here, 10 minutes there.
   b. Use these “bits” of time to accomplish a small “next action” task.

3. Begin before you’re ready
   a. If you wait to start a project until everything is “just right” – the stars are aligned and you feel “ready” – you might delay starting indefinitely.

4. Tricks to get you moving when you’re really stuck.
   a. Set a timer for 5 minutes and promise yourself you’ll work until it goes off.
   b. Choose a task at random and complete it. Successfully completing even a small task is rewarding and might provide the momentum you need to keep going.
   c. Keep a “reverse” to-do list and write things down as you complete them.
   d. Put the materials for your task right in front of you.
   e. Take a break for 10 minutes then try again.

Do you procrastinate?

Medical students cannot afford to procrastinate. If procrastination is a problem that impacts many aspects of your life, seek counseling. If you are putting off a particular task, ask yourself 3 questions:
1. Is this task really the next action?
2. Does this task or project really need to be done at all?
3. Am I experiencing an emotional block?

Summary

There’s no “right or wrong” way to spend your time, it’s all about doing the right thing at the right time, and this is a very personal, subjective thing. Being efficient and effective is about making the best use of the time you have, and this requires strategic planning. Take a moment for a reality check – a calibration moment, an opportunity for reflection – to ensure you’re doing what you need to do to achieve your goals.

- Self-awareness is the first step in making positive changes.
- How you manage your time sends a message to others about you; send the message you want to send.
- Breaking old habits and establishing new ones is hard work that takes intentional effort and deliberate practice. It doesn’t just happen by chance or good fortune; you have to make it happen.
- Be proactive and exercise choice in the space between stimulus and response.
- Schedule but don’t over-schedule.
- You have an inner guide (your conscience) that tells you what you should do – listen.
Sources Cited

Appendix

Exercise: How much study time do I really have?

Try to complete the table below as accurately as possible. To calculate your available study time (S), subtract the TOTAL (T) from 168 (168 – T = S). Students often find this exercise to be a real eye opener.

How much study time do you have?
A. < 0 hours/week
B. 0 – 20 hours/week
C. 21 – 40 hours/week
D. 41 – 60 hours/week
E. > 60 hours/week

How much study time do you need? That’s not an easy question to answer, but a general rule of thumb and a good starting point is 2-3 hours outside lecture for every hour spent in lecture.

A – No one should have selected A. If you did, please repeat the exercise because this result suggests you spend more time doing things than there are hours in the week!
B – If you selected B, you are extremely time-challenged, and will need to learn how to prioritize; you might be an individual who can’t say “no” to anyone or anything.
C – If you selected C, you’re in the right ballpark, but you need to do more prioritizing and careful planning.
D – If you selected D, you should not be having any trouble keeping up; your main challenges might be lack of focus, poor organization or procrastination.
E – If you selected E, you must not be sleeping, which may be the source of your problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Hours per day</th>
<th>Multiply</th>
<th>Hours per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours per night of sleep.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per day grooming/bathroom activities.</td>
<td></td>
<td>x 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per day for meals/snacks (including preparation time).</td>
<td></td>
<td>x 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per day of travel/commute time (Mon - Fri)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per day of travel/commute time (Sat &amp; Sun)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week for scheduled activities (excluding classes).</td>
<td></td>
<td>→→→→</td>
<td>→→→→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week ACTUALLY spent in class (lectures and labs).</td>
<td></td>
<td>→→→→</td>
<td>→→→→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week for chores, exercise, errands, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>→→→→</td>
<td>→→→→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week for socializing (dates, recreation, movies, etc).</td>
<td></td>
<td>→→→→</td>
<td>→→→→</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (T) hours per week</td>
<td></td>
<td>→→→→</td>
<td>→→→→</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>