

 Lifehack

TIME MANAGEMENT FOR MORTALS:  
“FOUR THOUSAND  
WEEKS”

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**ACTIONABLE  
BOOK SUMMARY**



# IN A NUTSHELL:

## The Problem

The average human lifespan is absurdly short — if you live till 80, you only get about 4,000 weeks of life. This is the crisis of our human existence:

- We feel like we've been granted the mental capacities to make almost infinitely ambitious plans, yet practically no time at all to put them into action.
- To get around this incredibly limited amount of time, we are obsessed with the concept of time management, believing it will help make our lives more valuable.
- However, modern time management notions usually achieve the opposite, leading us to obsess about doing as many things as possible and feeling guilty or anxious when we cannot.

The reality of our human limits is the big elephant in the room:

- There are hundreds of time management books out there, but all of them only talk about time from a productivity standpoint.
- None of them talk about the stark facts about the shortness of life and how to address this crisis, instead pretending that we can just ignore the subject.

## The Idea

This book is an attempt to help redress the balance — to see if we can't discover, or recover, some **ways of thinking about time that do justice to our real situation**: to the outrageous brevity and shimmering possibilities of our four thousand weeks.

- This book is an **exploration of a saner way of relating to time** and a toolbox of practical ideas for doing so, drawn from the work of philosophers, psychologists, and spiritual teachers who all rejected the struggle to dominate or master it.
- It sketches a kind of **life that's vastly more peaceful and meaningful** — while also, it turns out, being better for sustained productivity over the long haul.

## Chapter 1: The Limit-Embracing Life

### The Problem

We have a flawed concept of time that infuses our lives with false expectations, needless stress, and wasted opportunities for true happiness.

Our modern idea of "time management" is a trap:

- We think of time as a resource to be assigned to specific containers
- Containers such as... work, rest, leisure, etc. that are not allowed to overlap
- If they overlap you feel guilty — e.g. resting when you think you should be working

This attitude towards time makes it impossible to ever do "enough":

- It makes us constantly worried about the future instead of the present moment
- Instead of just experiencing life, we are worried if our time is being spent efficiently enough

We're just denying the reality that we have limited time and will never totally be in control of it.

### The Idea

We should embrace **the reality of our limitations**.

We have to make a sacrifice:

- **To let go of...** the hope that you will somehow be fully "on top of everything" and be able to experience every possible thing there is to experience
- **In return for...** living a more limited, but peaceful and meaningful life that's free from guilt and false expectations

### Take Action:

The next time you take a shower, enjoy the shower fully in the moment. Don't think about how long you're taking, what you need to do next, or anything else in the future.

**Just take a shower and enjoy it.**

## Chapter 2: The Efficiency Trap

### The Problem

Efficiency – trying to do more, better, faster.

- It's one of the most highly valued and sought-after qualities in modern society.
- We believe that efficiency buys us more time, but in fact it often does the opposite it leads to even more "busyness".

Chasing after efficiency for the sake of efficiency is a trap because:

- There is technically an endless list of things you can do.
- What "matters" or what's "important" is subjective.
- If you succeed in fitting in more, your goalposts will shift: more things will seem important, meaningful or obligatory. It's a never ending loop.
- Ironically, getting more things done faster simply generates even more things for you to do.

The worst thing about the Efficiency Trap is:

- "The harder you struggle to fit everything in, the more of your time you'll find yourself spending on the least meaningful things."
- In other words, **the quality of your time will degrade.**
- This is because the more you believe that you can get everything done, the less you will question whether any given activity is the best use of your time.

### The Idea

We have to consciously resist the urge to become more and more efficient:

- **Decide what you're *not* going to do... with discipline**
- Instead of trying to clear the decks, decline to clear the decks. Focus instead on what's truly of greatest consequence.
- Break the illusion that you can make time for everything, and accept the truth that there will always be things on your plate that cannot be finished.

### Take Action:

How many things do you have scheduled tomorrow?

Challenge yourself to remove tasks from your list, and commit to not doing them.

## Chapter 3. Facing Finitude

### The Problem

"Finitude": What we can actually achieve and do within our lives has a severe set of limitations.

One of them is time: assuming you live to be eighty, you only have about four thousand weeks.

In fact it is less than this because of reality:

- You only get four thousand weeks if you actually live till you're eighty, and that's far from guaranteed. **You cannot know nor control how much time you actually have.**
- While possibilities can be infinite, the actual range of choices and opportunities you have are limited within the tight range of your current circumstances.
- Because time is limited, every choice you make closes off the possibilities of countless others.

### The Idea

To live a full and authentic life, you have to realize that you don't actually possess or control your time. Embrace the reality of your limitations and use it as your lens for making choices with your time.

**Accept that we will miss out on things** and cannot experience everything:

- Focus on enjoying the tiny slices of experience you do have time for.
- Free yourself from the burden of regret on (imagined) missed opportunities.
- In fact, missing out is what makes your choices meaningful — it's valuable because you are giving something else up for it.

### Take Action:

Everyone has conflicting decisions coming up in the future. What are yours?

For your next decision — imagine instead that you only have one more week to live.

What option would matter more to you? Make that option your decision the next time.

## Chapter 4: Becoming a Better Procrastinator

### The Problem

Most time management techniques make your time troubles worse:

- They give you a false sense that you can actually get everything done when you can't.

We're terrible at long range planning and judging priority:

- When everything feels somewhat important, we naturally decide to fit everything possible in.

### The Idea

The core challenge isn't about how to get everything done:

- It's how to decide most wisely what not to do
- And to **feel at peace** about not doing it

There are 3 Principles of Procrastination to help you achieve this:

- **Pay yourself first** - If a certain activity really matters to you (e.g. a creative project, nurturing a relationship) the only way to be sure it will happen is to do some of it today, no matter how little, and no matter how many other genuinely big rocks may be begging for your attention.
- **Limit your work in progress** - Fix a hard upper limit on the number of things that you allow yourself to work on at any given time. No more than three items. Once you've selected those tasks, all other incoming demands on your time must wait until one of the three items has been completed, thereby freeing up a slot.
- **Resist the allure of middling priorities** - All your time should be organized around your first tier priorities - the core of your life. Second-tier priorities aren't for when you have "spare time" to spend... they should in fact be avoided at all costs!

### Take Action:

Follow-up by taking one action for each of the 3 principles:

1. **Pay yourself** least 3 hours this week to a personal project that's important to you and commit to it.
2. **Limit yourself to 3 things** that you will focus on each day, and don't let other things distract you until those 3 things are done.

3. **Make a list of the top 25 things you want in life**, and order them by priority. The top 5 are your first tier priorities. The rest are middling priorities. Can you make a decision around that?

## Chapter 5 & 6: Attention and Interruptions

### The Problem

Distractions are a fact of life that hurt our limited time. But we go about trying to master distractions the wrong way:

- Trying to become complete immune to distractions and achieving complete control over your attention is impossible.
- Getting rid of the symptoms does not address the root — that we distract ourselves because we do not want to confront the reality in front of us. (e.g. when the work in front of you is boring and tedious, your mind naturally wants to escape through distractions regardless of what techniques you use)
- By trying to brute force our attention we are missing a far greater damage to our lives — the fact that even if we "win" against distractions, it doesn't make you any happier. Instead you feel even more pressure, whether from external forces or from yourself, to keep using it efficiently. In the end, the time is still gone.

Modern day distractions have far deeper consequences than just the time we spend on them

- Because the distractions have an agenda — to push you towards a specific action, opinion, or bias in subtle ways.
- They affect your values, choices and judgement — which have a far greater and more lasting impact on your life.
- To make matters worse, these changes happen over time and you often don't realize the extent to which your judgement is being influenced.

### The Idea

**Attention is life.** Your experience of being alive consists of nothing other than the sum of everything to which you pay attention.

- **Instead of measuring your life in terms of how you're using your time, you should be measuring it in terms of how you're using your attention.**
- When you pay attention to something you don't especially value, it's not an exaggeration to say that you're paying with your life.

- You can be getting everything done, overcoming distractions, and being super productive every second with your time — but it's all meaningless if your attention is spent experiencing stress and dissatisfaction just to achieve that.

### Take Action:

Do you get impatient in traffic, while in line for something, or in other situations where you have to wait? How many minutes (or hours!) a day do you spend feeling impatient? Tomorrow, **change your focus** — when you find yourself waiting impatiently for something, put on some music or audio you love, and enjoy that instead.

## Chapter 7: We Never Really Have Time

### The Problem

We believe we have time but in truth it's only an expectation:

- Anything can happen at anytime and it's out of our control.
- Any number of factors could confound your expectations, robbing you of the three hours you thought you "had".

Our expectations are disjointed with the reality that time isn't in our possession and can't be brought under our control:

- We can't know if things will turn out as we expect, if goals will succeed, or how long it will take.
- But it creates a constant source of anxiety and agitation about the unknown future, which can never be known for certain.

### The Idea

**A plan is... just a thought.** The future is under no obligation to comply to our plans.

- The real problem isn't planning. It's that we take our plans to be something they aren't.
- All a plan is — all it could ever possibly be — is a present-moment statement of intent.

### Take Action:

For your current project, make a Plan B and a Plan C that maps out different possibilities if things don't go according to your current plan. During the process, what assumptions or expectations did you realize were blindspots you didn't see before?



## Chapter 8: You Are Here

### The Problem

We are obsessed with "using" time well without realizing it creates false expectations:

- Time is treated as a means to an end, rather than something to be experienced.
- The result is that we are always living mentally in the future, believing "real" happiness or satisfaction is always around the corner... but in reality never reached.
- Or we commoditize our time, such as the "billable hour" making us measure intangible things in terms of money (e.g. how much is watching your son's play at school worth?)

This future-focused attitude often takes the form of the "when-I-finally" mindset:

- ***"When I finally... get my workload under control/get my candidate elected/find the right romantic partner/sort out my psychological issues, then... I can relax, and the life I was always meant to be living can begin."***

### The Idea

Even if we're mentally in the future, we are in fact, only ever living in the moment:

- The past is already gone, and the future doesn't actually exist yet.
- **The present is all that's real.**

### Take Action:

Take 15 minutes today to be in the present moment – through a mindful focus exercise, walking meditation, or focusing on your breathing. Use the sense of calm afterwards to reflect on how you spend your attention in a given day, and see if you can make some changes.

## Chapter 9: Recovering Rest

### The Problem

We feel pressure against enjoying leisure time only for the sake of pleasure:

- We equate leisure or idleness with no future goal as laziness and wasting time.
- It begins to feel as though you're failing at life, in some indistinct way, if you're not treating your time off as an investment in your future.
- The consequence of justifying leisure only in terms of its usefulness for other things
- that it begins to feel vaguely like a chore and further degrades the value of it.

This also affects our attitude toward rest:

- Increasingly, we deny ourselves the chance to rest—becoming anxious when we feel as though we're not being sufficiently productive.
- Instead we tend to put off rest until the very last moment to "make the best use" of our time... without understanding the intangible penalties to our mental and physical health.

### The Idea

Just like some religions or organizations, you need to enforce time for leisure and rest:

- True leisure and rest should not be bound to some productive "usefulness" but done for its own sake.
- This is called an "Atelic Activity", where value isn't derived from its telos, or ultimate aim.

### Take Action:

Give yourself **at least 1 hour a day** this week to *devote entirely* to a restful or leisure activity... that has *nothing to do* with any future goal or responsibility.

**Restful** - reading a book, taking a nap, going for a walk

**Leisure** - spend time on a hobby you already have, or develop a new one

# Chapter 10: The Impatience Spiral

## The Problem

Impatience is a result of our misguided belief that we can control time:

- Like honking your horn in a traffic jam knowing full well that it's a pointless action.
- We tend to feel as though it's our right to have things move at the speed we desire, and the result is that we make ourselves miserable.
- Our efforts to force reality to move at our pace is always counterproductive — e.g. rushing makes you prone to more mistakes.

Technologies that bring convenience only makes our impatience worse:

- It's because they give us a false sense of control, that we can fit in yet more things in our limited time.
- So every reminder that in fact we can't achieve such a level of control starts to feel more unpleasant as a result.

Impatience lends itself to more impatience:

- The more impatient we are, the worse our expectations get.
- An example is reading — it's not that we don't have enough time to read, it's that when we do find time to try to read, we're too impatient to give ourselves over to the task.
- This makes us more inclined to interruption and distraction instead.
- It also degrades the entire experience itself as we are too impatient to place our attention on the action itself.

## The Idea

Surrender to the reality that some things simply need as much time as they need:

- It isn't within your power to force reality's pace.
- If making things go faster just makes the whole experience meaningless, what's the point?
- **The ultimate time waster is being impatient** — because you're spending the time anyways but feeling miserable because of it, *while getting nothing in return*.

## Take Action:

What's something you're always rushing to do? Washing the dishes? Getting dressed? Taking a shower? Today, assign yourself three times the amount of time you regularly spend on that activity and don't allow yourself to stop until that allotted time is over.

# Chapter 11: Staying on the Bus

## The Problem

Practicing patience is hard because it feels passive:

- The more you wait, the longer it seems like you'll have to continue waiting.
- In our modern society waiting is equated to wasting time, so much that it can create feelings of physical painful or mental discomfort for many people.
- On the other hand, impatience is like a drug addiction because it holds off the pain of having to wait for a result that's out of your control.

## The Idea

**Patience is a form of power.** It's the key to deriving fulfillment from the present moment.

- Patience is not simply doing nothing, it's the ability to resist the urge to hurry.
- When you are impatient, you're racing for a quicker result — which is often far from the best result if only you had patience to let reality take it's course.
- Ironically, **patience brings better quality results that are quicker than expected** because you have better awareness of the problem.

The 3 Rules of Patience:

- **1. Develop a taste for having problems** - Problems are opportunities at learning experiences, and not just "to be dealt with". That means that the process of dealing with problems are actually the essence of life and what makes it meaningful.
- **2. Embrace radical incrementalism** - Just like compound interest, incremental (e.g. daily) progress is much more sustainable and has a far larger impact than big one off efforts that you can't repeat consistently.
- **3. Originality lies on the far side of unoriginality** - Nothing is every truly original. All inventions are inspired from other ideas. Trying to be unique for the sake of being different is a trap. The only way to be truly original is to invest enough effort to build a foundation in something to the point that you reach your own boundaries.

## Take Action:

Try out "Rule #2: Embrace radical incrementalism" this week.

Pick a project or action that you need to spend time on and instead of binging a few hours at it in one shot, spread it out to strictly small bite-sized sessions each day. For example, writing your report in strictly 15 minute sessions each day. When the 15 minutes are over, you stop – no matter how much you want to keep going!

## Chapter 12: The Loneliness of the Digital Nomad

### The Problem

Isolating ourselves in order to gain more control (e.g. becoming a "digital nomad") has a flip side: it causes us to become disjointed with our relationships

- Every gain in personal time freedom is at the cost of a corresponding loss in how easy it is to coordinate your time with other people's.
- The digital nomad's lifestyle lacks the shared rhythms required for deep relationships to take root.
- This degrades the quality of your life, as you will miss valuable shared social connections and interactions – instead, spending most of your "free" time by yourself. In the long run this is generally harmful to any healthy relationships.

### The Idea

Time just feels realer—more intense, more vivid, more filled with meaning—when you're synchronized well with others:

- Humans are social creatures, we are biologically designed to find happiness in harmony and coordination with others – e.g. dancers in rhythm, soliders marching, a choir singing, a symphony orchestra playing.
- There's the profound sense of meaning that comes from being willing to fall in with the rhythms of the rest of the world... even if it requires *at least some* sacrifice of your sole control over what you do and when.

## Take Action:

Experiment with what it feels like to not try to exert an iron grip on your timetable: this week, try synchronizing some of your scheduled routines to share with someone else – a family member, friend, or colleague. How does it feel when you do it alone vs. together with others?

## Chapter 13: Cosmic Insignificance Therapy

### The Problem

We set really high standards for what we should be accomplishing within our limited time:

- We're pressured into the belief that for our life to be "well spent," it needs to involve deeply impressive accomplishments, or that it should have a lasting impact on future generations.
- We feel like our life is a failure or not valuable if it's too mundane or unremarkable.
- This leaves us constantly dissatisfied with our lives when measured against unreasonable benchmarks that most people can never hope to achieve.

### The Idea

**Cosmic insignificance therapy** is an invitation to face the truth about your irrelevance in the grand scheme of things.

- You're no longer burdened by such an unrealistic definition of a "life well spent".
- You free yourself to consider the possibility a far wider variety of things might qualify as meaningful ways to use your finite time.
- It lets you experience your life fully as it happens instead of worrying about unrealistic expectations of how it should be in the future.

### Take Action:

Find meaning in something mundane. The next time you do something that you feel is drab and boring, try changing your perspective. How can you make this one thing as meaningful and interesting as possible while you're doing it?

## Chapter 14: The Human Disease

### The Problem

To be human is to be challenged by our limits. To believe otherwise is doomed to fail:

- Time can never fully be mastered no matter how hard we try.
- We will never fully be "on top of things" as there will always be more demands on our time.
- This struggle can never be won or resolved, because life is simply about making choices with our limited time.

### The Idea

Accepting the full reality about the limitations of our time will give us what we truly want... to actually live your life meaningfully:

- To spend your finite time focused on **a few things** that matter to you, for its own sake, right now, in this moment.

To understand where you stand, you can ask yourself the **Five Key Questions**:

1. Where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort, when what's called for is a little discomfort?
2. Are you holding yourself to, and judging yourself by, standards of productivity or performance that are impossible to meet?
3. In what ways have you yet to accept the fact that you are who you are, not the person you think you ought to be?
4. In which areas of life are you still holding back until you feel like you know what you're doing?
5. How would you spend your days differently if you didn't care so much about seeing your actions reach fruition?

### Take Action:

Give yourself 30 minutes to go through the Five Key Questions – answer them honestly for yourself, and commit to taking one action for each of the questions this week.

# Appendix: Ten Tools for Embracing Your Finitude

## 1. Adopt a “fixed volume” approach to productivity.

- Keep two to-do lists, one “open” and one “closed”.
- Feed tasks from the open list to the closed one—that is, a list with a fixed number of entries, ten at most. The rule is that you can’t add a new task until one’s completed.
- Establish predetermined time boundaries for your daily work.

## 2. Serialize, serialize, serialize.

- Focus on one big project at a time (or at most, one work project and one non-work project) and see it to completion before moving on to what’s next.

## 3. Decide in advance what to fail at.

- Nominate in advance whole areas of life in which you won’t expect excellence of yourself, and focus your time and energy more effectively.
- **Fail on a cyclical basis:** to aim to do the bare minimum at work for some aspects of life (say, two months) and then switch so that in the long run they all get a chance in the spotlight.

## 4. Focus on what you’ve already completed, not just on what’s left to complete.

- **“Keep a ‘done list,’** which starts empty first thing in the morning, and which you then gradually fill with whatever you accomplish through the day.

## 5. Consolidate your caring.

- **Consciously pick your battles in charity, activism, and politics:** to decide that your spare time, for the next couple of years, will be spent lobbying for prison reform and helping at a local food pantry—not because fires in the Amazon or the fate of refugees don’t matter, but because you understand that to make a difference, you must focus your finite capacity for care.



## 6. Embrace boring and single-purpose technology.

- To combat digital distractions, **make your devices as boring as possible**.
- Such as removing social media apps, and switching the screen from color to grayscale.
- Choose devices with only one purpose (e.g. the Kindle e-Book Reader).

## 7. Seek out novelty in the mundane.

- Pay more attention to every moment, however mundane.
- Dive more deeply into the life you already have and the things you're already doing.
- Don't be afraid of doing the same things differently, like taking a different route to work, going for unplanned walks, and taking up drawing or journaling.

## 8. Be a “researcher” in relationships.

- When presented with a challenging or boring moment, try **deliberately adopting an attitude of curiosity**.
- Your goal isn't to achieve any particular outcome, or successfully explain your position, but “to figure out who this human being is that we're with”.
- **Choose curiosity** (wondering what might happen next) over worry (hoping that a certain specific thing will happen next, and fearing it might not) whenever you can.

## 9. Cultivate instantaneous generosity.

- Whenever a generous impulse arises in your mind—check in on a friend, send an email praising someone's work—**act on the impulse right away**, rather than putting it off until later.

## 10. Practice doing nothing.

Train yourself to resist the urge to manipulate your experience or the people and things in the world around you—to let things be as they are.

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