

a life less frantic

We are masters at packing plenty of activity into our daily lives. And consequently, our lives are frantic as we juggle the demands of “getting things done” within the 24 hours each day allows. It’s a constant battle.

But no one can survive this frantic pace purely on adrenalin, no matter how exciting, challenging or stimulating their life may be.

“To master one’s time is to gain mastery of oneself”

Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, “The Art of Time”, Bloomsbury, London, 1988.

Mastery of time is an essential ingredient to achieving a sense of wellbeing and balance. If we do not learn to master time then inevitably, it masters us.

the consequences of poor time management

With Australians now working longer hours and taking less annual leave than most developed nations it’s no wonder our rates of heart disease, obesity, fatigue and stress are also increasing. These outcomes, in turn, have led to substance abuse, sleeplessness and a growing drug dependency as we ‘work ourselves sick’.

The Japanese have a word for this malaise – “karoshi” meaning “death by overwork”. A study of Japanese workers found that more than two-thirds of those who died from heart attacks had worked excessively in the period before their attack.

strategies to reclaim balance

What can we do about better managing our frantic lives? Here are some strategies to help:

the ‘focus’ strategy

The ‘Focus’ Strategy relies on our ability to prioritise what’s important in our lives. It follows three simple steps:

Step 1 – Define what’s important

– these are the longer-term ambitions and aspirations that drive your life. They should be attended to every day; making small investments regularly will better contribute to a meaningful life. But because we become overwhelmed with matters that demand “urgent” attention we sometimes postpone these less urgent but more important issues

Step 2 – Prioritise what’s important

– setting priorities helps us to navigate the constant choices and changes we experience. Priorities also help us to “unbundle” and unburden unnecessary activities, especially the demands of others.

Step 3 – Action Your Priorities

– make sure you change your behaviours to align with your priorities. At first you’ll find it difficult to adapt, but if you stick to a plan it will soon become your natural mode of operation. You’ll benefit from a new found focus and you’ll be spending your precious time on what’s important to you.

A well-known Buddhist teaching is this – if you want to fill a beaker with rocks and sand then it is best if you place the rocks in first. The rocks represent our priorities, or what’s most important to us, and the sand represents everything else.

the ‘control’ strategy

Many people think of stress as a loss of a sense of control over life’s challenges. Coping is central to controlling the way we respond to life and there are five disciplines that can work very effectively to assist:

Rule 1 – plan ‘block-out’ time in your day.

‘Block-out’ time blocks out other people and activities and allows you some important space to think. Use this time to consider new challenges and issues (before they get out of control) and to plan your actions. Don’t use this time as a reserve for others – it’s your time, use it wisely.

Rule 2 – control the ‘incoming’.

In war-time, ‘incoming’ often meant bombs; these days it means phone calls and emails. They can be just as disruptive because others control their arrival. So exercise your control and turn them off for periods where you don’t want to be interrupted. Meal times are a great start. You may find this difficult, but it’s OK, you’re allowed to turn them off! And you’ll love the freedom and sense of power it will give you.

Rule 3 – master one thing at a time.

It’s tempting to do several things at once but that’s the trap of the frantic life. So when you sit down to read a report, finish it; when you take time for a coffee, enjoy the moment without distraction; and when you walk the dogs, get rid of the walkman and absorb your surroundings.

Rule 4 – find simple pleasures.

Our lives have increasingly relied on ‘retail therapy’ and commercial stimulation for relaxation. Yet we are surrounded with life’s simple pleasures that thankfully come at no price. For example, try a family picnic instead of a restaurant; a walk in the park with a loved one instead of an hour at the gym; or an afternoon with the music collection instead of at the movies. Simple pleasures give us control and time to enjoy ourselves and escape from our complicated lives.

Rule 5 – Say “no” more often.

Have you noticed that successful people always seem to have more time to do things well? That’s because they plan their time to achieve balance and they focus their energies on what’s important. Don’t overload your life just to please others. Map out your priorities for time and allow plenty of space in your days.

the ‘relaxation response’ strategy

The well documented ‘relaxation response’ (see especially “The Relaxation Response” by Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School) can help to clear away mental clutter and improve your ability to concentrate, so that your performance and skills in such areas as solving problems may improve.

The relaxation response, based on simple breathing techniques, is one safe and tested way to open our valves and release their pressure. But it takes time to re-train the body to achieve the desired response. Over time, a heightened sense of calm from relaxation will extend throughout the day and helps to protect us from the inevitable and unexpected stress factors in our lives.

The two components to perfecting the relaxation response are:

Deep breathing – practise breathing deeply using your diaphragm for 10 minutes twice a day. Slowly inhale and hold your breath for 30 seconds. Slowly exhale and relax. Repeat this procedure and stay focused on how your body responds. The deeper your concentration, the better the relaxation response.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation – lie on the floor, in a comfortable position and relax completely for one minute. Now tense all muscles in your head and neck and hold the tension for ten seconds, then gradually relax the tension until your head and neck are perfectly relaxed. Repeat this procedure once or twice for each major muscle group moving from head to feet. At the completion of the process, lie still and concentrate on the sense of relaxation of all muscles. This procedure re-trains your body to relax, over time, and reinforces the automated relaxation response you want, longer-term.

Time is a precious asset that we should use wisely to our benefit. The key strategy is to secure your own sense of control over your time and convert to a “life less frantic”, a life with less stress and more meaning.

For more information visit www.ipac.com.au/lifedirections

