

You Can Improve Your Use of Time

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“Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that’s the stuff life is made of.”
Benjamin Franklin

If you were a highly paid consultant, what change would you suggest you make in how you use time?

We’re three weeks into the New Year. How are your resolutions holding out? Whatever your resolutions might have been, it’s likely they were somehow related to how you use your limited time. Are you still doing what you promised yourself you would do in 2011?

Many resources deal with the topic of time management. For example, you may already be familiar with the distinction between urgency and importance that Stephen Covey introduces in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and expands in *First Things First*.

I find few leaders, however, who are familiar with the excellent guidance provided by Andy Stanley in his 2004 book *The Best Question Ever*. Andy gives special attention to those aspects of life that have caused regret for many people.

First, you may wonder, “What is the best question ever?” Here it is: “In light of my future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing to do?”

Andy allocates a section of his book specifically to answering this question relative to the one aspect of life that is genuinely equal for every one of us. We all are limited to 1440 minutes a day.

Have you ever paused and reflected back to your youth? Whether you have fond or sad memories, you may have wondered, “Where did all that time go?” The answer, of course, is “away.” And not a moment of that time is recoverable.

If Ben Franklin were here, he’d remind us sadly that the real question is, “Where did my life go?” Eventually, we all learn some principles about time. Andy Stanley points out that “eventually” for some people may be too late. So he provides these five principles for us to consider now.

There is a cumulative value to investing small amounts of time in certain activities over a long period. This may be obvious relative to exercise or in mastering a skill. However, Andy offers some other not so obvious activities: dinner with the family, date night with your spouse, and one-on-one time with your children. These activities may not be urgent, but they contribute significantly to building relationships with the most important people in your life.

There are rarely immediate consequences for neglecting single installments of time in any arena of life. What’s the big deal if you neglect your health for a day or a week? You’ll likely feel no negative effects. However, the lack of immediate repercussions can be seductive. If neglect becomes your pattern, watch out!

Neglect has a cumulative effect. Continue to neglect your health for a couple of months, and you’ll begin to regret that choice. The same is true with your relationships with people who are important to you. Neglect anything for a long period of time, and you’ll usually have a mess!

There is no cumulative value to the urgent things that we allow to interfere with the important things. That’s how New Year’s resolutions get broken. You had made a decision to routinely attend to something important to you. Last week, you allowed yourself to spend a lot of time researching on the internet. Yesterday, you decided to watch television much longer than normal.

Before you know it, you’ve stopped doing that important progress or maintenance item completely. And you don’t have much to show for what you chose to do instead. Your time has been gobbled up by those random, unquantifiable, supposedly urgent activities.

In the critical arenas of life, you can't make up for lost time. The important areas of life require small periods of attention all along the way. A burst of activity will not easily overcome the negative consequences that have accumulated. One morning of intense exercise at the gym won't make up for four months of neglect. (And you won't be able to move for the next few days, so you just extend the neglect!)

Before you finish this article, consider these four areas:

- physical
- relational
- financial
- professional

Think about one small behavior you can start doing consistently in each area to significantly improve that aspect of your life. Think about what you wish you had been doing over the past twelve months.

Your time is your life! In light of your past experience, your current circumstances, and your future hopes and dreams, how should you allocate your time? What should be added to your schedule? What could be deleted? Consider the best question ever: "What is the wise thing to do?"

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