

It's time to rethink time (management) Il est temps de repenser le temps (gestion)

Benjamin Kinnear,¹ Jennifer O'Toole¹

¹Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Ohio, USA
Correspondence to: Benjamin Kinnear, MD, MEd, Department of Pediatrics, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, 3333 Burnet Ave, MLC 5018, Cincinnati, OH 45229-3039; email: kinneabn@ucmail.uc.edu; phone: 314-541-4667; Twitter: @Midwest_MedPeds
Edited by: Marcel D'Eon (editor-in-chief)

Published ahead of issue: Nov 7, 2023; published: Dec 30, 2023. CMEJ 2023, 14(6) Available at <https://doi.org/10.36834/cmej.78024>

© 2023 Kinnear, O'Toole; licensee Synergies Partners. This is an Open Journal Systems article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

"I am definitely going to take a course on time management ... just as soon as I can work it into my schedule." —Louis E. Boone

If you ask physicians what resources they value most, "time" almost certainly will be at or near the top of everyone's list. Our professional lives are filled by busy clinical schedules, administrative duties, teaching activities, and scholarly pursuits. Additionally, our field (rightly) has a growing emphasis on well-being and work-life integration that encourages us to protect our personal and family time.¹ As the COVID pandemic increased professional connectivity and flexibility through virtual meetings, telehealth, and online education, we became more efficient at further stuffing our schedules. We are in an efficiency arms race that is only escalating.

As a result, we desperately try to squeeze each minute out of every day like the last bit of toothpaste in a spent tube. Unsurprisingly, we are easily seduced by time management tactics which promise to maximize our productivity and ease our anxieties over inefficiency and incomplete tasks. Strategies such as optimizing schedule management, improving task prioritization, maximizing focus and energy, limiting distractions/interruptions, and increasing delegation promise to help us reclaim our calendar.² While these strategies certainly hold promise to improve efficiency and productivity, many of us would benefit from rethinking what "time management" really means.

To re-imagine time management, first we should examine what time exactly is; or more importantly what it isn't. In his book *Four Thousand Weeks*, Oliver Burkeman writes

about how our modern conceptualization of time is that of a commodity or *thing* to be accumulated or lost.³ We use phrases such as "wasted time," "spare time," and "saving time" as if time were a tangible resource. This, of course, is a fallacy. We conceptualize and communicate about time in this way as a heuristic; a shortcut to augment understanding of an abstract and complex idea. The reality is that most of us do not fully understand what time is. Some understand time through the lens of quantum physics and the concept of entropy.⁴ Still others see time as an illusion or a byproduct of human experience.⁵ Any and all of these views hold truth depending on one's worldview, but it is undeniable that our treatment of time depends on our conceptualization of what we believe it to be.

Here we reach the disappointing paradox of the aforementioned commodification of time: we erroneously believe that if we can create more of this precious resource, we will eventually reach a state of nirvana. This fairytale state of being "all caught up" is something we all strive toward but never reach. Burkeman writes, "... time feels like an unstoppable conveyor belt, bringing us new tasks as fast as we can dispatch the old ones; and becoming 'more productive' just seems to cause the belt to speed up."³ Many medical students, residents, and health care professionals live on such a conveyor belt. In other words, classical time management strategies can increase efficiency, but they bring us no closer to feeling that we have enough time. Burkeman also writes, "Productivity is a trap. Becoming more efficient just makes you more rushed,

and trying to clear the decks simply makes them fill up again faster.”³

So, what should we do? Become chrono-Nihilists who forfeit any attempts at efficiency and productivity? Surely not. Some modicum of organization and time management is necessary to function in the real world. We should, however, stop chasing the cryptid that is being “caught up.” Simply letting go of the perfectionist notion that we can ever feel completely caught up on all tasks can relieve us of significant burden. Our obsession with “having enough time” adds a layer of anxiety onto the stress of our lives. We need to accept that we will *never* feel caught up. Time is beyond our *management*. This sounds fatalistic, but it is actually very liberating. When we accept that we are chasing the impossible, we can relieve ourselves of impossible expectations, which can be managed.

References

1. Tawfik DS, Shanafelt TD, Dyrbye LN, et al. Personal and professional factors associated with work-life integration among US physicians. *JAMA*. 2021;4(5):e21111575-e21111575. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.11575>
2. Pitre CJ, Pugh CM. Reclaiming the calendar: time management for the clinician educator. *J Grad Med Ed*. 2023;15(1):117-118. <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00939.1>
3. Burkeman O. *Four thousand weeks: time management for mortals*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2021.
4. Carroll S. *The big picture: on the origins of life, meaning, and the universe itself*. Penguin; 2017.
5. Wolfson ER. *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death*. Vol 5: Univ of California Press; 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520246195.001.0001>