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## NF94-172 Thirteen Timely Tips for More Effective Personal Time Management

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## Thirteen Timely Tips for More Effective Personal Time Management

*by Kathy Prochaska-Cue, Extension Family Economics Specialist*

1. **SPEND TIME PLANNING AND ORGANIZING.** Using time to think and plan is time well-spent. In fact, if you fail to take time for planning, you are, in effect, planning to fail. Organize in a way that makes sense to you. If you need color and pictures, use a lot on your calendar or planning book. Some people need to have papers filed away; others get their creative energy from their piles. So forget the "shoulds" and organize your way.
2. **SET GOALS.** Goals give your life, and the way you spend your time, direction. When asked the secret to amassing such a fortune, one of the famous Hunt brothers from Texas replied: "First you've got to decide what you want." Set goals which are specific, measurable, realistic and achievable. Your optimum goals are those which cause you to "stretch" but not "break" as you strive for achievement. Goals can give creative people a much-needed sense of direction.
3. **PRIORITIZE.** Use the 80-20 Rule originally stated by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who noted that 80 percent of the reward comes from 20 percent of the effort. The trick to prioritizing is to isolate and identify that valuable 20 percent. Once identified, prioritize time to concentrate your work on those items with the greatest reward. Prioritize by color, number or letter — whichever method makes the most sense to you. Flagging items with a deadline is another idea for helping you stick to your priorities.
4. **USE A TO DO LIST.** Some people thrive using a daily To Do list which they construct either the last thing the previous day or first thing in the morning. Such people may combine a To Do list with a calendar or schedule. Others prefer a "running" To Do list which is continuously being updated. Or, you may prefer a combination of the two previously described To Do lists. Whatever method works is best for you. Don't be afraid to try a new system — you just might find one that works even better than your present one!
5. **BE FLEXIBLE.** Allow time for interruptions and distractions. Time management experts often suggest planning for just 50 percent or less of one's time. With only 50 percent of your time planned, you will have the flexibility to handle interruptions and the unplanned "emergency."

When you expect to be interrupted, schedule routine tasks. Save (or make) larger blocks of time for your priorities. When interrupted, ask Alan Lakein's crucial question, "What is the most important thing I can be doing with my time right now?" to help you get back on track fast.

6. **CONSIDER YOUR BIOLOGICAL PRIME TIME.** That's the time of day when you are at your best. Are you a "morning person," a "night owl," or a late afternoon "whiz?" Knowing when your best time is and planning to use that time of day for your priorities (if possible) is effective time management.
7. **DO THE RIGHT THING RIGHT.** Noted management expert, Peter Drucker, says "doing the right thing is more important than doing things right." Doing the right thing is effectiveness; doing things right is efficiency. Focus first on effectiveness (identifying what is the right thing to do), then concentrate on efficiency (doing it right).
8. **ELIMINATE THE URGENT.** Urgent tasks have short-term consequences while important tasks are those with long-term, goal-related implications. Work towards reducing the urgent things you must do so you'll have time for your important priorities. Flagging or highlighting items on your To Do list or attaching a deadline to each item may help keep important items from becoming urgent emergencies.
9. **PRACTICE THE ART OF INTELLIGENT NEGLECT.** Eliminate from your life trivial tasks or those tasks which do not have long-term consequences for you. Can you delegate or eliminate any of your To Do list? Work on those tasks which you alone can do.
10. **AVOID BEING A PERFECTIONIST.** In the Malaysian culture, only the gods are considered capable of producing anything perfect. Whenever something is made, a flaw is left on purpose so the gods will not be offended. Yes, some things need to be closer to perfect than others, but perfectionism, paying unnecessary attention to detail, can be a form of procrastination.
11. **CONQUER PROCRASTINATION.** One technique to try is the "Swiss cheese" method described by Alan Lakein. When you are avoiding something, break it into smaller tasks and do just one of the smaller tasks or set a timer and work on the big task for just 15 minutes. By doing a little at a time, eventually you'll reach a point where you'll want to finish.
12. **LEARN TO SAY "NO."** Such a small word — and so hard to say. Focusing on your goals may help. Blocking time for important, but often not scheduled, priorities such as family and friends can also help. But first you must be convinced that you and your priorities are important — that seems to be the hardest part in learning to say "no." Once convinced of their importance, saying "no" to the unimportant in life gets easier.
13. **REWARD YOURSELF.** Even for small successes, celebrate achievement of goals. Promise yourself a reward for completing each task, or finishing the total job. Then keep your promise to yourself and indulge in your reward. Doing so will help you maintain the necessary balance in life between work and play. As Ann McGee-Cooper says, "If we learn to balance excellence in work with excellence in play, fun, and relaxation, our lives become happier, healthier, and a great deal more creative."

## Resources

Drucker, Peter. *The Effective Executive*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Lakein, Alan. How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life. New York: Signet, 1974.

McGee-Cooper, Ann. Time Management for Unmanageable People. Dallas, TX: Ann McGee-Cooper & Associates, 1983.

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