

“At Your Best”
How to Get Time, Energy, and Priorities Working in Your Favor
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According to a study of 7,500 full-time American employees, more than 70 percent of adults in their twenties and thirties are experiencing at least some level of burnout. If things got any more complicated or any busier, I was going to go the way of a cheese puff in a windstorm. I was overwhelmed, overcommitted, and overworked doing exactly what I thought I wanted to do with my life. I was numb. It’s like my body went on strike and said, “Enough with the craziness.”

If you don’t declare a finish line to your work, your body will. Our inability to control our use of technology is making us sicker, more anxious, and more distraught than ever before. Is your life filled with activity on the outside and emotional emptiness on the inside? If your busy season has no ending, it’s not a season—it’s your life. Workaholism is, after all, the most rewarded addiction in the nation. You can be fired for drinking too much but working too much usually gets you promoted. So, here we are as a culture. Busy is the default. Slammed is normal. Crazy time is all the time.

As I studied top performers, I realized they moved way past time management and were highly focused on managing not just their time but their energy. Usually they had one thing in common: they did what they were best at when they were at their best. To truly be at your best. Not somebody else’s best, but yours.

Everybody gets three primary assets every day: time, energy, and priorities. Time off won’t heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on. A sustainable pace is the solution for an unsustainable pace. Most of us are far more creatures of habit than we realize. If you’re like many people, for most of your waking hours you really don’t channel your time intentionally. You fail to use your most productive hours to do what you’re best at. Hijacked priorities happen when you allow other people to determine what you get done.

If I can just do what I’m best at when I’m at my best for a good chunk of each day (as I get time, energy, and priorities working for me), my effectiveness soars—work is far better, and my home life has a quality and joy that was missing for too many years. The way to be at your best is to focus your time, leverage your energy, and realize your priorities. Most people concentrate on managing their time but never think about managing their energy.

Adding the discipline of calendaring your energy zones, priorities, and key relationships will move everything you’ve learned from intention to reality. “Live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow.” Margin has less to do with income than it does with healthy habits.

I am the most kind when I have the most margin. Time off won’t heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on. I kept falling into the trap we all fall into—spending the most time on what matters least, and the least time on what matters most. Eliminate the excuses, and you start to move forward, because you can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can’t make both. Of all the lies we tell, the lies we tell ourselves are most deadly.

Stop saying you don't have the time. Start admitting you didn't make the time. And if I'm not doing that, it's because I chose not to do it and instead opted for something I felt was more valuable in that moment. I'm inspired by these words, which some attribute to John Wesley: "Set yourself on fire with passion, and people will come from miles to watch you burn."

As Greg McKeown said, "I can do anything but not everything." The opportunities available to a capable person always exceed the time available. You can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can't make both. Stop saying you don't have the time. Start admitting you didn't make it. Someone once asked Somerset Maugham if he wrote on a schedule or only when struck by inspiration. "I write only when inspiration strikes," he replied. "Fortunately, it strikes every morning at nine o'clock sharp." That's a pro. —Steven Pressfield

According to Daniel Pink, about 14 percent of people are morning people, 21 percent are night owls, and 65 percent of us are somewhere in the middle. I noticed I have only three to five hours a day when I'm truly at my best—alert, alive, focused, flowing with good ideas, and feeling like I'm at my peak. No matter how hard I tried or how rested I was, I was deeply productive for only a three- to five-hour window.

Most people have only three to five deeply productive hours in a day when their energy is at its peak. That's it. Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work*, has researched this quite extensively and argued that our capacity for intense, focused work comes in at around four hours a day. The first step is to uncover when that three-to-five-hour window. When you're at your best, that's your Green Zone—something you'll come to value, protect, and leverage.

Your day has peak energy periods, mid-energy hours, and some bleak moments. you'll see that your energy rises and falls in predictable patterns. When you're in your high-energy zone, you have enthusiasm for the tasks ahead. Simply, your Green Zone is those handful of hours a day when you're at your best. Focused, hours had ticked by. My most productive window of the day was gone, and my most important work remained untouched.

While you have twenty-four equal hours in a day, not all hours feel equal or produce equally. Now that you know when you're at your best, let's crack the code on the other important factor: What exactly are you best at? Gifting + Passion + Impact = Optimal Green Zone Focus. No amount of skill can really make up for a lack of natural talent. Pay attention to the things that fuel you.

Hard as it may be, passion means you can't imagine not doing it, and despite the effort, you find it immensely rewarding. To identify your passion, ask yourself these questions: What tasks do I most look forward to doing? What things energize me as I do them? When do I lose track of time because I'm enjoying what I'm doing so much?

The most important tasks you're charged with are the very things you don't always get done. Most people let days happen to them, which results in disappointment, tension, unmet expectations, and important things left undone. By leveraging your Green Zone, you can make sure that doesn't happen to you. The more naturally gifted you are at something, the easier it is to spend less time on it, not more. Why? Because you can do a good job without even trying. The tyranny of the everyday usually gets in the way of developing your gift into a high-level skill set.

Spending thirty minutes of your Green Zone each day reading, studying, and honing your skills can make an astonishing difference. You cheat your gift when you use it but never take time to develop it. Working outside of your gifting on a consistent basis is so demotivating it can slide you into burnout.

Do what you're best at when you're at your best.

Your Red Zone will sometimes get your most important work, which guarantees that you'll only use your gift, not develop it. The biggest Red Zone mistake you can make is to leave important decisions or critical tasks for this zone.

Focus on what you can control, not on what you can't. When you audit your life honestly, it is amazing to realize how much productive time gets spent on things that are neither important nor urgent. The wrong things will always want your attention. Urgent but ultimately unimportant things used up your best time and energy. Remind yourself that you can't prioritize the people who matter most to you if you say yes to everyone else. Deciding what you won't do ahead of time will free you to do what you want to do in the moment. You can't have your calendar filled with non-priorities if you want to accomplish what you're most called to accomplish.

Technology makes a wonderful servant but a terrible master. Researchers have discovered that it takes the average person almost twenty-five minutes to refocus after a single distraction. Most things that present themselves as urgent aren't urgent. When technology runs us, it can ruin us. The opposite of distraction isn't focus; it's traction. In the same way that not all hours are created equal and not all tasks are created equal, not all environments are created equal.

The people who want your time are rarely the people who should have your time. And the people who should get most of your premium time rarely ask you for it. Some people don't want to get better. They just want your time. If you spend most of your time with draining people, you'll live much of your life feeling drained. It appears that you and I are designed to process only a limited number of meaningful relationships.

The reason some people fail at task management is that they have a clear sense of what matters but not a clear sense of when to get it done. Healthy people respect the boundaries you set. Other people's needs don't have to become your guilt. Stress is a badge of honor in the hamster-wheel life everybody's living. Your agility is the cap on your ability.

Fixing something before it breaks is far less costly than fixing it after it breaks.

Pay attention to how your interaction with other people affects your energy and your mood. Being at your best is to some extent about what you accomplish, but to a much deeper extent, it's about creating the space you need to focus on who you're becoming.