

Managing the Pace with Grace

HOW TO WARP TIME AND INFLUENCE WORK STRESS

Address by JEFF DAVIDSON, Author, *Breathing Space* and *Simpler Living*

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Greetings, this fine day. I have been asked to speak about why we are all so time-pressured, and the continuing dilemma before each of us, as I see it, is making it through the today and week with relative grace so that we can enjoy our careers, as well as our personal lives. The best place to start, on the path to managing the pace with grace and to making yourself as productive at work as possible, is to actually make your home life a

sanctuary. Increasingly, our home lives are more stressful than our work lives! High achievers today and those who realize the importance of managing their energy as well as their time acknowledge the importance of balancing work- and domestic-related issues.

Lead at Home, Succeed at Work

At work for all the demands and pressures, at least

there's some kind of semblance of order. You report to someone, others report to you. There are meetings, agendas, goals and objectives. You're assigned specific responsibilities. You are expected to meet those responsibilities within a given time frame. Your compensation and indeed employment depend upon your ability to deliver on a regular basis. This regimentation, though challenging, also offers a fair degree of comfort. Given that you're working with fair and rational people—and I know that that's a huge assumption these days—you can reasonably predict what responses you'll receive for your performance and behavior.

Now consider, is any of this true at home? Home environments tend to have much less structure. Whether you're part of a family, live with a significant other, or live alone, your home environment may contribute to your sense of fatigue, indirection, and low energy at work. Too much clutter, too many distractions, responsibilities, and things competing for your time and attention and too little order applied to addressing such issues could result in, well, a tired, discombobulated, unfocused you!

Take control of your home environment by recognizing that your ability to get things done at work is partially dependent upon it. And, amazingly, it all starts with how you get out of the house each morning.

If getting out of the house for you each morning represents a time-pressured, hectic routine, then it's more difficult to turn things around when you step into the office. If you've left yourself too little time; haven't put important items that need to go with you by the door the night before; gulp down highly sugared, caffeinated, or fat-laden food products; and then fight your way through the masses to arrive at your place of work; be prepared for what might turn into at least a 30 or 60 minute time frame before you finally "calm down" and can begin to focus on accomplishing worthwhile tasks.

If you live in a major metropolitan area and you're a good distance from your workplace, you might be battling the crowds every morning. Or your morning commute might otherwise be out of your control. Certainly, you can attempt to get up before the masses, or after them. You might not have leeway as to when you must arrive at work. Hence, make your journey as pleasant as possible. If you drive, then make sure that you have the music or programs that soothe and inspire you.

Do you take the right steps the night before? Let's face it, how you depart your home in the morning is entirely up to you. If you awake by alarm clock, then, by definition, you didn't get enough sleep. Let me repeat that, since some of you didn't get enough sleep: when you awake by alarm clock, then, clearly, you didn't get enough sleep that night. So find that hour at which you can retire and easily wake up on your own the next morning without the aid of an alarm. If you need eight hours, then obviously to get up at 6 you'll have to retire by 10.

If you're going to bed at 11, 11:30 and still getting up

by alarm, thinking you can slug through the day, you're right, you can in the short term. In the long term, it all catches up to you.

If it helps, lay out your clothes for yourself the night before, yes ... like your mother did for you when you were young. Have nutritious food ready. You know too well that eating junk at home or eating anything on the run is not going to give you the fuel you need to accomplish one thing after another at work. You'll run out of gas too soon and then look for quick and easy stimulants -- did someone say caffeine? -- to keep you going. This is no way to work, no way to treat your body, and no way to pass through your life's journey.

Arrive Ready, Progress Steady

When you arrive in the morning, particularly if you're there before the rest of the staff, you have the best opportunity for structuring your day. Envision how you would like your day to go. Review your appointment calendar and plot out the few critical elements that will make your day a success. Keep flat surfaces clear to the degree that you can. Avoid letting your cell phone rule you. Take charge of your turf!

Now, if you stay home with children or other household occupants, carving out a few minutes for yourself during the early morning is even more crucial. How would you like your day to be? What are the critical elements or critical tasks you wish to complete?

At an outside job, at home, and everywhere in between, take a few minutes for yourself before lunch. While seated, relax, take some deep breaths, acknowledge yourself for what you've accomplished during morning, and contemplate how good it will be to eat your lunch.

Consider this: at all times, the person who knows best about what will keep you most productive is you. As often as possible, you want to work with your internal rhythm so that you get the best of yourself, while minimizing any stress or anxiety you might otherwise experience. For example, if you've been seated at your desk for twenty minutes or so, it's best to get up and stretch, even if for a few seconds. Your veins need this and so does your heart.

Physiologically speaking, your body will give you the cues you need at precisely the right moment. It's actually counter-productive to ignore your body's message to you that says it's time to stand up, to stretch, to take a drink, or what have you.

Although we each have what is called a "normal" temperature, rarely does your body temperature maintain a steady 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Body temperature fluctuates over the course of a day in a relatively stable pattern controlled by the brain. Most aspects of your body's performance ability are highest when your temperature is highest. This is true for physical coordination, memory, and alertness—all of which decrease as temperature decreases.

Here are some notes I took from an article about your body's natural capacities at different points in the day:

- 10 a.m. is when mental skills begin to rise, up until noon. So this is the best time to attack a challenging project or to make that pitch for a raise.
- At noon your brain power starts to dip not entirely because of your midday meal. No one is not sure what prompts it.
- Around 3 p.m. your alertness returns. So, whatever the reason for the noon dip, it loosens its grip and you get your “mental acuity” and efficiency back.
- At 4 to 5 p.m. your muscle tone is at its peak. So for many people, late afternoon is fitness time.

Tackling the Day’s Toughest Task

Okay, so has this ever happened to you? You approach the end of your workday and realize that you didn’t get to the most difficult tasks. If you’re like most people, you’re likely to accomplish more of what’s on your daily task list if you start with the hardest tasks. Moving on to the easy tasks then seems like a downhill bike ride.

Researchers agree that you are best able to perform your hard tasks well if you do so in the morning. A Doctor Norbert Myslinski, a neuroscience professor at the University of Maryland, found that cortisol peaks around the time you wake up. Cortisol, a naturally occurring stress hormone that affects your ability to respond to challenges, increases your blood-sugar level, better enabling you to handle tasks energetically and with enough momentum to carry you through their completion. Most importantly, tackling tough tasks in the morning generally enhances your confidence level. By increasing productivity at the beginning of your day, you are motivated to perform better and accomplish more throughout the rest of your afternoon and evening.

So as your workday winds down, seek to tie up loose ends. Can you put away several file folders? Can you return the one key phone call? Can you get tomorrow’s project notes ready? Can you discard junk mail and other unnecessary documents?

The more little things you complete before departing, the more focused and energized you’ll be when you return the next day to a clear and clean environment that is conducive to greater productivity and is more visually appealing.

Over the years I’ve observed that even the most mundane tasks, if approached in a certain way, can help to maintain one’s energy level. I’m talking about the energy you can gain from switching tasks. After school, my daughter sometimes used to help me in my office. I might have had a number of assignments for her, such as putting labels on envelopes, proofreading a letter, applying postage to a package that needed to be mailed, and so on. While in her early teens, she found any one of these jobs done to the exclusion of all else to be boring after just a couple of minutes. By giving her bite-sized portions of each task and then rotating the tasks, she was able to go for an hour or more. This process works just as well for adults.

Task switching can’t be employed all the time for all types of assignments, but it does work well when you can mix the mundane in with the tasks that are a little more challenging. Suppose you’re faced with an assignment you’d rather not be handling. Something as pedestrian as folding newsletters. Instead of tackling the assignment for a straight 60 minute period, if you were to proceed for 10 minutes then to turn to something else of a shorter nature, go back to folding for another 10 minutes, and likewise turn to something else, you can maintain productivity, reasonably high spirits, and energy for what comes next. Because you proceed methodically, in a controlled manner, you avoid the perils of multi-tasking.

What about handling errands? Everyone has errands to handle—the professional and personal variety. The way you handle errands and when you handle them can make a huge difference in your overall energy level and impacts your performance at work. IDIOTWE is an acronym for *I’ll Do It On The Weekend*. Weekends, if you haven’t already discovered, are when everyone else is attempting to do their errands! I suggest using Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday to handle errands and avoid the IDIOTWE syndrome. Cease and desist if you run into undue delays, traffic back-ups, or long lines. Chances are, when you handle errands at a different time, delays will be fewer.

Forsake “Right Time” or “Right Mood” Traps

When I was 26 I moved down from Connecticut to Washington, D.C., the big city. I was excited about my new job. That whole day went by like a dream. When I got out in the evening, I headed up the road to pull onto M Street so I could cross the Key Bridge and go home to Virginia, there was no break in the traffic. I couldn’t even pull onto the road.

What happens, when sitting in your car or at your desk for that matter, when there is no “right” time to initiate action? Initiate anyway! Back to Georgetown: So I’m sitting there looking at my car clock, and after two minutes there’s no break. Amazingly, after four minutes there’s no break. I’m thinking about that pizza I’m going to put into the oven, but after six full minutes there’s no break in the traffic, no opportunity for me to pull onto the major road that leads across the bridge.

Think about the times you’ve been in front of a traffic light that’s been steady for two minutes when you wanted to get somewhere. It turns out that I sat there, fixated, stuck, immobile, and unable to take action for literally ten minutes. Think about how long that is. Try to sit where you are in silence for ten minutes to reinforce just how long that is. Even the thought of it seems difficult!

So, what do I do? I decide to head back down the road, drive all the way around, and try another road where there’s a traffic light. That way at least I get onto M Street, even though I’m much further back than where I started. The next day I head into work again, everything is going well, and I’m enthusiastic. I’m excited to be there. At night

I leave work, pull up to the road to turn onto M Street, and guess what? An endless sea of traffic. I'm thinking:

- Don't they know I'm new here?
- Don't they know I get a break?
- Is anybody going to let a nice Connecticut boy into the line?

Then I'm thinking, this is not going to become a nightly ordeal. I'm going to get home, and the Key Bridge is my route across. So, I waited for a minute, two minutes, three minutes, and finally I just pulled into traffic. I made my break. I got home that night and felt like I had achieved a great victory. How many of us, in attempting to get things done, wait for the right time or the right mood instead of making that break, taking that calculated risk that would propel us faster and further? Sometimes the step we need to take does not need to be a large one, but it's critical to propel us forward. For example:

- initiate contact, make that call
- order the supplies
- map out a plan
- talk to the boss
- commit to the team

Forsaking the right mood trap can be harder than forsaking the "right time" trap. Many professionals wait until they are "in the mood," to take action. In doing this, they run the risk of being in the right mood at the wrong time or not at all! Are you among the portion of the population who happens to "never be in the mood?" Setting a standard for yourself may help overcome the dilemma of not being in the right mood to get started on something. Let's take writing for example, since many people face the task with something far less than enthusiasm.

Consider a professional writer. Suppose the writer steadfastly maintains a writing quota of a certain number of words per day. This daily writing quota helps generate a desired level of output, whether or not the writer "feels like it." On occasion, a writer's daily performance level may not be up to par but can be balanced by days when the quality of writing surpasses expectations.

Forcing yourself to produce a number of words per day accomplishes little if you turn out low quality writing. But, in the case of writers who set a word quota, many correct themselves as they go along. So what they write is seemingly effective, potent, and on the mark from one day to the next.

Similarly, you may be highly productive when you are "in the mood" to tackle something, making it more vital to focus your efforts when you are in a less-than-enthusiastic mood. By doing something—regardless of your mood—you're farther ahead than if you do nothing. You may not manage to complete a task on your first attempt, but it's to your benefit to at least start.

So, when it comes to getting things done, have the mental clarity and emotional strength to *ignore* your mood. Stop telling yourself that you must "feel like proceeding." Instead, move forward upon your personal desire to

achieve results.

In my book, *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped up Society*, I introduce the concept of time warps. A time warp occurs when you accomplished so much or what transpires flows so freely, that seemingly many more hours have passed than actually have.

Time warps happen when you're not conscious of your output or responsiveness in relationship to fixed time intervals, such as an hour. You can increase the likelihood of experiencing a favorable time warp effect by removing yourself from the time measured environment such as hiding the clock. This is why jotting notes while sitting on a park bench, in an airplane, or on your back porch, often yields greater output than anticipated or accomplished during the same interval while at a desk in a traditional office. One hour of uncluttered thought can yield more benefits than days of common desk work.

Other people have other names that they use for what I call time warps. Some people call it being in the zone. Some call it being on a roll. Regardless of what you call it, it would be useful for you to know how to get into a time warp on a more consistent basis. Okay, here's a simple exercise you can undertake to help create that environment in which you can work at your best:

1. Think back to when you were highly productive:
 - Where were you?
 - What time of day was it?
 - Was anyone else around?
 - What was the temperature?
 - What was the lighting?
 - What resources were available?
2. Think about yourself at that time:
 - What were you wearing?
 - What did you consume the night before?
 - How long did you sleep the night before?
 - How did you feel?
 - What was your level of fitness?
 - What did you eat that morning?
3. Think about the time of day and week:
 - What time of day was it?
 - What day of the week was it?
 - What had transpired earlier?
 - What was forthcoming?
4. Think about the tools available:
 - Were you using a computer or mobile device?
 - Were you using other equipment?
 - Did you have a pen or pencil?
 - Were other resources available?
 - Were periodicals, books, or directories present?
5. Consider other factors that were present:

Did you have a view?
 Were you in a comfortable chair?
 Were you at a desk or at a table?
 Were you in a moving vehicle, i.e., a plane or a train?
 Was there quiet or soothing background noise?
 What were the colors of the walls surrounding you?
 Were you in a room with rugs?
 Could you hear others?
 Was water nearby?
 Were you near the bathrooms?
 Were you near the coffee machine?

Now as you recall the situation when you were in a time warp, circle each item above that was present or was a factor at this time. I guarantee that new insights will emerge!

If you can, recall a second time in which you achieved a time warp and run through each of the questions above once again. What items have now been marked or circled twice? If you have the momentum, use this list for a third or fourth time in which you were highly productive. You may see a strong pattern emerge. You'll uncover *the specifics as to what factors were present when you were highly productive*. So your goal is now to emulate that scenario to increase your probability of achieving similarly pleasing results.

Master Your Immediate Environment

Okay, as the time winds down, take charge of your immediate environment to the degree that you can, as often as needed. You may find that a lack of productivity stems from the feeling of not being in control. When you creatively carve out sanctuaries for yourself, they give you both the quiet you need to get quality work done and serve as a reminder that you're in charge of your career. There's something about taking control of your immediate environment that enables you to get the best from yourself, to work with your internal rhythms, and to more easily and effortlessly produce superior results.

It's too easy to fall into unproductive, energy-draining customs and postures. This is especially so when you sit for prolonged periods, fixated on a screen. So, here are some exercises you can undertake right where you are that

will help to keep you on a more energetic keel:

- To experience an energy boost, inhale slowly through your nose, and hold your breath for two seconds, then exhale through your mouth. Repeat this often.
- To loosen up your shoulders and upper torso, using a wide circular motion, roll your shoulders forward 4 or 5 times. Then do the same thing in reverse.
- To stretch your neck, turn your head slowly from side to side and look over each shoulder. Count to three and then repeat the exercise several more times.
- To stretch your back, while seated (and with no one looking!), slowly bend your upper body between your knees. Hold this position for a few seconds, then sit up and relax. Repeat this exercise a few more times.
- To stretch the muscles in your forearms and give your wrists some relief, hold your arms straight out in front of you and raise and lower your hands bending them at your wrists. Repeat this several times.
- To give your upper back and shoulder blades some relief, fold your arms in front of you, raise them up to your shoulders, and then bring your elbows straight back. Hold this for several seconds. Repeat several times.
- To relax your fingers and hands and make them feel more nimble, make a tight fist with your hands and hold it for several seconds. Then, spread your fingers as far as you can and hold for another five seconds. Repeat this exercise several times.

Okay, now here are some simple tips that can help you minimize or even ward off eye-strain associated with too much time in front of a monitor:

- Reduce any glare from the walls surrounding you especially if it reflects back onto your screen.
- Seek to match the brightness of your room to that of your monitor.
- Reduce surrounding lighting.
- Refocus your eyes on distant objects every few minutes, then turn back to your monitor. Also blink often!

Finally, take frequent breaks, at least once every twenty minutes, if only to stretch or get some water. That way you can be at your best nearly to all day. And that way you have the best chance to manage the pace with grace! ♦

Proposed Financial Reform: Safeguards, Transparency and Consumer Protections

“I WANT TO URGE YOU TO JOIN US, INSTEAD OF FIGHTING US IN THIS EFFORT”

Address by BARACK OBAMA, President, United States
 Delivered at Cooper Union, New York City, April 22, 2010

It's good to be back in the Great Hall at Cooper Union, where generations of leaders and citizens have come to

defend their ideas and contest their differences. It's also good being back in Lower Manhattan, a few blocks from