

5 Strategies for Using Time More Effectively

Cal Newport is the author of two of the most influential non-fiction books of the past decade, [*So Good They Can't Ignore You*](#) and [*Deep Work*](#). Recently, he recommended the delightful 1910 book [*How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*](#) by the Englishman Arnold Bennett.

While Newport's work focuses on how to improve our professional life, Bennett focuses more on time spent outside of our working life. Influenced by the Stoic philosophers Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, as well as the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bennett concludes, we fritter away much of our time.

Are you feeling as though you don't have enough money to live on? Bennett observes that there are no shortages of books on how to live on a certain amount of money a day. But for most of us, it is time—not money—that is the issue. Bennett writes, "It has been said that time is money. That proverb understates the case. Time is a great deal more than money."

Acknowledging a problem is the first step towards change, and Bennett gives us eyes for the many ways we squander time. There were no social media platforms, smartphones, or cable TV channels in Bennett's time; but there was no shortage of ways to waste time. Wasting time is a mindset; Bennett offers gentle pointers toward using our time more wisely.

Back in Bennett's time, the workday was considered the "day." How little has changed. As we arrive home, we still say to our partner, "How was your day?" Such an attitude, Bennett writes, is "illogical and unhealthy." We give "prominence to a patch of time and a bunch of activities which the man's one idea is to 'get through' and have 'done with.'"

I have known individuals who by age 35 were already dreaming of retirement. I wonder if they used their hours outside of work any better.

If you find yourself squandering time, first, stop making excuses. Bennett asks, "Which of us is not saying to himself...: 'I shall alter that when I have a little more time'? We never shall have any more time."

Do not expect a quick fix for the problem of time squandering. Bennett instructs us:

"The most important preliminary to the task of arranging one's life so that one may live fully and comfortably within one's daily budget of twenty-four hours is the calm realisation of the extreme difficulty of the task, of the sacrifices and the endless effort which it demands. I cannot too strongly insist on this. If you imagine that you will be able to achieve your ideal by ingeniously planning out a time-table with a pen on a piece of paper, you had better give up hope at once. If you are not prepared for discouragements and disillusion; if you will not be content with a small result for a big effort, then do not begin. Lie down again and resume the uneasy doze which you call your existence."

Begin now, and remember, as Bennett observes, "There is no magic method of beginning":

"If a man standing on the edge of a swimming-bath and wanting to jump into the cold water should ask you, "How do I begin to jump?" you would merely reply, 'Just jump. Take hold of your nerves, and jump.' As I have previously said, the chief beauty about the constant supply of time is that you cannot waste it in advance. The next year, the next day, the next hour are lying ready for you, as perfect, as unspoilt, as if you had never wasted or misapplied a single moment in all your career. Which fact is very gratifying and reassuring."

You can turn over a new leaf every hour if you choose. Therefore no object is served in waiting till next week, or even until to-morrow. You may fancy that the water will be warmer next week. It won't. It will be colder."

Here are some of Bennett's ideas for "jumping in":

1. Exercise Your Mind With Regularity

Realize that "mental faculties are capable of a continuous hard activity; they do not tire like an arm or a leg. All they want is change—not rest, except in sleep." Thus, as a beginning "employ an hour and a half every other evening in some important and consecutive cultivation of the mind." If you are interested in going down this path [*The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*](#) by Susan Wise Bauer is a fine guide.

2. Use Downtime Wisely

Bennett observed that most fellow commuters on the train were in a "mental coma." Use downtime wisely. Just as physical exercise enlivens your whole day, so does mental exercise. Bennett asks, "Why should you be astonished that an average of over an hour a day given to the mind should permanently and completely enliven the whole activity of the mind?"

3. Focus

Before books on mindfulness were commonplace, Bennett advocated disciplining the unruly mind simply by being more aware. The mind will often "skip away under [our] very eyes" and jump to "another subject," Bennett observes, and modern technology has only made the task more difficult. A recent study found that the average attention span of humans has fallen from 12 second to eight seconds—[shorter than](#) that of a goldfish. Training the mind to focus on a single topic is key to using time effectively.

4. Check Your Ego

Stop frittering away your time with useless mental activity centered around your ego's narrative about you as the heroic victim in an uncaring world. A little bit of empathy goes a long way. Bennet shares this everyday example:

"The next time you get cross with the waiter because your steak is over-cooked, ask reason to step into the cabinet-room of your mind, and consult her. She will probably tell you that the waiter did not cook the steak, and had no control over the cooking of the steak; and that even if he alone was to blame, you accomplished nothing good by getting cross; you merely lost your dignity, looked a fool in the eyes of sensible men, and soured the waiter, while producing no effect whatever on the steak."

5. Know When It's Bedtime

One indication of an evening well spent is that you are ready for bed without much preparation. Bennett encourages us to "fall out of that habit of muttering to yourself at 11.15 p.m., 'Time to be thinking about going to bed.' The man who begins to go to bed forty minutes before he opens his bedroom door is bored; that is to say, he is not living." To that end, consider keeping electronic devices out of the bedroom.

"It's not at all that we have too short a time to live, but that we squander a great deal of it," wrote the Stoic philosopher Seneca. Bennett's book is a quick read and provides much advice for a life well-lived. Perhaps you have your own suggestions to share.

—
[Image Credit: By Jae (boredom) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via
Wikimedia Commons]