

Befriending Time

Breaking Free from Busyness or Stuckness

Faced with various responsibilities and competing desires, lawyers generally believe there is too much to do and not enough time to do it all. When multiple demands and tight deadlines arise, lawyers often gravitate toward one of two extreme responses: chronic busyness or perpetual stuckness. Some choose to work harder and faster, juggling many things simultaneously to do what needs to get done. Others tend to put things off, avoiding challenges and waiting for inspiration to nudge them forward. While these are normal reactions to mounting pressure, they frequently entail an unhealthy and poor use of time. An addiction to busyness sometimes results in meaningless accomplishments, unnecessary struggles, and a nagging sense of failure.¹ A propensity to stay stuck sometimes leads to fewer achievements, aversion to challenges, and allegiance to secure but unsatisfying careers.²

To accomplish tasks and goals, lawyers turn to practical, time-management techniques such as checking off to-do lists, prioritizing assignments, and maintaining detailed daily plans. But these techniques are not very effective if you overlook the underlying, limiting beliefs that drive chronic busyness or keep one perpetually stuck. Whether you are spinning your wheels or caught in a rut, it helps to develop a healthy relationship with time, let go of time-stealing habits, and engage in these time-enhancing practices:

- Pour your attention on what is actually before you (attention-management).
- Focus your energy on things that are within your control (energy-management).
- Shed unnecessary things to make space for what truly matters to you (self-management).

Make Time Your Ally

In the legal profession, the concept of time is helpful because it tells you when a court hearing will start, when to meet an important client, when a brief is due, and when to file an appeal. But when there are only 24 hours in a day to meet an infinite number of goals, it is easy to develop limiting beliefs about time.

Common limiting beliefs around time include:

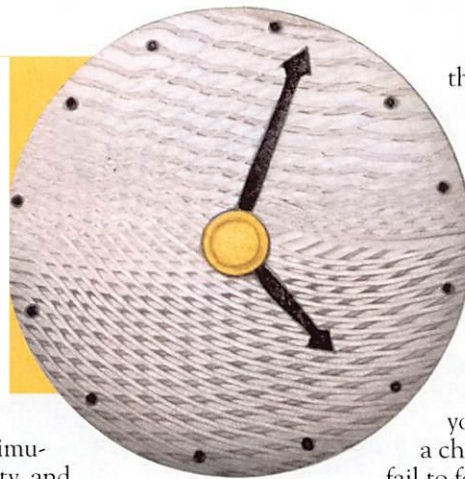
- There's not enough time to do everything I need to do.
- There's no time to do the things I really enjoy.
- Time is running away from me or time is passing me by.
- I need to hurry to get things done in the short time I have.
- I might as well not start something that I won't have time to finish or do right.



BY DYAN WILLIAMS

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Attorneys typically function with one eye on the clock, often juggling competing priorities, demands and expectations, both those they impose on themselves and those they take on from others. Many respond with either perpetual busyness or perpetual stuckness. Changing some personal practices may enable you to befriend time rather than treat it as an adversary.



These limiting beliefs can lead to chronic busyness or perpetual stuckness, which often wastes time. To shed these beliefs, you first need to understand how you relate to time and how you pace yourself as a result. If you are chronically busy and averse to stillness, you generally relate to time as an enemy to resist and conquer. You fight against the ticking clock by multitasking and moving fast (cramming as many tasks as possible into a given day).³ If you are hopelessly stuck and reluctant to act, you tend to relate to time as a master to outmaneuver and outsmart.⁴ You avoid time pressures by procrastinating and holding still (delaying tasks as much as possible for another day).

With time on your side, however, you can fully attend to, actively engage in, and fully experience the task at hand. Therefore, befriend time so it becomes your ally. Treat time as a cyclical resource that informs you of your coordinates and supports you in completing tasks with greater ease, heightened flow, and increased clarity.⁵

Shed Time-Stealing Habits

Once you befriend time, you can adopt a more balanced approach to using it. You can release two major time-stealing habits that are common in the legal profession: chronic busyness, which typically manifests as multitasking, and perpetual stuckness, which usually shows up as procrastination.

Multitasking. Multitasking is generally defined as paying attention to multiple things simultaneously or switching rapidly from one task to the next. Due to 24/7 work modes, information overload and urgent deadlines, many lawyers turn to multitasking as a way to produce more, faster. But this type of busyness is usually a poor use of time.⁶ Multitasking often has less to do with efficiency and productivity, and more to do with getting an adrenaline rush, satisfying an addiction to speed, and conforming to a fast-paced culture.⁷ If time is money and speed is the default mode, slowing down can be a challenge and even a cultural taboo, even when it would increase pro-

ductivity, stimulate creativity, and improve your health.⁸

Due to limits of the human brain, multitasking eats up more time than single-tasking. It drains your energy and demands constant refocusing.⁹ It divides your attention, which is a finite resource. It works only when the tasks are simple or routine and do not require more attention than what is available.¹⁰ When the activities require considerable attention and cannot be performed on autopilot, multitasking can cause disastrous results. For example, reading an email from Client A while drinking coffee is likely an effective use of time. But reading an email from Client A while engaged in a telephone conference with Client B likely is not.

Multitasking can lead to high stress, exhaustion, and burnout which prevent you from obtaining peak performance. Furthermore, you are more prone to miss things, make mistakes, and become confused when you do not focus on the task at hand. Multitasking also makes it difficult for you to plan and organize because you really do not know how long a task takes if you are constantly attending to distractions and interruptions. Moreover, it can hurt your creativity and problem-solving ability because it does not allow enough space for reflection and question-framing.

Contemporary research suggests that multitasking can reduce short-term memory, impair comprehension, and erode productivity. A 2005 Hewlett Packard study warned that the constant barrage of emails, phone calls and instant messages causes IQ levels in the workplace to fall ten points, which is double the effect of smoking marijuana.¹¹

Procrastination. Procrastination is the tendency to delay or completely escape from tasks and goals that you need to or want to accomplish.¹² You procrastinate by forgetting, intentionally avoiding, distracting yourself, or finding other things to do. When you feel overwhelmed and believe you lack the ability or resources to succeed, you might procrastinate to ease the anxiety

that comes with starting or fulfilling a task or goal.¹³

Being stuck often stems from underlying issues such as perfectionism, anxieties about failure, fear of success, indecisiveness, and unrealistic goal-setting.¹⁴ You succumb to inaction because you worry about what will result or what you will give up if you make a change or take a step.¹⁵ You fail to follow through on plans and ideas because you fear uncertainty and therefore cling to familiar territory.¹⁶

Procrastination becomes a problem when it keeps you from doing things that really matter to you. Delay can result in external consequences, such as missed deadlines, inferior work product, and dissatisfied clients. It can also inflict internal consequences, such as anxiety over postponed action, guilt about substandard work done at the 11th hour, and remorse about missed opportunities.¹⁷

Engage in Time-Enhancing Practices

You can develop a healthy relationship with time, let go of limiting beliefs, and shed time-stealing habits if you practice:

1. Attention management through mindfulness; *i.e.*, focus your attention on a single task, instead of obsessing about the next task.
2. Energy management through acceptance, *i.e.*, concentrate your energy on the things that you can influence, not on situations and circumstance that you cannot control.
3. Self management through authenticity, *i.e.*, express your true values and core interests in your vocation, rather than add meaningless, unnecessary activities to your to-do list.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is direct attention to the present moment, including the inner experiences of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, and the outer experiences of interacting with other persons and external situations.¹⁸ Mindfulness allows you to move more deeply into flow, which infuses greater creativity, productivity, and ease in your work. Flow is an optimal state of mind that amounts to total absorption in an activity.¹⁹ Flow is also the natural, effortless unfolding of your life in a way that moves you toward deeper meaning and increased harmony.²⁰

Practicing mindfulness can enable one to break free from both chronic

busyness and perpetual stuckness.

To break the grip of busyness:

1) Attend to underlying fears. In the legal profession, there is a tremendous pressure to live up to certain standards, which fuels one's fear of falling short. When this fear goes into overdrive, you can develop physical tension and mental obsessions that push you to keep busy and strive for more than you really need.²¹ Mindful attention to moment-to-moment experiences allows you to shed fears that drive chronic busyness. From a place of stillness, you can notice thoughts and feelings associated with your fears, without judgment. If you find yourself distracted by your mind—which constantly reflects on the past and plans for the future—shift your attention to sensations in the body and the breath. Unlike the mind, the body and breath are always present. By resting in the body and attending to the breath, you will be less prone to get swept up by racing thoughts. Through mindfulness, you can observe and dissolve your fears directly, without fighting them with busyness.²²

2) Focus on one thing at a time. Pouring your attention on the task at hand enables you to experience calm under pressure and joy in your work. You connect fully to what you are doing instead of preoccupying yourself with what you are not doing.²³ By completing the first task or pausing before you move on to the next, you can perform as well as possible and savor your time.²⁴

3) Cut down interruptions and distractions. Competing deadlines, last-minute requests from clients and colleagues, and emergency meetings are sometimes unavoidable. But whenever possible, reduce interruptions and distractions that waste your time. Schedule uninterrupted time to focus on projects and cases that require deep concentration. Check your email and voice mail at specific times of the day, rather than repeatedly, to avoid being overtaken by interruptions and distractions that entail low-priority matters.²⁵

Mindfulness is also an effective antidote to perpetual stuckness:

1) Attend to your sense of being stuck as a physical sensation. You stay stuck when you do not attend to self-doubt, anger, resentment, or other difficult emotions relating to procrastination. Naming your stuckness as a temporary, bodily sensation helps you spring out of indecision and into action. If you can identify this as a tight knot in your stomach, sweaty palms, or general heaviness, for example, you are more likely to move out of it. Attend to

physical discomfort as pure energy that can dissolve and evolve, rather than as a permanent condition to be feared and avoided.

2) Focus on the action itself.

While reflection and planning are critical, too much can result in overthinking a situation so no action is taken. Instead of reaching toward magnificent goals, striving for desired results or waiting for inspiration, just take a small step to get started. Ask yourself what is the one step you could take right now to get the momentum going, and focus on that action.²⁶

3) Break down large goals into turtle steps. When tackling a project, you might feel so overwhelmed that you don't know where to start. By breaking it up into smaller, specific and manageable pieces, you can take steady steps to move toward your goal.²⁷ Instead of planning to write a brief next week, plan to do research for one hour on Monday, write the draft for a couple hours on Tuesday, and revise and finalize the draft for an hour on Wednesday.

Acceptance

Acceptance is opening up to all experiences and embracing yourself, including your vulnerabilities and weaknesses, without reacting.²⁸ Acceptance is not the same as denial, complacency, numbness, aloofness, or cynicism. You still want to improve a situation, but this desire comes from a place of abundance and appreciation, and not from a place of scarcity and unworthiness. Your energy is focused on your efforts and actions, not on the outcomes. Like mindfulness, acceptance can be a key to release from busyness:

1) Embrace feelings triggered by busyness. Rather than rely on artificial stimulants to keep you in fast-speed mode, try settling into your exhaustion and other feelings that arise from busyness. Until you accept that you feel tired and disconnected from the things on your to-do list, you will continue to race through your life rather than fully experience it. Simply recognize illness or tiredness as your body telling you to slow down. Once you accept feelings triggered by busyness, you can then begin to consider whether busyness is a protective strategy to avoid yourself, others, and your true feelings.²⁹

2) Engage in the process. By fully engaging in the process, regardless of the results, you can keep your serenity even in difficult situations. When you find yourself forcing an outcome that is not ready to come to fruition, note that you can accomplish great things if you are not wasting energy through struggle and strain.

3) Delegate or barter. Once you accept your limits, you can delegate portions of a project or an entire assignment that is best handled by someone else with the time, interest, and resources.³⁰ You can also barter the task by finding someone who enjoys what you dread, and who hates what you love, then swap tasks.³¹ By releasing control to someone who can handle the project better, you preserve your energy.

Stuckness too can be overcome by acceptance:

1) Embrace feelings triggered by being stuck. When you are emotionally stuck, bringing your stories and limiting beliefs to light will allow you to move out of the trance. Once you acknowledge your underlying anxieties and fears, it is easier to act without procrastinating.³² Tremendous creativity and productivity can follow a period of stuckness that is fully accepted. If you try to push away or move out of the state of stuckness too quickly, you might conjure up more fear. Meanwhile, by feeling the emotional experience and physical sensations of being stuck, you allow it to naturally transform into a different energetic quality.

2) Open up to uncontrollable situations. When you face an obstacle, you could step back, move around it, relax into the point of resistance, and discover another path. Trying to bulldoze through or run away from obstacles can keep you stuck. Through acceptance, you embrace your being stuck as an opportunity to release your fears, grow, and transform. Discomfort is natural as you let go of familiar comforts and move into a new direction or uncharted territory. Avoiding necessary change consumes tremendous energy, while acceptance leads to a positive energy shift.

3) Let go of perfectionism. Perfectionism is a form of controlling behavior that has little to do with getting things right or meeting high standards.³³ If you beat yourself up for not doing things perfectly or as well as others, you will cut your energy level. Instead, strive for excellence, identifying the most significant aspects of a project and accepting that you need to focus on those in the time available. A work product is rarely perfect because at some point, to meet the deadline, you must deliver it and move on.

Authenticity

Authenticity entails being true to yourself and requires a deep awareness of yourself and of life.³⁴ Authenticity is a form of self-management in that you decide what to do and when to do it

based on your true values, core interests, and real priorities. It allows you to accomplish more of what really matters to you.³⁵ Authenticity encourages you to answer deeper questions, including what is your life's purpose, what are your true passions and interests, and who are you without your titles, roles, and possessions.

Authenticity is a third avenue to relief from busyness. For example:

1) Do/find work that encourages a sense of play. The concept of work as play might be counter-intuitive to lawyers, especially those who equate work with long hours, ongoing stress, and never-ending struggles. But work is not drudgery when it allows you to explore your passions, use your gifts and talents, and offer services that are meaningful to you. Through the practice of authenticity, you can instill a sense of play in your work. If you cannot experience any playfulness in your work, you might want to seek different work.³⁶

2) Say "no" to unimportant, undesired projects. When you express enthusiasm for something that you really do not care for, it is hard to say no to follow-up requests. Overscheduled and

overworked, you will have less time for people you love and things you enjoy.³⁷ By setting boundaries and saying no to trivial, extra projects, you make time for what truly matters to you.

3) Declutter and simplify your life. Getting rid of or limiting unwanted things helps you to manage yourself, and thus your time, more effectively. Shed office clutter, including extra paperwork, outdated electronics, and useless objects that do not resonate with you. Also shed unnecessary relationships that do not serve you well.³⁸

Practicing authenticity can also help you find release from stuckness:

1) Do/find work that allows for creative expression. Experiencing work as a form of creative expression makes it easier to have sustainable joy in your profession. Creativity is not just about being innovative and unique, but also about expressing your true values, fulfilling your deepest intentions, and using your gifts in your profession.³⁹

2) Say "yes" to meaningful, desired projects. Lawyers not only put off what they hate to do, but also what they love to do. Making time for projects that you enjoy and that are meaningful to you is

key to getting unstuck. When you are authentic about your preferences, opportunities that truly interest you tend to come your way.

3) Create space for your priorities in life. If who you are and what you do are out of alignment, pause and reflect to reconnect with your passions, values, and interests. If your financial situation, family obligations, or other factors pose restrictions, think about small steps you can take now to get closer to alignment.

Conclusion

When work primarily involves a race to the finish line that recedes further away the faster you run or the longer you stand still, the results can be stress, depression, exhaustion, and burnout. Shedding beliefs that keep you mindlessly busy or hopelessly stuck starts with befriending time. Letting go of time-stealing habits and making way for time-enhancing practices lead to more fluid and effortless action. By managing your attention (mindfulness), your energy (acceptance) and yourself (authenticity), you will have a more balanced approach to spending your time effectively on things that really matter to you. ▲

Notes

¹ See Martha Beck, *Finding Your Own North Star: Claiming the Life You Were Meant to Live*, (Three Rivers Press, 2002); Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*, (HarperOne, 2005); Marc Lesser, *Less: Accomplishing More By Doing Less* (New World Library, 2009); Patrick Ryan, *Awakened Wisdom: A Guide to Reclaiming Your Brilliance*, (Awakened Wisdom, 2009).

² See Beck, *supra* n. 1; Jane B. Burka & Lenora M. Yuen, *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It* (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2008).

³ See Honore; Lesser, *supra* n. 1.

⁴ Burka, *supra* n. 2.

⁵ See Honore; Ryan, *supra* n. 1; Deepak Chopra, *Reinventing the Body, Resurrecting the Soul: How to Create a New You* (Three Rivers Press, 2010).

⁶ See Honore; Lesser, *supra* n. 1.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Honore, *supra* n. 1.

⁹ See Catherine Harper, "Breaking the Multitasking Habit—One Step At a Time," *O, The Oprah Magazine* (10/15/2010); Megan Santosus, "Multitasking Wastes Time and Money," *CIO Magazine* (09/15/2003).

¹⁰ See Santosus, *supra* n. 9; Honore, *supra* n. 1.

¹¹ See Carl Honore, *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting* (HarperOne, 2008).

¹² See Neil Fiore, *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play* (Tarcher, 2007).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*; Burka, *supra* n. 2; Rita Emmett, *The Procrastinator's Handbook: Mastering the Art of Doing it Now* (Walker & Company, 2000).

¹⁵ See Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (Tarcher, 1992).

¹⁶ *Id.* See also Ryan, *supra* n. 1; Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World* (Beacon Press, 2006).

¹⁷ See Burka, *supra* n. 2; Fiore, *supra* n. 12.

¹⁸ Rothberg, *supra* n. 16.

¹⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (HarperCollins, 1990).

²⁰ Charlene Belitz & Meg Lundstrom, *The Power of Flow: Practical Ways to Transform Your Life With Meaningful Coincidence* (Three Rivers Press, 1998).

²¹ See Tara Brach, "Befriend Your Fears," *Yoga Journal* (August 2007).

²² *Id.*

²³ Chopra, *supra* n. 5.

²⁴ Honore, *supra* n. 1.

²⁵ Lesser, *supra* n. 1.

²⁶ Ryan, *supra* n. 1.

²⁷ Beck, *supra* n. 1.

²⁸ See Rothberg, *supra* n. 16; Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of A Buddha* (Bandam, 2003).

²⁹ See Cameron, *supra* n. 15.

³⁰ See Burka, *supra* n. 2.

³¹ Beck, *supra* n. 1.

³² See Burka, *supra* n. 2.

³³ Cameron, *supra* n. 15.

³⁴ Mike Robbins, *Be Yourself, Everyone Else is Already Taken: Transform Your Life with the Power of Authenticity* (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

³⁵ See Lesser, *supra* n. 1.

³⁶ See Beck; Ryan, *supra* n. 1.

³⁷ See Rita Emmett, *Manage Your Time to Reduce Your Stress: A Handbook for the Overworked, Overscheduled and Overwhelmed* (Walker & Company, 2008). See also Burka, *supra* n. 2; Lesser, *supra* n. 1.

³⁸ See Brooks Palmer, *Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What's Holding You Back* (New World Library, 2009).

³⁹ See Beck; Ryan, *supra* n. 1.