

THIRD EDITION

# GENERALIST PRACTICE WITH ORGANIZATIONS & COMMUNITIES

**KAREN K. KIRST-ASHMAN**  
*University of Wisconsin–Whitewater*

**GRAFTON H. HULL, JR.**  
*University of Utah*

THOMSON  
BROOKS/COLE

Australia • Canada • Mexico • Singapore • Spain  
United Kingdom • United States

## STRESS AND TIME MANAGEMENT

*Consider this scenario: You are a social work practitioner for a county department of social services. It is now 8:00 a.m. By 4:30 p.m. today, you are supposed to accomplish the following tasks:*

- *Meet with your supervisor for your weekly supervisory rendezvous.*
- *Complete appointments established with six clients as noted on your weekly calendar.*
- *Call to schedule a dentist's appointment as soon as possible. You cracked a molar and it hurts like all get out.*
- *Return phone calls to the following clients about crisis issues: Ms. Hermanez, Ms. White, Mr. Scissorhands, Ms. Cheatum, Mr. Beauregard, Ms. Leinenkugel, Ms. Doohee, Mr. Howe.*
- *Find the homeless Shaver family a place to stay.*
- *Enroll Tina Tuna in an alcohol treatment program.*
- *Decide what to get your mother for her birthday (it's tomorrow, and you already forgot to send her a card on time).*
- *Try to stop thinking about your fight with your spouse this morning.*
- *Have lunch.*
- *Use the restroom—probably twice.*
- *Prepare an agenda for tomorrow's 8:00 A.M. staff meeting.*
- *Help Ms. Loophole place her critically ill father in a hospice.*
- *Drop your car off to get your leaky tire fixed.*
- *Complete your two weeks' worth of progress notes before your supervisory meeting.*
- *Call Irma about riding together to the state social work conference next Thursday.*
- *Talk to your colleague Horatio about the minor conflict you had yesterday.*
- *Make appointments with eight clients for next week.*
- *Drive the Hanratti family to the doctor.*
- *Take your client Pauline Prudo to Planned Parenthood for contraception counseling.*
- *Check up on your client Merhan Birmquach, who you believe is seriously depressed and potentially suicidal.*
- *Work on that grant application that's due in two weeks.*

*What would you do?*

- a. Cry.
- b. Take a sick day.
- c. Punch a hole in the wall.
- d. Use good time-management skills.
- e. Update your résumé.

*What do you do when you have scores of tasks to complete right now? How can you handle the stress from the demands of clients who you feel desperately need your help? How can you keep your own personal concerns from interfering with your ability to accomplish your work? How can you keep from going absolutely crazy with all the pressure?*

*Two practical means of coping with professional and personal stress are recognizing and using established stress- and time-management techniques. You can't necessarily get rid of all the pressure in your life, but you can begin to control it.*

## ***Introduction***

Two variables are critically important to conducting your professional life effectively and efficiently. They are stress and time. Both can and will affect your ability to do your job. They exist whether you like it or not, and they are related. Failure to manage time well can become a major stress producer. However, you can begin to get control of them. Stress and time management techniques allow you to maximize your time both professionally and personally.

Stress and time are also two critical facets of your macro environment. They are integrally involved in everything you will be doing. In order to fulfill your job responsibilities with clients, comply with supervisory directives, and make decisions concerning your macro objectives, you will need to get control of both your time and stress level.

This chapter will:

- Describe the dynamics of stress and explain the General Adaptation Syndrome.
- Discuss how stress occurs within an agency context.
- Explore the physiological, psychological, and behavioral problems that stress can cause.

- Propose a broad range of techniques for managing stress.
- Explain how poor time management causes stress.
- Identify various personal styles for dealing with stress.
- Propose approaches for establishing and prioritizing time management goals.
- Examine a variety of techniques for managing your time.
- Assess the dynamics of procrastination and suggest means for combating it.

## ***Stress and Stress Management***

Stress is “the overall process” by which external pressures affect individuals emotionally and physically, producing some internal tension (Jex, 1998, p. 2). Each individual may experience a potentially stressful situation differently, although most of us recognize that certain situations cause unusual stress. For example, abruptly losing your job or hearing of a significant other’s catastrophic death will always cause stress.

Even positive events can be stressful. They, too, can force you to deal with new circumstances and expend energy pursuing unfamiliar or different activities. Getting married or receiving a promotion, desirable events for most people, still cause stress.

Environmental situations can also create stress. For example, expending time and effort to change an agency policy may add to the pressure you already feel from fulfilling your everyday responsibilities to clients. Or the abrupt shutdown of a major industry in the town where you work leaves thousands of people unemployed. Your client caseload soars. You see the need to develop a range of new services, from job retraining to relocation planning to food pantries for hungry newly-unemployed workers and their families.

Likewise, personal characteristics, such as perfectionism, can magnify stress. Most of us, however, can withstand significant amounts of stress and survive. When we are exhausted, we go to sleep. When memories are too painful, we forget. In effect, we have developed coping mechanisms to keep our stress levels under some control.

Certain factors are associated with stress. Rigid, authoritarian attitudes and so-called “Type A” personalities appear to be more prone to stress. The Type A

personality frequently fights the clock to squeeze more work into smaller and smaller time frames. Likewise, irrational thinking can cause stress. Believing that your intimate other can satisfy all of your needs—which, of course, is impossible—can produce stress.

Cultural factors such as gender role expectations may also play a role. The pressures many women feel to be supermoms doing an outstanding job both at work and at home can increase their stress levels. There appears to be important gender differences in how men and women construct their networks (Belle, 1991; Seaward, 2004). These differences also affect the way each gender uses personal networks in times of stress. Such contrasting relationship styles apparently have consequences for our overall well-being. However, more research is needed before we can fully understand such gender differences. Because women maintain more emotionally intimate relationships than do men, they mobilize more varied social supports in times of stress. Women also provide more frequent and effective support to others than do men.

## General Adaptation Syndrome

Your body appears to respond to both negative or positive stress in the same way. Selye (1956), one of the foremost authorities on stress, found that the body reacts to all stressors in the same way, regardless of the source of stress. This means that the body reacts to positive stressors (a romantic kiss) in the same way it reacts to negative stressors (an electric shock). Selye found that the body has a three-phase reaction to stress: (1) the alarm phase, (2) the resistance phase, and (3) the exhaustion phase. Selye labels this stress response process the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). Following is a brief outline of how this syndrome works.

In the *alarm phase*, the body recognizes the stressor and responds by preparing for fight or flight. A stressor can be any stimulus that causes stress. The body's reactions to a range of stressors are numerous and complex: The body sends messages from the hypothalamus (a section of the brain that regulates a range of physiological functions) to the pituitary gland to release its hormones. These hormones trigger the adrenal glands to release adrenaline.

The release of adrenaline and other hormones results in

- Increased breathing and heartbeat rate.
- A rise in blood pressure.
- Increased coagulation of blood to minimize potential loss of blood in case of physical injury.
- Diversion of blood from the skin to the brain, the heart, and contracting muscles.
- A rise in serum cholesterol and blood fat.
- Gastrointestinal tract problems.
- Dilation of the pupils.

This range of changes results in a massive burst of energy, better vision and hearing, and increased muscular strength—all changes that increase our capacities to fight or to flee. A major problem of the fight-or-flight reaction in modern times is that we often cannot deal with a threat by fighting or by fleeing, especially in agency life. In our civilized society, fighting or fleeing—helpful to primitive humans—is generally considered unacceptable behavior.

In the *resistance or repair phase*, bodily processes seek to return to homeostasis. The body strives during this phase to repair any damage caused by the stressors. The body can adapt itself to hard physical labor, a serious stressor. In handling most stressors the body generally goes through only the two phases of alarm and repair. Over a lifetime, a person goes through these two phases hundreds of thousands of times.

The third phase, *exhaustion*, occurs only when the body remains in a state of high stress for an extended period of time. If such stress continues to affect the body, the body is unable to repair the damage. If exhaustion continues, a person is apt to develop a stress-related illness or even to die.

## Macro Context for Stress

Social workers often consider themselves, their profession, and their agency work environment to be highly stressful. Certainly, dealing with the complicated needs of multiple clients, confronting the huge amounts of paperwork and documentation required for accountability, and operating within bureaucratic systems can produce significant stress.

A great concern in social work practice is *burn-out* (Simpson & Simpson, 1992), a condition caused by prolonged pressure, tension, and overwork that is characterized by low energy, irritability, and apathy. Burn-out can occur when you have too much work and feel that you have too little control over getting

it all done. Obviously, social work usually addresses problems. Constant confrontation with problems is also stressful.

On the other hand, Simpson and Simpson (1992) explain: "Words cannot convey the satisfaction of having successfully intervened in someone's life. It is a good feeling to know that you have made a difference. And although the work can be grueling, it is rarely dull because people are rarely dull. Only the paperwork is tedious, and you will find that the case in every profession" (p. 18).

To avoid burn-out and enhance your usefulness, good stress- and time-management skills are essential. The following sections will explore stress-related problems and techniques for changing your perception about, and managing, stress. Because time management is so critical for effective control of stress, we will extensively explore the issues concerning time and techniques recommended to manage it.

## Perceptions of Stress

Stress becomes a problem only when the stressors are so great that your adaptive system is overwhelmed. This can happen either from too much stress in a short time or from the cumulative effects of stress over an extended period. It is typically the chronic or long-term stress that causes us the greatest concern. Because of the prolonged time involved, you can develop both physiological and psychological problems. Interestingly, it is often not a single major event that triggers stress-related problems. Rather, it is many sometimes trivial occurrences and factors that add up.

Stressors can be better understood if we recognize that they differ in quality, duration, and quantity (Roskies, 1991; Seaward, 2004). That is, some stressors are harmful because of their importance (seriousness). Others are detrimental because of the length of time they work on us or because of the large number of stressors occurring at one time. What one person considers stressful, another may not. Individual judgment defines just how stressful an experience is. Individual judgment also determines how effective we perceive our coping mechanisms to be (Roskies, 1991).

Thus, both the type of problems encountered and your perception of how well you can cope with them affect the stress-related problems you experience. Feeling you simply cannot cope with a particular prob-

lem, no matter what, can lead to increased anxiety. The anxiety increases stress and starts a snowball effect. The consequences of stress, thus, can include physiological, psychological, or behavioral problems.

### **Physiological Stress-Related Problems**

Often the first recommendation for coping with stress is to recognize its existence and magnitude. *Physiological* problems of stress include headaches, stomach upset (such as colitis), and skin rashes or hives. They also can include high blood pressure which, of course, can be life-threatening. Although most of us have some of these symptoms from time to time, you should recognize that chronic, long-lasting symptoms are warning signs that your stress level is out of control.

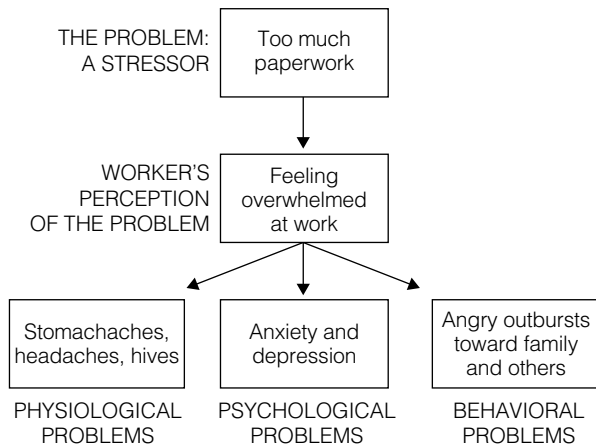
### **Psychological Stress-Related Problems**

Psychological difficulties from chronic stress include anxiety and depression. *Anxiety* is "painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill" (Mish, 1995, p. 53). *Depression* is an emotional state of sadness and despair often characterized by "inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping, feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes suicidal tendencies" (Mish, 1995, p. 311). Attempts to cope with psychological stress vary. Some people turn to excessive intake of alcohol, drugs, or food. Others smoke or even consider suicide.

### **Behavioral Stress-Related Problems**

*Behavioral correlates of stress* include any behaviors resulting directly from excess stress. A father might hit his 5-year-old daughter when he's had a hard day at work. Or a wife might argue incessantly with her husband when she's under extreme duress. Other people withdraw inwardly and isolate themselves.

Figure 15.1 illustrates an example of the stress process in a macro context, reacting to pressures at work. First, a stressor occurs. In this case the problem stressor is too much paperwork. Second, a person's perception of the problem shapes that individual's reactions to stress. Figure 15.1 illustrates that the person, depending on his or her individual make-up and perception, may experience: physical symptoms

FIGURE 15.1 ■ *The Stress Process*

such as stomachaches, headaches, or hives; psychological symptoms such as anxiety or depression; or behavioral symptoms such as angry emotional outbursts. Depending on the individual, the environmental context, the problem, and the person's perception of the problem, each individual will react differently to stressors.

### Confronting Stress: Flight or Fight

People react to stress in highly individualized ways. We have mentioned that some people react to extensive stress by *fleeing* it, or pursuing activities to avoid confronting the stress. We have already mentioned that they might drink to excess, use drugs, overeat, or smoke.

Other people react to serious stress by *fighting* and attempting to manage it. Positive ways to handle stress include the various stress management techniques we will discuss below.

### Managing Your Stress

Managing stress often means reducing it or finding ways to keep it under control. Fighting stress to control it is more effective in the long run than fleeing from it. The latter only can result in physiological, psychological, or behavioral problems.

There are three primary approaches to stress management. This is true both in your work setting and in your personal life. First, you can change the stressful event. Second, you can change the way you think about the stressful event. Third, you can adopt spe-

cific strategies and techniques to help control your stress level.

### Changing the Stressful Event

At least seven problem areas in a work context can cause you undue stress. These include inadequate or distressing work settings, frequent urgent deadlines, too much work to accomplish in the time allocated, deterrents to accomplishing work (such as frequent interruptions), problematic relationships with other staff, role ambiguity, and poor match between staff and job. Sometimes you can change such stressful events. Other times you can't. The following will explore the possibility of implementing changes to control each type of stressful event.

**Inadequate or distressing work setting.** (Jex, 1998; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). Is your work environment helpful for getting your work done? Do you have sufficient privacy? Or do you have to work in a tiny cubicle separated only by paper-thin partitions of shoulder height?

A social worker we know once held a job as counselor at a mental health center where she was supposed to do counseling in an office located in a large room with paper-thin dividing walls. It was virtually impossible to maintain confidentiality or to avoid distraction from other therapists going about their jobs. The answer was the purchase of a "white-noise" machine for each therapist. These machines blurred noise in the external environment so that other workers could not understand what was being said outside their office cubicle. This minor change in work environment—acquisition of the white-noise machines—made all the difference in the world in the worker's ability to do her job.

There are other ways to evaluate and improve your immediate work environment. Can you make your office more pleasant? Can you put up pictures that appeal to you? Can you paint your office some tantalizing color? Or would music help? Does music relax you and thereby assist you in getting work done? (Don't forget to use earphones so as not to disturb others around you.) These are only a few of the many questions you might ask yourself about improving your work environment.

**Frequent urgent deadlines.** (Seaward, 2004). Do you feel that you can never catch up, no matter what you do? Paperwork is an ongoing problem for many

workers. You have to complete your paperwork for the sake of accountability, but it's often excessively demanding and time-consuming.

How might you assume greater control of deadlines and paperwork? Is there any way you can decrease the urgency of deadlines? Can you decrease the amount of paperwork you must do? Can you record less? Are you incorporating too much detail? Are there ways you could be more efficient in completing your paperwork?

Is there any way that you can gain more lead time for accomplishing tasks and goals? Is there any way you can better manage your time? (Time management is discussed more thoroughly under "Managing Your Time" in this chapter.)

Do you clearly understand your job, or are you trying to accomplish too much? You might discuss with your supervisor the appropriate expectations of your role (Cooper, 1981): "Encourage your boss . . . to provide three separate lists" of what he thinks you should be doing (1) more of or better, (2) less of or not at all, and (3) just the same in your job. "In the meantime, you should prepare the reverse list" of what you think he should be doing (1) more of or better, (2) less of or not at all, and (3) just the same in respect to you (pp. 185–186).

**Too much work and too little time.** (Brody & Nair, 2003; Jex, 1998). The problem of an overly heavy workload is related to the discussion of urgent deadlines, above. Do you clearly understand your job role? Are you spending your time on the tasks that are most significant? Are you wasting time on tasks that should not have priority?

As Cooper suggested above, you might discuss your role with your supervisor. She might be able to help you better define your responsibilities and prioritize your job tasks. Are you wasting time trying to accomplish repetitive tasks? Can you better manage your time? Can you develop a form or procedure for accomplishing repetitive tasks to decrease the amount of time you have to spend on them? You might also examine your expectations for your performance. (We will discuss this in more depth under "Change How You Think about the Stressful Event," the second approach to stress management.)

Note that having too little to do can also produce stress (Brody & Nair, 1998). Staff may be bored or feel they have no purpose. Inequitable workloads can cause resentment among staff that can also result in stress.

**Deterrents to accomplishing work.** (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). Are people constantly popping into your office? Does the phone ring incessantly? Do you feel you never have an opportunity to think? How can you get better control of your time? (Once again, this refers to time-management techniques to be discussed under "Managing Your Time.") Can you shut your door during certain times of the day? Can you put a "Please do not disturb" sign on your office door? Can you possibly set aside some predetermined time to finish your paperwork? Can you have an administrative assistant or secretary hold your calls and take messages or record them on your answering machine or voicemail so that you're not constantly distracted?

**Problematic interpersonal relationships.** (Jex, 1998; Seaward, 2004). Usually, problematic interpersonal relationships at work involve one of two scenarios (Cooper, 1981): First, you have a colleague, supervisor, or administrator who has poorly developed interpersonal skills. Such people have difficulties effectively interacting and communicating with others. Second, you alone have a "personality clash," for whatever reason, with a specific individual. If so, examine whether it is possible to resolve the conflict. In the case of the person with generally poor social skills, can you and other colleagues talk to your supervisor about the problematic staff member? Can this person's own supervisor help him improve his interpersonal skills? Can the agency send him to receive some training to improve social and communication skills?

If you have a personality conflict with someone else, can you approach this person and straightforwardly try to resolve the conflict? Can you ask your supervisor to function as a mediator? (Chapter 2 discussed some specific techniques for dealing with conflict, enhancing assertiveness, and gaining help from supervisors.) If you don't think resolution is realistically possible, can you minimize your involvement or interaction with the individual without interfering with your own ability to do your job?

**Role ambiguity.** (Jex, 1998; Brody & Nair, 2003). When job descriptions, worker expectations, or administrative policies are unclear, it's difficult to know the right thing to do. This can cause anxiety and stress.

Agencies having an extremely laid back atmosphere may contribute to such ambiguity. Consider an out-

patient counseling center for adolescents (Brody & Nair, 2003). Because agency administration desires to encourage a warm, informal atmosphere, rules and agency activities are extremely relaxed. Staff take two-hour lunches, spend hours talking with clients in unstructured sessions, and receive no formal supervision. As a result, goals are rarely set and even less frequently attained. There are few if any helpful policies such as what to do when a client threatens suicide. Ironically, staff feel overworked because the lack of structure results in inefficient use of time where little work gets done. They find themselves regularly working overtime, yet spinning their wheels.

Contradictory expectations for worker performance can add to role ambiguity and create stress (Jex, 1998; Seaward, 2004). For example, an agency's administration might tell workers they're supposed to help poor people, but then impose massive restrictions regarding service eligibility and provision (Brody & Nair, 2003).

**Poor match between staff and job.** (Seaward, 2004). Stress can result when workers are given responsibilities for which they aren't qualified. It can be amazingly frustrating to practitioners when they don't have a clue about what to do. Stress can also occur when required work is way below a person's ability level. Social work interns may experience this kind of stress when their internship expectations primarily (and inappropriately) involve filing records and licking envelopes.

### **Change How You Think about the Stressful Event**

If you can't change the stressful event or situation itself, can you pursue the second avenue of stress management and change how you think about the stressful event?

The following are some suggestions to consider:

1. *Accept that some stress cannot be avoided.* Do you have to worry about every stressor? Or can you accept the fact that some stressors will exist regardless and put them out of your mind as much as possible?

2. *Realize that the primary changeable element in your life is you.* Appreciate the fact that you can control your thinking and your behavior.

3. *Separate insoluble problems from others.* If you can't solve the problem, can you put it out of your mind and stop worrying about it?

4. *Examine your expectations.* Put plainly, dump the

unrealistic ones. Both positive thinking (reframing a negative event to make it more positive) and talking to others about your expectations can be helpful. Recognize that some things are not worth getting upset about.

5. *Avoid should/should not thinking.* This limits your options. Are you wasting time worrying about what you should be doing while you're not doing it? Either do it or don't, but don't waste time worrying about it. Thinking differently really can reduce your stress level.

6. *Analyze your needs.* What do you really need? How much does the stressful event really affect you? To what extent should you let it bother you? Are you wasting your time and energy thinking about it?

7. *Emphasize your strengths—physical, emotional, and spiritual.* Could your time be better spent placing greater emphasis on positive aspects of your life instead of dwelling on stress-producing negatives?

### **Adopt Stress-Management Strategies**

The third way to manage stress is by adopting specific strategies and techniques to help subdue your stress level. There are at least four types of stress-management strategies: relaxation approaches, exercise, reinforcing activities, and social support.

**Relaxation approaches.** These five techniques—deep breathing relaxation, imagery relaxation, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and biofeedback—are effective techniques for reducing stress and inducing the relaxation response (becoming relaxed). Making yourself comfortable and at ease, avoiding distractions, and closing your eyes are helpful for each of these approaches.

*Deep breathing relaxation* helps you stop thinking about day-to-day concerns and concentrate on your breathing process. For five to ten minutes, slowly and gradually inhale deeply and then exhale. Meanwhile, tell yourself something like, "I am relaxing, breathing more smoothly. This is soothing, and I'm feeling calmer, renewed, and refreshed." Regular practice of this technique will enable you to become more relaxed whenever you're in some tense situation—such as prior to giving a presentation or running a meeting.

*Imagery relaxation* involves switching your focus (for ten to fifteen minutes) from your daily concerns to your ideal relaxation place. It might be lying on a beach by a scenic lake in the warm sun. It might be soaking in a frothing hot tub while relishing your



favorite magazine. It might be looking down on a vast wilderness landscape from the top of some picturesque mountain. Regardless, savor all the pleasure, the peacefulness. Focus on everything that you find calming, soothing, and relaxing. Sense your whole body becoming refreshed, revived, and rejuvenated.

*Progressive muscle relaxation* is based on the principle that people cannot remain anxious if their muscles are relaxed (Jacobson, 1938). You can learn the technique by tightening and relaxing muscles, set by set. When relaxing each set of muscles, you should concentrate on the relaxed feeling and the fact that your muscles are becoming less tense. Watson and Tharp (1973) provide a brief description: "Make a fist with your dominant hand (usually right) . . . and tense the muscles of your (right) hand and forearm; tense it until it trembles. Feel the muscles pull across your fingers and the lower part of your forearm. . . . Hold this position for five to seven seconds, then . . . relax. . . . Just let your hand go. Pay attention to the muscles of your (right) hand and forearm as they relax. Note how those muscles feel as relaxation flows through (twenty or thirty seconds)" (pp. 182–183).

The procedure of tensing and then relaxing is continued three or four times until the hand and forearm are relaxed. Next, other muscle groups are tensed and relaxed in the same manner, one group at a time. These groups might include left hand and forearm, right and left biceps, forehead muscles, upper lip and cheek muscles, jaw muscles, chin and throat muscles, chest muscles, abdominal muscles, back muscles between shoulder blades, right and left thigh muscles, right and left calf muscles, and toes and arches of the feet. With practice, you can develop the capacity to relax simply by visualizing your respective sets of muscles.

A variety of *meditative approaches* are also being used today to decrease stress and tension. (Deep breathing relaxation and imagery relaxation are two forms of meditation.) Benson (1975) has identified four basic components common to meditative approaches that induce the relaxation response: (1) being in a quiet environment free from external distractions; (2) being in a comfortable position; (3) having an object to dwell on, such as a word, sound, phrase, or image (because any neutral word or phrase will work, Benson suggests repeating silently to yourself the word "one"); and (4) having a passive attitude so that you stop thinking about day-to-day concerns. This last component, Benson

asserts, is the key element in inducing the relaxation response.

*Biofeedback equipment* provides mechanical feedback to people about their stress levels. Such equipment can inform people about increasing stress levels of which they may be unaware until markedly high levels are reached. A person's hand temperature can vary 10 to 12 degrees in an hour's time, with an increase in temperature indicating an increase in relaxation. Similarly, biofeedback equipment can measure the functioning of numerous physiological processes. These include blood pressure, hand temperature, muscle tension, heartbeat rate, and brain-wave activity. In biofeedback training, a person is first taught to recognize high levels of anxiety or tenseness. Then the person is instructed on how to reduce such high levels by either closing the eyes and adopting a passive "letting-go" attitude or by thinking about something pleasant or calming. Often, relaxation approaches are combined with biofeedback to elicit the relaxation response. In summary, biofeedback equipment provides a person with immediate feedback about the kind of thinking that is effective in reducing stress (Brown, 1977). Information concerning biofeedback equipment and other methods of professionally supervised stress management may be found in a large city's Yellow Pages under "biofeedback equipment and systems" or "stress-management services."

**Exercise.** Exercise has multiple benefits. Because the alarm phase of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) automatically prepares us for large muscle activity, it makes sense to exercise. Through exercising, we use up fuel in the blood, reduce blood pressure and heart rate, and reverse the other physiological changes set off during GAS's alarm stage. Exercising helps keep us physically fit so we have more physical strength to handle crises. Exercising also reduces stress and relieves tension, partly by switching our thinking from our daily concerns to the exercise we are involved in. For these reasons, everyone should have an exercise program. A key to making yourself exercise daily is selecting a program you enjoy. A wide variety of exercises are possible including walking, jogging, isometric exercises,<sup>1</sup> jumping rope, swimming, lifting weights, and so on.

1. Isometric exercises involve those in which "opposing muscles are so contracted that there is little shortening but great increase in tone of muscle fibers involved" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1995, p. 621).

**Reinforcing activities.** These activities are pleasurable experiences and are key to what we might call personal therapies. They relieve stress, change our pace of living, are enjoyable, and make us feel good. What is a reinforcer (pleasurable experience) to one person may not be to another. Common examples are listening to music, going shopping, hugging or being hugged, taking a bath, going to a movie, having a glass of wine, taking part in family and religious get-togethers, taking a vacation, going to a party, singing, and so on. Such activities add spice to life and remind us that we have value. Personal pleasures can also be used as payoffs to ourselves for jobs well done. Most of us would not seek to short-change others for doing well; we ought not to short-change ourselves. Such rewards make us feel good and motivate us to move on to new challenges.

Enjoyable activities outside our work and family responsibilities also relieve stress. Such involvement switches negative thinking from daily concerns to positive thoughts about the enjoyable activities. Therefore, it is stress-reducing to become involved in activities we enjoy. Such activities may include golf, tennis, swimming, scuba diving, taking flying lessons, traveling, and a host of others.

**Social support.** The importance of social support in reducing stress should not be overlooked (Brody & Nair, 2003; Seaward, 2004). Sharing feelings and frustrations with colleagues, supervisors, family, friends, and even professional counselors can help alleviate internal tension and develop coping strategies.

## ***Managing Your Time***

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"I can't do it, I just can't! Oh, if only I had more time." How often have you thought something like this or heard others complain this way? So often it seems that there is simply never enough time to finish everything you absolutely must get done. If you don't have three exams to study for, you have four papers due next week. If you don't have papers due next week, then you have to work at your part-time job for 35 hours, do the laundry, clean the apartment for friends coming over next weekend, have the car fixed, and keep up with your regular homework.

People who are disorganized with their time usually feel that they're living on the brink of catastrophe. The key is that they feel out of control. They are swept this way and that by the torrents of time demands. Time-management techniques can help

people acquire a sense of control over their lives. As a social worker, you will be faced with the need to juggle many responsibilities. Your macro environment is saturated with demands and potential stressors. Learning specific ways to use your time more effectively and efficiently will help you manage your workload better. This section will identify a variety of techniques to help you manage your professional (and personal) time. Highlight 15.1 describes some typical time "troublers and controllers" (Mackenzie, 1972).

## **How Poor Time Management Causes Stress**

If you are not managing your time efficiently, then you are probably not being nearly as effective as you could be. There are at least five reasons why insufficient or total lack of time management results in stress. These include "preoccupation" with the myriad tasks you're supposed to accomplish; poor task "pacing"; "stimulus overload"; stimulus underload; and "anxiety" (Curtis & Detert, 1981, pp. 190–191; Jager, 1999; Seaward, 2004).

### ***Preoccupation***

Have you ever had so much on your mind that you felt totally overwhelmed? Perhaps it seemed you had so much to do that you couldn't possibly finish it all anyway, so why even try? Did you end up paralyzed? Maybe the problem was that you were worrying about all the things you needed to do instead of paying attention to the task at hand. If you don't keep your mind on what you're doing, how can you expect to do a good job? Preoccupation with a huge throng of tasks is overwhelming and distracting. It adds to your overall level of stress.

### ***Poor Task Pacing***

It's interesting that academia, in some ways, is so very different from the real work world. Specifically, academia is based on a series of escalating peaks of stress. At the beginning of a term, the workload is probably not too bad for a while, but soon enough midterm exams come up. Then you have three exams on one day or two twenty-page papers due in the same week. During these periods, pressure escalates, and you probably feel some degree of stress. Then, finally, there's semester break when you have almost total respite from the

**HIGHLIGHT 15.1**

**Time “Troublers” and Controllers**

Several habits cause you and just about everyone else to waste time. Review the time “troublers,” likely reasons, and possible options listed below. Then answer the questions.

<i>Time Troubler</i>	<i>Likely Reasons</i>	<i>Possible Options</i>
<i>What a mess</i>	Confusion, disorder	Throw out, reorganize, file
<i>Hurry, hurry</i>	Doing too much too fast, too little attention to detail	Undertake less, allow more time, just say “No”
<i>I just can’t decide</i>	Terror at making mistakes, cowering at responsibility, can’t prioritize and set goals	Use decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting skills
<i>Oops! Forgot to plan</i>	Just didn’t think, things happened too fast	Take time to think things through ahead of time, allow time for thought
<i>There’s just too much to do</i>	Unable to say no, too much pressure to perform, can’t prioritize	Prioritize goals, just say “No,” evaluate what is possible to accomplish
<i>I’ll do it later</i>	Overwhelmed, don’t feel like it, it’s too hard	Prioritize tasks, plan how to accomplish the most significant
<i>There’s that phone again</i>	Can’t resist answering, too nonassertive to not answer or to speak briefly, can’t control yourself	Talk briefly, stick to the main points, offer to return call later
<i>Unwanted guests</i>	Just can’t say no, talking is fun, allows you to avoid work	Limit easy access and availability, be assertive

**Now answer the following questions:**

1. What is your number-one time troubler? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What are the likely reasons for this troubler? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What are your potential options for controlling this troubler? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your number-two time troubler? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What are the likely reasons for this troubler? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What are your potential options for controlling this troubler? \_\_\_\_\_

SOURCE: Adapted from Mackenzie (1972).

seemingly unending flow of assignments, exams, research papers, and other academic responsibilities. Finally, you may have a summer break, when you probably have to work, but not in school.

Hence, school creates an environment where stress

levels escalate to a pinnacle, then abruptly fall away. In your working environment you should ideally try to maintain more even stress levels, avoiding such drastic, upsetting variations. In other words, it is important to pace yourself on a more regular basis so

that you can both accomplish your tasks and control your blood pressure.

### **Stimulus Overload**

Stimulus overload is having too much to do. No matter how you utilize management skills, you cannot possibly complete all of your assigned tasks. Stimulus overload is similar to preoccupation, in that both can lead to stress and dissatisfaction with your work. It seems there is no possible way for you to do a good job.

### **Stimulus Underload**

Stimulus underload is the opposite of stimulus overload. It occurs when you don't have enough to do to maintain your interest. Either there are not enough tasks or the tasks are numbingly dull. Have you ever spoken to someone who retired or quit working outside the home who comments that he can't get anything done, despite having significantly more time than he had before? An old cliché comes to mind: "Work expands to fill the time available." With fewer, or not enough, things to do, it is easy to become lethargic, to move slowly and sometimes pointlessly. Stimulus underload can cause stress if you can't finish the tasks you feel you should. Time-management skills can reduce stress by helping you analyze how you spend your time and plan to spend the time you have more productively.

### **Anxiety**

We have established that anxiety is "painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill" (Mish, 1995, p. 53). Anxious people may appear nervous, skittish, and edgy. They may have difficulty both controlling useless movement (pacing back and forth or tapping their fingers annoyingly on the table) and redirecting their energy and attention to completing tasks at hand. Anxiety can result in lack of attention to time management. The probable consequence is stress.

Anxiety can result from any number of causes. These include personal problems, such as not being able to pay your full phone bill this month or a fear that your significant other is being unfaithful. Anxiety can result from worries about work or school. It can arise from subjective feelings of failure or low self-esteem. Whatever its causes, anxiety detracts from

your ability to perform any task, thus resulting in stress. As we will see, good time-management skills can help you control both your anxiety and your time. (Note, however, that chronic, long-lasting anxiety that cannot be controlled may signal the need for professional help.)

### **Styles of Dealing with Time**

Different people have divergent approaches to dealing with time. Filley (1978) cites at least five styles, or ways people view and handle their time. First, there are people who are just bored. They are bored with work. Actually, they are lazy and don't like to expend any energy. They are bored with leisure time, too. They are critical of everything and complain a lot. Many are whiners. You probably don't like these people very much.

Second, there are people who are happy-go-lucky. They love their leisure time and would just as soon spend all their time playing and relaxing. They probably should be extremely wealthy, because they don't like to work. They usually do work when they have to, but feel it is a waste of their precious leisure time. They are the people the boss frequently has to tap on the shoulder and ask not to read the newspaper for the first 45 minutes of their workday.

The third type of people are the "nose to the grindstone" type (Filley, 1978, p. 117). They work, work, work to get ahead, ahead, ahead. They hate having fun because they don't really know how to. Sometimes other people refer to them as drudges.

In the fourth style, people perceive time as invaluable. Such an individual sees time "as a precious commodity, and feels guilty if it is wasted. Such people seem to be active and productive, both in their work and their leisure" (Filley, 1978, p. 117). These people differ from the "nose-to-the-grindstone" type in that they place value on *time* rather than on *work*. They place equal emphasis on leisure time. They usually can't sit still. Other people often refer to them as workaholics, and they can drive these other people crazy.

Finally, the fifth style is that of people who look at time as something they can choose to manage. They think in terms of priorities and goals. They make conscious choices concerning how to spend both their work and leisure time. In essence, they control time rather than letting time control them. These people are time managers. The following sections discuss the skills time managers use.

## Time Management

At least three aspects of time management involve expending some amount of effort to learn new approaches to handling time and changing old behavior patterns. They include planning, controlling your own behavior, and dealing with procrastination.

### Planning Your Time

Planning your time involves four primary steps. First, figure out how you currently spend your time. You can't make changes until you know what you need to change. Second, establish goals for yourself. How would you ideally like to spend your time? What would you really like to get done? Third, prioritize your goals. What goals are the most important? What do you need to accomplish first, second, and so on? Fourth, specify the tasks you must accomplish in order to attain each prioritized goal.

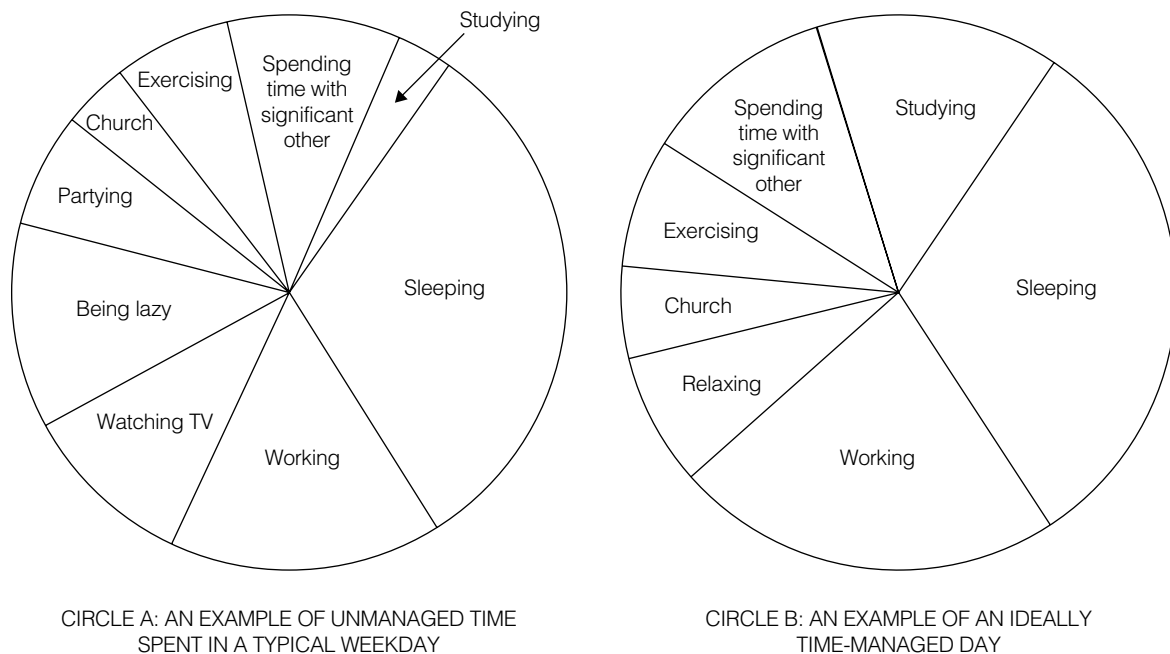
**Step 1: Figure out where the time goes.** Are you spending too much time on some activities and not enough on others? Are you avoiding unappealing tasks you know you should be doing? Do you dawdle? Do you spend more time than you think you should watching *General Hospital*, *Oprah*, *South Park*, or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*?

Your first task in time management is to figure out how much time you spend pursuing or not pursuing various activities. Figure 15.2 illustrates one method for achieving this. First, draw a circle representing a typical 24-hour workday. Estimate exactly how you spend your time during that day and mark off appropriately sized sections. How much time do you usually spend sleeping? Studying? Working? Lying around doing nothing? Circle A in Figure 15.2 shows how one individual illustrated approximate time spent on various activities (or lack of activities).

After completing your visual depiction of how you actually spend a day, draw another circle of the same size. Divide this circle to illustrate how you would ideally like to spend your day. Would you like to spend more time studying and working? Would you prefer to decrease your lazy time? Circle B in Figure 15.2 demonstrates how the same individual would ideally prefer to spend his time. He deletes being lazy and watching television. Instead, he increases studying and working time and adds a shorter relaxing category. In a similar manner, your own circle should provide a rough idea of how you spend your time and how you would like to spend it.

Another more detailed and time-consuming technique for analyzing how you spend your time is

FIGURE 15.2 ■ *Where Does All the Time Go?*



*time-mapping*, that is, keeping an hourly, half-hour, or fifteen-minute record of how you spend your time (Seward, 2004). Keeping such a log (as many professionals, such as lawyers, typically do) allows you to keep track of your specific daily activities and how long each takes. You might choose to track your time for only one day or for several days. Highlight 15.2 shows how to begin tracking fifteen-minute blocks. You would then continue this process to cover a 24-hour period. You probably would simply block out whatever period or periods of time you spend sleeping. In any event, this approach should provide you with a fairly accurate picture of how you spend your time. It should pinpoint for you those periods when you waste time. Subsequently, this information can be a guide to those time periods over which you want to gain greater control.

We assume here that you are a student. Therefore, your time-tracking will be substantially different than if you were working in a full-time professional social work position. However, many of the methods used to gain control over your time at this period of your life are identical to those you can use to gain control over your agency work time.

**Step 2: Establish goals for yourself.** One reason that people fail to use time wisely is that they simply do not set goals for themselves. They drift in time from day to day, maybe getting things done and maybe not. Therefore, one of the primary steps in time management is to establish goals.

You have already begun to explore how you actually spend your time. You should also have begun to think about how you might improve your time management. At this point it is helpful to establish specific goals for how you would like to spend your time.

Arbitrarily, we will divide time up into daily units. The point is for you to get a perspective on what you would like to accomplish on a short-term basis. Of course, you can use the same technique to establish longer-term goals of a week, a month, three months, a year, two years, or whatever. You can set goals for virtually any period of time. The intent of this exercise is to teach you the goal-setting and decision-making procedure. Highlight 15.3 gives you a format for doing this. Identify your goals using this format. (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 9 discussed the importance of establishing measurable goals.) Keep this procedure in mind when establishing any type of goal, ranging

## ■ HIGHLIGHT 15.2

### ■ *Time-Tracking*

Day: \_\_\_\_\_

*Time Segment*

*How Time Was Spent*

6:00 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

6:15 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

6:30 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

6:45 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

7:00 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

7:15 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

7:30 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

7:45 a.m. \_\_\_\_\_

(Continue this process in a similar manner to account for your time during a full 24-hour period.)

■ HIGHLIGHT 15.3

■ **Planning Time-Management Goals**

Identify up to ten things you would like to accomplish today. (Remember that goals don't have to be set up on a daily basis. They can be for weeks, months, or years, depending on the unit of time over which you wish to gain control.)

- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____  |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____  |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____  |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____  |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

from your own personal time management to major macro goals. For example, a goal stating “improve my personality” is pretty difficult to measure, but a goal to “give a genuine compliment to two colleagues today” is easier to monitor.

Note that your goals as a student will be different than your goals as a full-time professional social worker. However, once again, you can use these same procedures to manage your work time and workload in the future. Highlight 15.3 lists spaces for ten possible goals. The number of goals is arbitrary. You could list two, ten, or whatever number you wish.

**Step 3: Prioritize your goals.** You may become overwhelmed and immobilized when confronted with a cluster of goals all at one time. Therefore, after identifying goals, prioritize them according to their importance. One common method of prioritizing is the ABC method (Lakein, 1973; Seward, 2004), wherein you assign a value A, B, or C to each goal you cite. “A” goals are those you absolutely want to get done no matter what. These are top-priority goals.

“C” goals on the other hand, are unimportant goals. They might be things that you would like to accomplish, but in all likelihood never will. You might want to write the first forty pages of the great American novel today. Or you think it would be nice to call your four best friends from high school by tonight. If you don't really think a “nice” goal is important or don't really think you'll get around to it today, drop it. Don't waste precious time worrying about things that you cannot or will not do. “C” goals often get relegated to the circular file.

“B” goals lie between “A” and “C” goals. You think you do need to get them done pretty soon, but you really do not think you'll have time to do them today. Frequently, today's “B” goal becomes tomorrow's “A” goal. This happens as a deadline approaches or your anxiety increases. If you can't decide whether a goal should be “A” or “B,” automatically assign it a “B” (Curtis & Detert, 1981). If you're not certain that it's critical enough to be an “A” goal, it probably isn't.

Now, further prioritize each category of goals. Among the “A” goals that you absolutely feel you must get done, determine which one is the most critical life-or-death goal to attain today. Make this goal “A1.” Continue through your “A” goals, numbering them in order of priority. When finished, do the same thing first with your “B” goals and ultimately with your “C” goals. This should provide you with a clearly prioritized plan for how to go about your day. First, pursue goal “A1,” then “A2,” and so on down the line. Highlight 15.4 illustrates one person's goal planning for one day.

Note that you can prioritize goals in at least three major life areas, including “self, work, and family” (Curtis & Detert, 1981, p. 199). You can do this either separately or on one prioritized list. Highlight 15.4 includes goals in all three areas. Priorities depend on the individual's value system. The goals specified here would probably significantly differ from those you would formulate for yourself. But then again, maybe not.

Highlight 15.5 illustrates a potential prioritized goal list for a professional social worker working in a

## ■ HIGHLIGHT 15.4

### ■ *Prioritized Plan for “A Day in My Life”*

The following is an example of one individual’s daily goals, listed in an unprioritized order. They are followed by their designated “ABC” and numerical assignments.

#### Day: Monday

1. Finish Statistics assignment due Tuesday for class . . . . .	A3
2. Take Harry to the doctor . . . . .	A1
3. Go to aerobics class . . . . .	B5
4. Talk to Professor Tuffgrade regarding research project . . . . .	B1
5. Work at Wal-Mart for four hours . . . . .	A4
6. e-mail Kristen . . . . .	C3
7. Play poker . . . . .	B3
8. Clean the bathroom . . . . .	B4
9. Clean the refrigerator . . . . .	C2
10. Go to class . . . . .	A2
11. Buy beer for poker game . . . . .	B2
12. Watch <i>The Young and the Restless</i> . . . . .	C1
13. Call Mom . . . . .	B6

health-care center for the elderly. As we discussed, you can establish goals for virtually any area of your life.

**Step 4: Specify tasks for each goal.** After prioritizing your goals, it is helpful to list the specific tasks needed to accomplish each goal (Curtis & Detert, 1981; Filley, 1978). A hospital social worker might identify the goal of arranging Ms. Jones’s transfer from the hospital to a nursing home. She arbitrarily labels this goal “A1.” Specific tasks to accomplish this particular goal might include notifying Ms. Jones’s son and daughter, locating an appropriate nursing home, arranging transportation, working out financial arrangements, and notifying the nursing staff that arrangements are complete.

Obviously, these tasks need to be accomplished in a particular order. For example, you arrange transportation only after you know the nursing home in which the client will be placed. Thus, it is probably wise to assign numerical priority to each task to guide your progress from one task to the next.

It is also important to leave sufficient time to complete each step. Think ahead and try to estimate how much time each step will most likely take. Do not allow 30 minutes to transport Ms. Jones to the nurs-

ing home if the hospital is 45 minutes from the home—45 minutes, that is, when there is no summer road construction and you aren’t traveling during rush hour. In this case, it would be better to allow an hour and a half for the task.

#### ***Get Control of Your Own Behavior***

What do we mean by controlling your own behavior? Doesn’t everyone automatically control what he or she does everyday? The answer is no.

Time management involves more than planning daily goals. It requires following a number of principles that guide your choices for goal planning. These principles include committing yourself to the time management process, evaluating your actual job requirements, clustering similar activities together, using a calendar, handling each sheet of paper only once, delegating any tasks you can, avoiding doing other people’s work, bringing order to your desk, developing time management systems, planning time for contemplation, designating leisure time, managing meetings effectively, managing your correspondence appropriately, using the phone efficiently, and reviewing your weekly progress.



■ HIGHLIGHT 15.5

■ ***Prioritized Plan for a Professional Workday***

The numbered items to the left below make up a nursing home social worker’s unprioritized goal list for one workday. The arbitrarily prioritized “ABC” and numerical standings are depicted to the right of each goal below.

**Day: Monday**

- 1. Finish last week’s progress notes .....C1
- 2. Call Sybil about Ms. Siciperson .....A1
- 3. Meet with supervisor .....B1
- 4. Get resources for Mr. Ed .....B2
- 5. Take Ms. Harrington to her daughter-in-law’s .....A2
- 6. Complete resource file .....C2
- 7. Attend two-hour in-service .....B3
- 8. Run social support group .....A3

**Look at yourself.** Develop a time management perspective. Instead of falling prey to the various stresses discussed earlier, look yourself right in the eye and commit to time management. Sheafor and Horejsi (2003) suggest: “Come to terms with your resistance to using time management principles. Do not hide behind the claim that you are too busy to get organized. Some people appear busy because they are always in motion, but activity does not always mean that something is being accomplished. Make sure your activity is productive” (p. 196).

**Understand your job.** If you have a job, of course, you understand it, right? Not necessarily. We have established that most positions typically have job descriptions indicating what you are paid to do. However, many social work jobs are complicated. They involve not only your micro and mezzo obligations to clients, but also your macro responsibilities to your agency and community. They require a lot of discretion regarding what you should do and how. Discuss with your supervisor what your job description really is: What are your specific responsibilities (Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 1997)? Allow her or him to help you make decisions regarding how to prioritize goals and the respective tasks necessary to achieve them.

**Bunch similar activities together.** Sometimes, it is helpful to block portions of time for completing similar types of tasks (Fillee, 1978). Some social workers set

aside a specific day for doing paperwork. Others identify a portion of each day for tasks such as returning all phone calls. Concentrating on completing a cluster of similar tasks often saves the mental energy of switching from one orientation to another. It would probably be inefficient for you to spend every other fifteen minutes switching from studying policy to studying research. Focusing on one until you have completed your assignment and then moving on to the other is probably a much more coherent approach.

**Use a calendar.** Using a calendar does not mean just writing your appointments down. Employing a calendar means establishing a whole new perspective on time. Instead of trying to keep everything in your head, look at your calendar and let it guide you. It can tell you whether you have time to assume additional responsibilities. When someone asks you if you can do something, consult your calendar to see if you have sufficient time to undertake whatever tasks the new responsibility involves. Consider such factors as the time it will take to go from one responsibility to another. Agreeing to do something for which you do not have sufficient time results in overscheduling, a source of stress for many people.

Calendars come in many formats, including daily, weekly, or monthly; paper or electronic. It doesn’t matter which you choose. Select whatever format suits your needs and preferences best. Use your calendar

as a record of your work. Check off appointments that have been kept. Jot down mileage to and from appointments. Insert notes that will save you time, such as the room number of a hospitalized patient or the directions to your client's house.

The goal is to make your calendar an indispensable tool for managing your time. The calendar should go with you everywhere, along with an address book. In emergencies, you will have at your disposal both a means to reach people and your calendar. If you find yourself running behind, take a minute to call and notify your next appointment. If you do this, you will feel less pressure to race to your next stop. Both clients and colleagues will appreciate knowing your reasons for being late.

**Handle each sheet of paper only once.** What do you mean only once? Many people might respond to this suggestion in a similar manner. However, think about it. How much time can you waste reading a sheet of paper, putting it on your desk, losing it, thinking about it again, finding it on your desk, reading it again, and so on? Generally, if you don't have time to focus your attention on that piece of paper right now, keep it until another period in your day when you will have time to address it. You probably should take some time as soon as possible, because the letter or memo might be important. It might be a deadline notification from your supervisor or possibly a termination notice. Who knows? Making time for such activities highlights the importance of planning time for thinking and for responding to relevant correspondence.

An example of a colleague comes to mind: Sam is an avoider. If he is forced to take notes, they are typically brief and vague. Sam feels it's too difficult to both take notes and pay attention to what's going on. In one particular situation, he was recording the recommendations made at an important staff meeting. It was his turn. All other participants had already assumed similar responsibilities at other meetings. After the meeting, Sam got up, said he would finish the notes later, and left for his office. Days passed. Weeks dragged by. Meanwhile, in Sam's office, his sketchy notes drifted among the mounds of other paperwork on his paper-strewn desk. Occasionally, the notes surfaced, Sam looked at them, and then he put them down where they submerged themselves once again. Finally, after several other staff members reminded Sam about his task, he finished the notes. He complained energetically about how difficult this

task was. He whined about how hard it was to remember what occurred weeks ago. Sam's minutes were vague and did not capture the sense of the meeting. Sam wrote down what he thought he remembered from the meeting held weeks ago. The record was so bad that staff had to hold the same meeting all over again. This time, participants did not ask Sam to assume any note-taking responsibility.

Sam is also a procrastinator. A later portion of this chapter, "Procrastination," discusses this behavior and what to do about it.

**Delegate.** Too often, it is easy to feel that, in order to get something done right, you have to do it yourself. Instead, if at all possible, delegate (Fillee, 1978; Seaward, 2004). Delegating simply means assigning responsibilities to someone else. We have discussed delegation in the context of supervision, as a critical supervisory skill. Although it is probably easier for a supervisor to "assign" tasks to someone else, you can still watch for your own opportunities to do so. Is there some repetitive task that your secretary (or administrative assistant) might be able to do as part of her or his job? Are there volunteers or students available to help you?

Delegating, of course, requires defining what needs to be done with sufficient clarity that another person can complete the job. Next, leave the initiative with the delegatee. If you tell people exactly how to do a job, you limit their creativity and further involve yourself in details that should be left to others. Don't forget to thank people and reward them for helping you and for doing the job right. Like you, most people appreciate praise, acknowledgment, and other forms of recognition.

**Don't do other people's work.** In time management, the flip side of delegating is making certain you do your work and your work only, not that of other people (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). Consider Sam, the procrastinator mentioned earlier. People who regularly fail, do a poor job, or never really learn how to complete a task can be very manipulative. Others learn that they are not dependable. Therefore, they get out of a lot of work. Colleagues no longer ask Sam to take notes at meetings because he inevitably "screws it up." Thus, he does less work, and his colleagues take up the slack and do more.

If you tend to have high expectations for the quality of work, be vigilant that you do not end up doing other people's work because you do it better or more

effectively than they do. Think in terms of each individual being responsible for her or his own tasks and failings.

**Bring order to your desk.** Remember the adage “A messy desk reflects a messy mind.” No one knows if this is really true. However, organizing items on your desk so you can find them easily is a time saver (Yager, 1999). Additionally, if you follow the prior suggestion of handling each sheet of paper only once, organizing your desk will be easier. Instead of allowing documents to drift amid an ocean of paper, you will deal with each paper once and put it in its resting place.

Another aspect of bringing order to your desk is making sure the information you use frequently is readily at your disposal (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). You might have your telephone and address book with frequently used contacts in an obvious place. Likewise, you might retain certain forms, files, or manuals that you find particularly useful in a manila folder in your top stacking file or your top desk drawer. Saving time involves wasting as little as possible on useless activities, like looking for lost or hard-to-find information.

**Develop a system.** Develop some kind of system whereby you can keep track of your deadlines (Seaward, 2004). You can note deadlines on your regular monthly calendar. Perhaps what works best for you is to have a large monthly calendar as a desk pad or hanging over your desk. Your system might be more sophisticated, using a computer program. Try various methods. Whatever works for you is the best system.

**Leave time for contemplation.** Even with an ever-so-busy schedule, allow yourself some “downtime” each workday (Yager, 1999; Seaward, 2004). You need time to organize your thoughts and evaluate your progress toward your designated goals. If you are constantly harried and distracted, you can’t focus as well on the tasks and goals at hand.

**Designate leisure time for yourself.** Workaholics often burn out and have heart attacks at a young age. Incorporate some leisure time into your schedule on a regular basis. What happens when you don’t do this? Have you ever forced yourself to complete task after task after task with no relief in sight? Did you, perhaps, finally find yourself saying, “To heck with it” and end up doing nothing at all?

It is important to gain a realistic perspective on your time. Time with friends, family, and yourself alone are all important facets of life. If you control this and use such good time to reward yourself for work, you may find yourself working much more eagerly and effectively.

For example, we knew a student who would study like crazy virtually all day—in addition to going to class, of course—from about 9:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. However, unless she had an exam the following day, at 9:00 P.M. she would abruptly stop whatever she was doing and go off either to play sheepshead (a card game unique to Wisconsin and Minnesota) or to party until about midnight. She made a point of not feeling guilty about having fun, because she already had put her work time in. She felt she deserved some reward and relief.

**Manage meetings effectively.** Most social workers have many chances to arrange, conduct, and participate in meetings, which occur any time two or more people come together for some designated purpose, usually to pursue some type of goal. We have established that meetings involving social workers can range from staffings (where particular clients’ progress is discussed), to task groups (where a variety of professionals get together to do something, such as propose amendments to social work certification requirements), to large political meetings (where political tactics are discussed). Chapter 3 discussed a number of ways to manage meetings more efficiently and effectively, including: planning ahead, clarifying meeting purpose and objectives, carefully selecting participants, specifying time and place, preparing an agenda, starting on time, stating the ending time at the meeting’s beginning, periodically alerting participants to how much time remains, keeping the group on target, ending the meeting on time, and planning for follow-up meetings.

**Manage your correspondence.** Because correspondence (e-mails, letters, memos, announcements, and advertising) can consume a major portion of our busy time, it is appropriate to consider ways to manage this efficiently.

Write brief replies to e-mail or by hand as quickly as possible to correspondence you receive. Remember that it’s time-efficient to handle paper or address an e-mail message only once. If you answer immediately, you save the time required to re-read old messages.

Always keep a copy of what you send, even if doing so somewhat delays your response. Otherwise, especially if you have a deluge of paper and e-mail, you may not remember what you said, or, worse yet, whether you responded to the correspondence at all.

If possible, use established formats to structure your correspondence instead of “reinventing the wheel” and writing a totally new response each time. This is especially true if you routinely receive requests for similar information or need to send many people the same message. Of course, you can easily send the same response to a large group via e-mail. Tailoring each response to the individual recipient is also viable. You might keep examples of exceptionally well-written letters you receive or have sent to give you ideas about how to phrase things effectively.

Open second- and third-class mail including the “junk mail” we get both at home and at the office once a week near a recycling bin. It is probably not important enough to make a real claim on our time. You should either immediately throw it out without opening it or bunch it together and save it until you have a small block of slow time. Such slow time might include lunch if you’re having it at your desk, time waiting for an appointment to appear, or time at the end of the day when you are simply too “bushed” to do anything more difficult and productive.

If you doubt the efficacy of these suggestions, try this experiment. Save all your junk mail in a box for a week or two. When you open it, count the items you think are important. How many of them affected your day-to-day work as a social worker? How many of them had any importance in your personal life? The chances are good that most, if not all, of this material is of limited or no value.

**Use the phone efficiently.** Consider using conference calls instead of holding meetings. Conference calls are especially effective if the main reason for the meeting is to consult or to give information. Meetings take travel time, and much time is wasted getting started. Conference calls can be set up and managed at much less cost than many meetings.

Outline your phone calls before dialing. Think about what you want to say and note the most important points on a piece of paper. This will help you use your phone time efficiently and ensure that you cover everything you had planned to.

**Review your weekly progress.** At each week’s end, review the extent to which you actually achieved your

time-management goals. Were you on target? Or, did you overestimate (or underestimate) what you could accomplish for the week? How did this past week and the progress you made relate to your longer-term goals? Should your goals for next week be higher, lower, or about the same?

To get a perspective on time management for life, it is sometimes helpful to stop and ask yourself, “Is this the very best way I can be spending my time right now?” Periodically addressing this issue can help orient you to your life’s broader picture. You might find yourself working two hours overtime to get those rotten progress notes done while you are missing your 91-year-old grandmother’s birthday dinner. At such times, what really is most important to you? Does your quest for effective time management overshadow something else you might be doing that means more to you?

A related question to ask yourself occasionally is, “If I were faced with death this very moment, what would I regret?” Is there someone close to you that you haven’t contacted for too long a time? Have you managed to avoid making your will? Whatever your concerns might be, confronting yourself like this can help you manage major life priorities. Perhaps you haven’t had enough time for your family. The old cliché is that time passes too quickly. Small children soon grow up and move away. Old people get older and die. Is there time you should be spending with someone now—or soon—before it’s too late?

**Postscript.** Following these suggestions will help you use time more effectively. Because we can’t manufacture time, we have to ensure that we use it as efficiently as possible. The multiple responsibilities of social workers require that we adopt strategies to help us do our jobs better. Time management is just one of those strategies.

### ***Procrastination***

The third major time-management dimension is fighting the tendency to procrastinate. To *procrastinate* simply means “to put off doing something, especially out of habitual carelessness or laziness” (Pickett, 2002, p. 1111). Most of us, perhaps all of us, put off what we’re supposed to do at some time or another. No one is totally faultless. However, when procrastination interferes with your ability to accomplish your goals in a significant or ongoing manner, then you are no longer in control. To gain control of

your time, you can implement a number of techniques for fighting procrastination.

**Reasons for procrastination.** The first reason is the quest for flawlessness. Some people cannot tolerate being anything but 100 percent perfect. Given that no one is that perfect, this sets people up for failure. If you can't do it perfectly, why do it at all? Such an attitude prevents people from accomplishing their goals. Another aspect of the quest for flawlessness is putting the task off until another time. Perhaps you know that you will have to complete the task sometime. However, you are so averse to it right now (because you want to do it flawlessly) that it's easier to worry about the whole thing later.

A second reason is "fear of failure" (Jager, 1999, p. 34). It is no news flash that our society places extremely high value on success. We generally do not want to fail, no matter what. If you feel that you may fail to accomplish a task, it can be easier to avoid the task altogether.

A third reason is feeling overwhelmed. If you perceive a task as awesomely difficult and perhaps even scary, it may be easier for you to avoid it altogether than to do it and get it over with.

A fourth reason is nonassertive overacceptance of responsibilities. People who just can't say no to requests can easily overextend themselves. Trying to get too much done can distract you from getting anything done at all. We have discussed how easy it is to become overwhelmed, unable to focus on anything adequately, and immobilized.

The fifth reason is idling away your time with useless "busy-ness." You can avoid completing a task by doing something else and keeping busy. Busy-ness can provide you with an excuse for not doing what you're supposed to. For example, you might have to complete a research paper for one of your classes, and you hate doing research papers. You can avoid the actual writing of the paper by spending scores of hours in the library searching through stacks of articles—or by washing your car. Highlight 15.6 helps identify personal reasons for procrastination.

**The cons of procrastination.** Sometimes it seems that procrastination is your best choice. It allows you to avoid some unpleasant work. However, there are at least four reasons why procrastination is unappealing (Lakein, 1973). First, it's probably best that you complete your own task rather than passing it on to someone else. Shirking responsibility is irritating to

## ■ HIGHLIGHT 15.6

### ■ *Self-Analysis of Procrastination*

1. What tasks do you procrastinate over?
2. What are your reasons for procrastinating over them? Why do you find them aversive?
3. What tactics can you use to control your procrastinating behavior?
4. When will you begin implementing these tactics?

people. Others may not do the task the way you want it done or know it should be done. Additionally, you can get a bad reputation as someone who cannot effectively complete assigned work.

Second, unappealing tasks probably won't go away. They usually remain wedged in your consciousness, nagging you to get at them. Doing the task and getting it over with stops this bothersome nagging. Third, unappealing tasks rarely get any easier. If anything, the longer you put off a task, the harder it gets. Maybe you will forget some of the details. Possibly the task will increase in complexity as time goes on. Fourth, and perhaps worst, is that the longer you put something off, the more aversive it becomes. If it seems like it's bad to start out with, it will only get worse.

**Battling procrastination.** Procrastination plagues most of us at some time or another. So, what exactly do you do about it? Following are several suggested techniques:

1. *The "Swiss cheese" approach.* Lakein (1973, p. 71) suggests that you can often drastically reduce procrastination when you break up a large threatening task into a number of smaller, more manageable tasks. Even if you start doing a task for only five minutes, you are still combating procrastination and getting greater control over your time.

Suppose you have to write a twenty-page term paper. Thinking in terms of the entire gigantic paper—including all the research, thinking, and typing involved—can be paralyzing. Instead, divide the process into smaller, more doable pieces. First, go to the library and find some sources. Second, take notes on notecards from these sources. Third, make an outline of topics as the skeleton of your paper.

Fourth, arrange your notecards in the order that you think you will use them. Fifth, sit down and type a rough draft. Sixth, edit that draft. Seventh, type your final draft. When thinking about these seven smaller tasks, don't envision yourself doing them all at once. Picture yourself doing them on different days at various times. As you complete each task, you will gain the satisfaction that task completion can give you. At the same time, you will be chipping away at completion of the final project.

2. *Do the worst job first.* Often, anticipating a tough job keeps you from ever getting it done. Doing the job immediately means that other, less unappealing tasks will look better and easier in comparison. The other advantage of doing tough jobs first is that it ensures sufficient time to see the job through to completion. Saving the hard jobs until the end of the day often means that they don't get done.

3. *Complete whatever it is you start* (Filley, 1978). Coming back to an old project or task requires taking the time to get oriented to it again. You will probably need to waste precious time rethinking what you have already done. If you pick up an article to read, finish reading it. If you put it down and pick it up again later, you will probably have to re-read the beginning to get yourself oriented again. If you begin working on a letter or social history, finish it before turning your attention to other tasks. If you don't establish the habit of doing this, you will find your desk full of half-finished projects, most of which are probably overdue. Be persistent, even dogged, about finishing a task.

4. *Do it right now.* How many times have you heard friends say that they're going to quit smoking, lose twenty pounds, stop drinking, or study harder—someday? What have you noticed about these comments and these people's plans? Well, for one thing when they say they're going to do something, they obviously have not done it yet. Framing plans in the *going to* perspective is a good way to procrastinate.

We have a friend who is going to write a novel someday. She barely writes letters, but she is going to write that important novel. She's been going to write it for about fifteen years now. One minor related problem is that she can't spell very well and needs a lot of help with her grammar. A suggestion for becoming a good writer is to write—write a lot. Write right now. It need only be a page or two a day, but do it. Forcing yourself to do whatever your task is right now can save you a lot of wasted energy and worry (Curtis & Detert, 1981).

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