

HOW TO FEEL LESS BUSY AND GET MORE DONE

Laura Vanderkam



Feeling off the clock is exhilarating.

It is a key component of human happiness. And yet a life is lived in hours, and living the good life requires being a proper steward of those hours. This stewardship often requires choices that come from being mindful of time.

More broadly, it is hard to relax and enjoy time when there are looming projects whose constituent parts have not been mapped out, or amid the malaise of knowing swaths of your “wild and precious life,” as the poet Mary Oliver puts it, are lost to the vague anxiety of traffic, aimless meetings, and such that the brain doesn’t even catalog in memory.

So we come to some paradoxes. Being off the clock implies time freedom, yet time freedom stems from time discipline. You must know where the time goes in order to transcend the ceaseless ticking.

You can wander into philosophical knots on such matters, knots you might need to run miles along the coast to sort out, but I believe that part of wisdom is knowing that contradictory concepts can both be right when seen from a broader perspective.

The key is finding the right vantage point on the cliff to take in the full view, finding that look-out spot for understanding time freedom. It is about developing a new mind-set.

There will always be tension between knowing how we spend our time and moving beyond an obsession with the minutes. Yet this tension does not mean that both aren't simultaneously possible. Honoring time requires embracing certain truths: that time is precious and time is plentiful. Time is finite, so we must make smart choices about it. But time is also abundant: there is enough for anything that truly matters.

In years of studying people's schedules, I've talked to plenty of busy people who seem rushed and harried. Yet others, with similar time demands, seem relaxed. I well recall a conversation with an executive I hoped to interview about her astonishing productivity. I began our call with an assurance that I would not take much of her time. She laughed. "Oh, I have all the time in the world," she said.

Wouldn't it be nice to feel like that? For *Off the Clock*, I recruited 900 people with full-time jobs and families to track their time for a day. I asked how they felt about their time. I analyzed the differences between people who felt starved for time, and those who felt time was abundant. Seven strategies came up again and again—and can help anyone feel less busy while getting more done.

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1. Time Discipline Leads to Time Freedom

Want to feel relaxed about your time? You need to figure out where the time really goes. Try tracking your time for a week. Look over your schedule and decide what you like and don't like. Knowing where the time goes will make you feel more in control of your time. That will allow you to enjoy your down-time without worrying there's something else you should be doing.

2. Make Life Memorable

Often, when people say “where did the time go?” what they mean is that they can't really remember what they did with their time. When life isn't memorable, you don't remember it, and time starts to feel like it's slipping away. The answer? Plan in little mini-adventures into your life. If you can answer the question of why today is different from other days, you're more likely to remember it, and that will make you feel like you have more time.

3. Don't Fill Time

To have space for adventures, you need to clear the clutter from your calendar. One approach: Declare a time amnesty. For all your obligations, ask what you would add now if you were starting from a blank slate. If you wouldn't add it, see if you can wind it down, or at least minimize the time commitment, over the next 3-6 months. Don't fall prey to the temptation to say yes just because you're available. Open space invites opportunity in a way a cluttered calendar can't.

4. Learn to Savor Good Moments

Wouldn't it be great if a good moment could pass as slowly as a boring meeting? Time marches along at the same pace, but you can stretch the experience of pleasant moments by learning to savor them.

Choose something on your calendar that you're excited about. Spend some time anticipating your pleasure. During the experience itself, try to slow down and take in your surroundings. Talk about how much you are enjoying yourself. Talk about the experience afterwards. You'll create a much deeper memory than if the time passes mindlessly.

5. Invest In Your Happiness

When people say they want more time, what they mean is more time spent doing things they're happy about. No one wants to spend more time in a traffic jam! Analyze your schedule and see when you're counting minutes. Is there any way you could improve your experience of this time? Maybe you convert a boring meeting into a walking meeting, and get some fresh air. Maybe you listen to a favorite podcast during your commute. Some suffering can't be changed, but if it can be changed, change it.

6. Take One Small Step

Big goals can seem overwhelming, but small steps taken repeatedly do add up. Want to write a book? Write 500 words a day, and you'll have a draft in a year. Rather than lament all you're not doing, be gentle on yourself and celebrate consistent small steps. You'll probably get more done.

7. Make Relationships a Priority

The happiest people make space in their schedules for family and friends. Try planning your weeks on Friday afternoons. Make yourself a 3-category priority list: career, relationships, self. Making a 3-category list will nudge you to put something in all 3 categories! It's pretty hard to make a 3-category list and then leave one of the categories blank. Creating relationship priorities for the week will automatically make these activities seem more important, and will encourage you to invest time with the people who make time feel more rich and vast.

Life offers possibilities we have only begun to imagine. The lure is a life that is full and calm. Most of us want to claim more joy from our hours for this simple reason: a life is made of hours. How we live those hours—and whether we make the most of those hours—will add up to how we live our lives.

This brings us back to the concept of time freedom.

Because life is complex, being off the clock and experiencing time freedom is likewise a complicated concept. People who spend their days waking up too early to commute too far to jobs where too many hours are dictated will likely view being off the clock as the traditional definition: not working.

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And yet as I study people who feel that time is abundant, I see that it is possible to feel off the clock even while doing paid work. When you are absorbed in solving an interesting problem, you can lose all sense of time, just as might happen during a dinner with old friends. And in arranging that dinner with old friends, we soon see that while we can feel relaxed when we have no time-specific obligations, sometimes having plans can make us feel more relaxed than not having plans. Lingering over wine with friends requires inviting them over, and being mindful of the time that will happen, but then once they are there we enjoy ourselves so much more, and feel so much more like time is abundant, than if we were spending an equivalent evening doing what most people do when they have nothing on the calendar: watching TV or glancing at their phones just often enough to feel on edge.

Sometimes commitments literally give us more time. In one of the most famous experiments in social science, elderly residents of a nursing home given plants to care for lived longer and were in better health than those without such responsibilities.

Better health and longevity means you are free to do things you otherwise would not be able to. This phenomenon shows up in other contexts of obligation as well. A strong marriage meets enough emotional needs that people feel free to take big risks in the outside world. Having children takes a ton of work, and yet the emotional intensity of raising them can slow time down, if you open yourself to that possibility.

Perhaps this sounds like another paradox: freedom does not mean having zero obligations, but I think it's helpful to see that freedom is multifaceted. It must be viewed from a broader vantage point to be understood. There is freedom from things we don't want to do, but there is also freedom to do the things we want to do, and figuring out the right balance requires understanding when commitments are burdens and when they are benefits.

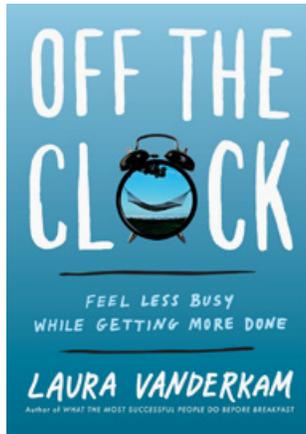
Ultimately, in my definition, time freedom is about having blissful moments of no immediate obligations, and also choosing obligations—including lines cast into the future in the form of plans—with an eye toward building a life that allows for meaning and a sense of time's abundance.

It is about going full-in on these commitments so they become sources of identity. Caring about community is abstract, but tending a neighborhood garden might be the proof in the experience of hours. These choices involve commitments, but they also stretch time, because as you choose to spend time on these things, you become in your mind the kind of person who has the time to spend on these things. As a wealthy person allocates her capital to different investments, you likewise allocate your resources in pursuit of the returns you desire.

Time is fluid, and these allocations may need to change in different seasons. But being off the clock means dealing with time on your terms. You are in control. Time is not something to be feared, a steady drumbeat marching toward doom. It is no more than an idea, to be studied and manipulated as an artist might use her materials. Once you develop this mind-set of freedom, you can make choices to stretch time where you wish it to stretch. You can free it up where you wish to free it up. You can move tasks around to make more of them fit into your life than most people think is possible. **You can deepen the experience of individual moments to the point where time almost seems to stand still.** 📖



Info



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About the author

Laura Vanderkam is the bestselling author of *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*, *I Know How She Does It*, and *168 Hours*, among others. Her 2016 TED talk, “How to Gain Control of Your Free Time,” has been viewed more than 5 million times. Her work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, and other publications. She lives with her husband and their four children outside Philadelphia.

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