Everyone is busy being busy

“I am so busy keeping my head above water that I scarcely know who I am, much less who anyone else is.”  
[Sylvia Plath]

In our modern lives, it often feels like we are constantly trying to do more with less. Our always-on culture blurs the boundaries between work life and home life. These pressures lead to stress and anxiety, which often prevent us from doing what is most important. Emotional and physical exhaustion and feelings of low personal accomplishment lead to burnout, an increasing threat to our work force (Drummond, 2015; Kane, 2019). Skills centered on organization, prioritization, time management, and minimizing
distractions are increasingly essential for improved productivity. Our headspaces swim with all the things we need to do, and we begin the day asking the age-old question: How am I going to get it all done?

How do you do it all?

“You can do anything, but not everything.” — [David Allen]

Though many of us think of ourselves as great multitaskers, it turns out that only about 2% of us can truly multitask (the so-called supertaskers). What the majority of us are doing is called “serial mono-tasking,” or “task switching”: the shifting of attention and focus between two or more tasks. Task switching leads to decreased efficiency and increased rates of errors (American Psychological Association, 2006; Skaugset et al., 2016). According to one study, attempted multitasking is up to 40% less efficient, especially when working on complex or new tasks (Rubinstein et al., 2001).

It also seems that the more you try to multitask, the less efficient you get at all the tasks you are trying to accomplish (Ophir et al., 2009). Resist the trap of “being busy.” Understand that “doing it all” is a myth and multitasking is not the answer. Instead, focusing on the right things and doing those well tends to be a better path toward achieving your goals. In many instances, this comes from doing less, in general, while spending more time doing more of the things that matter most (McKeown, 2014).

How do you say no?

You cannot learn how to say no until you identify your “yes’s.” Spending dedicated time considering your core values is extremely important and will shed a light on the right things you should be doing. Many people do not spend enough time on this step, or even skip it altogether. This is also a process that needs to be repeated, because core values can change over time. Although there are a lot of wonderful, possible core values to consider, this is a brutal process in which you must eliminate the good and even the very good contenders until your list includes three to five of the very best values, which you can then turn into personal core value statements (Table 1).

This list should provide a true reflection of who you are, what you are about, and where you want to go. This is the list that should guide all to-do lists going forward. There are helpful instructions to aid in this process for those who have not done this exercise in the past or who have not felt that their list has guided them in times of tough decision-making (Jeffrey, 2014). Once you have finalized your list of core values, write them down and keep them in a place that you see every day so that they are always solidly in mind, lest you get busy again and find yourself compromising on what should help to define the “yes’s” and “no’s” of your life.

Table 1. Examples of core values and associated core value statements.

| Core value examples | Core value statement examples |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Compassion          | Lead with compassion: Remember everyone has a story. Say yes to health: Prioritize spending time to promote a healthy mind, body, and spirit. |
| Health              | Be in constant pursuit of excellence: Learn from mistakes and seek out opportunities for growth and improvement. |
| Excellence          | Let ethics guide: Do the right thing. Always. |
| Ethical             | Start with gratitude: Look first to appreciation, rather than accept aggravation. |
| Gratitude           | Go paperless

Get rid of the pile-and-Post-It system

Stop spending energy on remembering where you need to look to find important papers, journal articles, children’s art projects, recipes, or parts of to-do lists on various Post-It notes stuck all over the house and office. This is not a system that you can trust. Additionally, all those papers, books, and journals are taking up space in your office, on your desk, and, most importantly, in your head. Ultimately, this type of untrustworthy, cluttered system zaps your energy before you even begin to get stuff done. If you are willing to put in the time and let go of the piles, improved personal productivity will follow (Lackey et al., 2014). You will need a scanner, a weekend (or longer), and a shredder. Set up a reference manager, such as Evernote or One Note. If you are an academic and write a lot of papers, a citation manager will be useful.

The first rule is this: If you can look it up online, you must get rid of the paper copy. No more journals on the shelf or in piles by your desk. If you cannot easily look it up or would like to keep the paper copy and reference it at a later time, scan it and file it digitally in a searchable reference or citation manager. There are very few documents that you may want to consider keeping the hard copy on file. Once scanned or filed, recycle the piles of paper so that they no longer clutter your workspace.

Unfortunately, you cannot “win the game” when it comes to paper piles except temporarily, and one pile must remain: the paper inbox. This is often a single desk tray that collects paper, such as mail or articles you would like to read before recycling or documents you must review or sign before placing in the outbox. Depending on how much paper your job or life collects, you will want to build in time during each day, week, or month to appropriately process it using the above scanning methods.

Learn the getting things done workflow or another trusted system

“Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.” — [David Allen]

Ideally, your brain should not be cluttered with all the things you need to do, think you need to do, or are worried you will forget to do. Rather, your brain should be freed up to think and come up with new ideas. A simple, trusted system reliably keeps everything organized and on track so you do not need to try to keep it in your head. My personal favorite is the Getting Things Done (GTD) system developed by David Allen, whom many would consider the father of modern-day personal productivity (Allen, 2015; David Allen Company, 2019).

Consider learning and adopting such a simple system, which starts with collecting all of the stuff after identifying the inboxes in your life. The stuff tends to fall into only a few different categories. First, ask yourself, “Is this stuff actionable?” If not, the majority of stuff probably can be deleted/recycled/trashed. If you want to keep it because it may be useful to you at a future time, then it is a reference. If you look at your stuff and decide it is actionable, and you need to do something with it, then ask yourself: “Will this task take less than two minutes?” If yes, then do it. If that task will take longer than 2 minutes, ask yourself if you are the person who needs to do it, and if not, delegate that task.

If you are the person who needs to take care of this longer-than-2-minute task, then ask yourself if it is something that must be done at a certain place/time/with certain people, such as appointments, meetings, and so on. These items belong on your calendar, and you must block time on your schedule to do these things. If this item is something that you need to do but it can be done anytime, it goes to your task manager, which is what replaces those
Post-It notes. As an example, a modified GTD workflow for the simple management of e-mail is shown in Fig. 1.

No more Post-It notes

Digital and analog systems for task management exist, and the right one for you depends on what tasks you need to track and how you personally work (Pot, 2019; Schmitz, 2019). Good task managers should be able to reliably capture everything you need to do from all of the other inboxes in your life, and a digital task manager should be accessible across platforms. I would advise everyone to adopt a task manager that fits with his or her workflow: develop a system that allows you to get everything out of your head and generate a reasonable daily or weekly to-do list.

Use your calendar

“The things that get scheduled are the things that get done.”
[Robin Sharma]

In my opinion, it is important to work with one calendar. Having more than one calendar runs the risk of having to be in two places at once, sometimes without even realizing it—a nightmare for most of us. In addition to scheduling obvious things such as appointments, meetings, and clinics, consider scheduling anticipated urgent things so that there is blocked time to do them without getting hijacked by them later (Huber, 2019). Oftentimes, this is something as mundane as e-mail: something almost all of us have to do on a daily basis but rarely schedule time in our day to do. Additionally, consider what important things need time blocked off on your calendar to ensure that they get done.

Manage your priorities, not just time

“If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.”
[Greg McKeown]

Generating a to-do list does not always result in the biggest possible gains in productivity, unless it is prioritized. You must consider the most important task on your daily to-do list. In the field of personal productivity, the most important task has become synonymous with the frog. More often than not, your frog is also the task that is hardest and the one you are most likely to procrastinate doing.

This term comes from Brian Tracy’s classic book, Eat That Frog (Tracy, 2006). The title stems from a Mark Twain quote: If the first thing you do each morning is to eat a live frog, you can go through the day with the satisfaction of knowing that that is probably the worst thing that is going to happen to you all day long. This tenet of modern personal productivity to eat your frog first (Schmitz, 2011) ensures a maximally productive day. As a bonus, once you have finished the hardest, most important thing on your to-do list, the remaining tasks should be very easy to complete.

The AIR method for the two-career household

Although you will most certainly increase your personal productivity by adopting a trusted system for managing all the things you need to do, even when using a small group of guiding core values to help you decide which of those things are most important and setting aside time on the calendar to execute those tasks, you may still find yourself unable to get everything done. This is especially true when you are not working alone but as part of a productive partnership. The challenge increases when there are even more people in the household, such as children, with their own schedules and agendas.

I have often found myself excited to wake up to execute my plans to have a productive day, only to realize that everyone else in the house feels the same. I soon realized that involving my equally busy partner in many of these steps improves both of our odds for success. If my partner was not aware and supportive of my projects and priorities, it would translate into me losing out on protected time to GTD because he was planning on getting his own things done. Often, one particular partner ends up giving up their GTD time in deference to the other’s plans. Over time, this can result in missed deadlines, unmet goals, and feelings of dissatisfaction and even resentment. I realized that the system was sound, but my partner and I needed to connect on a productivity level. To this end, we developed the align-integrate-reflect (AIR) method for the two-career household, but it is applicable to any close collaboration.

AIR: Align, integrate, reflect

In the two-career household, it is even more important that you have defined your “yes”s through developing your list of core values and by aligning your projects and tasks with these values to
ensure you are focusing on what is most important to the group. Both partners should generate their own list of core values, but this will serve the partnership well over time by creating a third list: a group of integrated “joint core values” or “family core values.”

There is often some overlap, but there likely will be some differences; this is an opportunity to make sure you are both on the same page and to define that page together as a couple. If you both operate using separate lists to guide you through life, someone may get lost. So, define your “yes”s as a couple to help you recognize your “no”s, and continue to refine the integrated list of core values as you reflect over the years on how well they provide clarity in difficult times. As with your personal list of core values, you should keep this list where you both can see it and be reminded of what is really important to you both as you start each day. This will ensure your choices that day will align best with the list you co-created.

Keep a shared calendar. By combining your calendars in this way, you can quickly and easily understand your partner’s availability in a given day or week. It also will allow you to easily see what times are open for you to schedule your time. Without doing this, you risk your time getting hijacked when one person needs to cancel something last minute to yield to the other persons’ plans. Do not forget to schedule time for each other in addition to all of the work stuff and other appointments that often take up space on the calendar but may not be the most aligned with your joint core values. Honor each other’s time the way you would a work meeting or doctor’s appointment.

An important consideration is that while you do want to share. Your calendars, you want to be very careful about sharing your task managers, which arguably should remain separate. If you happen to be part of a particularly productive partnership, combining to-do lists may get unnecessarily overwhelming. However, integrating each other in the process of generating daily to-do lists is effective. Once a week, sitting down together with your shared calendar and task managers to preview what each of you need to get done can be useful. If, for example, my partner has a couple of grant deadlines coming up in the next week or two, I populate my to-do list with easier, simpler items that I can realistically accomplish while he likely will be busy. This will allow me to continue to move my projects forward, albeit slowly that week, but neither of us has to give something up entirely or set ourselves up for failure.

However, if I am the one with upcoming deadlines or he has less that he needs to get done the following week, I populate my to-do list with harder or more tasks, and he throttles back. The tradeoff for the two-career household is often the speed with which goals are accomplished, but by playing the long game, everyone can ultimately make it over the finish line rather than only one partner always achieving at warp speed. I think of it like a potato sack race: We either both win, or neither does. It is not pretty or quick, but it will all get done.

Once we generate our daily to-do lists, we look to prioritize them by identifying our most important tasks (or frogs). As a couple or a family, we try to integrate the step of identifying our frogs daily so that we can best enlist each other’s support and ensure everyone has as successful a day as possible.

Finally, we have found it useful to keep a productivity journal and share our entries with each other at the end of the day. Jotting down three things that got done that day, no matter how big or how small, takes less than 2 minutes. No matter how organized you are or how efficient your system runs, life does get busy. It is very easy to reach the end of the day and say to yourself or your partner, “Today was so busy; I got nothing done!” By sharing and reflecting on our busy days, we realize that although it felt like a whirlwind, we did get stuff done. We can celebrate with each other the little, or sometimes big, things that we each check off our to-do lists. That leaves us with a positive, productive energy that we can roll into the next morning to do it all over again.

David Allen talks about the idea of "Mind Like Water," "the mental and emotional state in which your head is clear, able to create and respond freely, unencumbered with distractions and split focus." This state of mind, he argues, results in organization, productivity, and creativity. In a two-career household, for a productive couple, I would argue that you need to be even more flexible, fluid, and ready to adapt to anything: You need a Mind Like AIR.

Conflict of interest
None.

Funding
None.

Study Approval
NA.

References
Allen D. Getting things done: the art of stress-free productivity, revised ed. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books; 2015.
American Psychological Association. Multitasking: Switching costs [Internet]. 2006 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: https://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask.
David Allen Company. GTD [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: https://gettingthingsdone.com/resources;
Drummond D. Physician burnout: Its origin, symptoms, and five main causes. Fam Pract Manag 2015;22(5):42–7.
Huber L. How to master your priorities with the urgent-important matrix [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: https://jmedium.com/swih/how-to-master-your-priorities-with-the-urgent-important-matrix-.a7904de55266.
Jeffrey S. Core value exercise [Internet]. 2014 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: https://scottjeffrey.com/personal-core-values/.
Kane L. Medscape dermatologist lifestyle, happiness & burnout report 2019 [Internet], 2019 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: http://www.medscape.com/slideshow/2019-lifestyle-dermatologist-6011111.
Lackey A, Moshiri M, Pandey T, Lall C, Lalwani N, Bhargava P. Productivity, part 1: Getting things done, using e-mail, scanners, reference managers, note-taking applications and text expanders. J Am Coll Radiol 2014;11(5):481–9.
McKeown G. Essentialism: the disciplined pursuit of less. New York, NY: Crown Business; 2014.
Ophir E, Nass C, Wagner AD. Cognitive control in media multitaskers. PNAS 2009;106(37):15583–7.
Pot J. The 11 Best to do list apps in 2019 [Internet]. 2019. [cited]. Available from: https://zapier.com/blog/best-todo-list-apps/.
Rubinstein JS, Meyer DE, Evans JE. Executive control of cognitive processes in task switching. J Exp Psychol Hum Percept Perform 2001;27(4):763–97.
Schmitz M. Eat that frog – do your most important tasks in the morning [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: http://www.asianefficient.com/habits/eat-that-frog-most-important-tasks/.
Schmitz M. How to achieve your goals with any task management system [Internet]. 2011 [cited 2019 October 1]. Available from: http://www.asianefficient.com/task-management/simple-task-management/.
Skaugset LM, Farrell S, Carney M, Wolff M, Santen SA, Perry M, et al. Can you multitask? Evidence and limitations of task switching and multitasking in emergency medicine. Ann Emerg Med 2016;68(2):189–95.
Tracy B. Eat that frog! twenty-one great ways to stop procrastinating and get more done in less time. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers; 2006.