

Time Management Habits: How to Develop Good Ones and Kick Bad Ones

by Margaret Spencer Dixon, Esq.

Habit is the flywheel of society, its most precious conserving agent.... The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their proper work. There is no more miserable person than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of deliberation. Half the time of such a man goes to deciding or regretting matters which ought not to exist for his consciousness at all.

-- William James

All of us are creatures of habit. The \$64,000 question is: do your particular habits help you or hurt you? It is equally important to question whether you have consciously chosen which habits to cultivate and which to avoid. Have you unwittingly fallen into patterns of behavior simply because it has not occurred to you to question whether it would be worthwhile to try to change them?

This article will discuss three common habits that harm professional effectiveness: perfectionism, worrying, and postponing pleasure. Then, we will talk about how to change bad habits and cultivate good ones.

When Bad Habits Happen to Good People

Some of our most insidious bad habits sneak up on us because they are simply good habits taken to an extreme, or otherwise applied inappropriately. Here are some examples.

1. **The habit of perfectionism.** "I'm a perfectionist," you confess (or brag?) to your colleagues. "I'd never have gotten this far if I weren't." Yet there is a difference between perfectionism and excellence, and it involves knowing when to exercise your perfectionism and when good enough really is good enough. While it is important to spend your time and talent on producing a clearly written, well-polished brief, applying the

same kind of energy on a routine letter or in-house memorandum is probably not the most productive use of your efforts.

2. **The habit of worrying.** How often have you spent a lot of time and emotional energy worrying about something that might – or might not – occur? And, how often has your worrying had any effect on whatever you were worrying about? If your concern led you to take some constructive action – such as making a difficult decision or taking effective measures to prevent the unwanted outcome – then your worrying was worthwhile. Yet how often do we limit our fretting to that amount necessary to spur us to action? Not often. We waste enormous amounts of time on fruitless worry – resulting in reduced productivity and increased stress.
3. **The habit of postponing pleasure.** Most lawyers are so busy focusing on the next deposition, trial, or brief that all planned recreation and relaxation is postponed until after that work is finished. This approach works well – for a while. At some point, especially if you are extremely successful, you realize that there's always more work on the horizon. If your approach is "no play until you've finished all your work," it's easy to become overwhelmed and depressed. Practicing law is a marathon, not a sprint. In the not-so-long run, you will be more effective if you learn to pace yourself by scheduling at least minimal R&R, even during the crunch periods.

How to Change Your Habits

1. **Recognize your habits.** The first step to changing a habit is to be aware of it. This step is particularly important in connection with the three types of habits discussed earlier because these habits involve overusing traits which, when used appropriately, are necessary for professional success. Being aware of and concerned about problems and potential problems, paying attention to detail, and deferring gratification can be

extremely positive traits. It is only when they are not kept within reasonable limits that they become negative habits. Realizing that our positive traits have developed into bad habits requires self-awareness, objectivity, and even some humility.

2. **Decide to change.** The second step is simply deciding to change the habit. Identify why you want to change, and point out to yourself both the advantages of changing (the carrot) and the disadvantages of not changing (the stick). Make a conscious determination that the costs of a particular behavior of yours outweigh its benefits. This serves three functions: (i) it helps you understand why you developed the habit in the first place; (ii) it buttresses your decision to change; and (iii) it motivates you to move away from the stick and toward the carrot.
3. **Decide how you want to change.** The third step is figuring out precisely how you want to change your behavior. Determine the specific situations in which you want to act differently and how you will act differently in those situations. For example, if your habit is perfectionism, decide how much attention to detail is appropriate for a particular project and how that attention should be focused. An internal memorandum, for example, might justify only one revision for style and content (and as many revisions as necessary to correct actual errors), while an appellate brief would justify multiple revisions for form and substance.
4. **Act on your decisions.** The fourth step is acting on these decisions. This is the tough part. Any change from the familiar is difficult, and it is particularly difficult to change behavior that is not appropriate in some situations while perfectly appropriate in others. Returning to the perfectionist example, if you are used to applying your high standards to all of your work, it can be very painful to decide that the effective use of your time requires you to refrain from focusing this talent on the lower priority items. At these difficult times, recharge your motivation to change by reminding yourself of the costs of unfettered perfectionism and the value of freeing

up your time and energy to focus on the truly important items.

5. **Persist.** The fifth and final step in changing a habit is persistence. Do not expect that you will change completely, effortlessly, and overnight. Rather, expect that your progress will be sporadic. From time to time you will regress despite your good intentions. If you resolve from the outset to continue making the effort to change despite the inevitable difficulties, your ultimate success is practically assured.

Habits to Adopt

Now that you are on your way to eradicating your bad habits, here are some suggestions for good habits to adopt in their place. Use the same procedure to instill a good habit that you use to erase a bad one – decide, motivate yourself by articulating the benefits and costs of the habit, figure out how and when to change your behavior, act on your decision, and persist in acting on it despite setbacks. Consider adopting any or all of the following:

1. **Use a *three item* “daily action list.”** If your “to-do” list runs to multiple pages, try picking only the three most important items. Focus on working on those items – and only those items – until you finish them. (Emergencies can muscle their way onto the list as newly-prioritized “most important” items.) Keep your longer “to-do” list for ease of future planning.
2. **Arrange for an hour or two of uninterrupted time every day during your high-energy periods.** Have your calls screened. Hide out in the library, or come in early. You can get much more accomplished during periods of high concentration, and knowing you can look forward to such times with reasonable certainty is a stress-buster by itself.
3. **Keep your office organized.** The costs of disorganization – in terms of time, stress, lost opportunities, and potential malpractice claims – are enormous. Set up a *simple* chronological filing system for your work projects, and a *simple* alphabetical filing system for miscellaneous in-

formation, and develop the habit of using them consistently.

4. **Make minor decisions promptly.** Much of the paper clutter that builds up in your office is tangible evidence that you have been procrastinating on minor decisions. Check out the paper piled on your desk right now. How many of the items will you eventually resolve (whether by filing, tossing, or responding) without needing any additional information? Usually, all you have to do is make a decision – whether to attend the event, subscribe to the publication, respond to the request for a donation, etc. Resolve to get in the habit of making minor decisions at the first possible opportunity.
5. **Think on paper.** This good habit is especially useful in the following situations:
 - ◆ At the creative stages of projects, have your own private brainstorming session on paper, including even your most outlandish ideas.
 - ◆ For making decisions, draw a line down the center of a piece of paper and make two columns: pro and con.
 - ◆ For conquering the worry habit, write down the answers to these questions: Precisely what am I worried about? What, if anything, *can* I do about it? What *should* I do about it? (Make a pro and con chart if necessary.) When will I act on the decision?

The Most Important Habit

The habit of self-improvement is never-ending. The good news is that the moment you start working on reducing your bad habits or increasing your good ones, you have automatically begun the most important habit, that of monitoring your behavior in order to improve it – and yourself.

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