



## Too busy to relax?

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Today I am going to exercise. *Finally!* I plan to leave my office early and go to the gym on my way home. I just need to complete a few telephone calls and I will be on my way. Suddenly, the emergency department calls. Mrs S. is back with congestive heart failure and will likely need admission. There goes my new resolution. By the time I leave the emergency department, it is time to go home, have a quick bite to eat, and take the kids to their soccer game. Tomorrow I have a meeting at the hospital, a full office, and a visit to the nursing home. I also promised to take my wife out to dinner. And I will have to make time to reassess Mrs S. at some point, somehow.

Does this look like a version of your day? Welcome to the club!

### Time for change

As a typical physician, your life is full and overflowing with activities, and you cannot seem to get ahead. Even your plans for some free time are swallowed by unexpected requests. Any vacations you have are great while they last, but when you return you wonder where the vacation went. All of this gives you the feeling of being trapped, helpless, and unable to control your life. You know this type of feeling is not very healthy.

You might have tried reading books to help you with these feelings, but the advice is often too complex or time-consuming. Perhaps you have tried rushing to yoga or meditation classes but have missed most of them. Anyway, these activities only appear like one more thing to do in the middle of a busy life; one extra thing that does not make much difference in the end.

You begin to accept fatigue as your daily companion and busyness as inescapable. And slowly you start to lose your enjoyment in living and practising medicine. Is there a way to avoid this? Is there a way to bring some fun back into your daily life? *Yes!*

Many things can be done to bring back fun, a sense of control, and relaxation into your day without increasing demands on your time. Incorporating new habits into your life is a great and easy way to do that, and I would like to introduce to you the most effective ones.

### Eight new habits

**1. Practise deep breathing.** You already breathe; you just have to do it better. Taking a deep breath brings many benefits, and it is the easiest way to take a short

break or "vacation" on a regular basis. Deep breathing can help you to do the following:

- slow down,
- increase awareness of the present moment,
- increase awareness of your own feelings and tensions, and
- decrease stress.

Try a deep breathing exercise (**Box 1**) several times a day.

#### Box 1. Steps to deep breathing

Practise this deep breathing exercise:

- Close your eyes
- Take a deep breath in while you slowly count to 4, and then pause briefly
- Exhale slowly counting to 4, and then pause
- Repeat the cycle 5 times
- Keep your breathing smooth and regular, and breathe from the abdomen

**2. Use "dead time" positively.** You have moments in your day that seem like a waste of time (eg, sitting at a red light, waiting in line, walking somewhere, getting a haircut). Instead of looking at these moments of "dead time" as a waste, why not look at them as special moments when you can stop for a break or as a sort of "gift" in your busy day? Look what you can do during these moments of "dead time."

- Practise deep breathing.
- Stretch your arms and neck and relax your shoulders while waiting at a red light.
- Enjoy the feeling of the present moment with no demands on you.
- Practise gratefulness.

Using "dead time" to think about everything you need to do later will not help you get ahead. It will only contribute to your misery.

**3. Use reminders.** You are convinced that you want to incorporate deep breathing into your day. But it is now bedtime, and you realize that you completely forgot to practise deep breathing. One way to remember to do the exercise is to use common daily events as reminders. For example, when the telephone rings, do not answer it right away. Slowly take deep breaths instead.

**4. Develop mindfulness.** Mindfulness is the practice of living in the present moment. Mindfulness makes you

present and gives fullness to your life. It teaches you to enjoy the little pleasures of life that you forget along the way and increases your life satisfaction.

- While at a red light, become aware of your body. Do you notice tension or restlessness? It is a good time to stretch, practise deep breathing, and consciously relax your body. Also, pay attention to your feelings or thoughts and be aware of what is going on inside you.
- Become aware of a mundane activity at least once during the day. It could be something simple like drinking a glass of water, walking across the parking lot, or taking a shower. Whatever it is, focus completely on that activity. Feel, taste, and discover something you have been doing all these years without paying attention to it.

**5. Develop gratitude.** Being grateful greatly increases life satisfaction and decreases depression.

- Once a week, write down 5 things for which you are grateful.
- Have a gratitude day once a week: a day when you focus only on positive things.
- See your life in a positive way. Do not see yourself as being overwhelmed, lacking time, or having too many difficult patients. See the good in what you do and the help you give to people.

**6. Control your attitude.** A glass is half full or half empty, depending on how you see it. Likewise, you might look at any situation in your life in a positive or negative way. Looking at a situation negatively only increases your distress and discomfort. Become aware of your thoughts, challenge them, and control them in a positive way.


- Why do you think it is bad to be busy? Some might see being busy as a very positive and meaningful situation.

- If something is difficult, does it mean it is bad? Look at it as a learning experience, a time of growth, or a personal challenge.

**7. Control your time.** Take control of your time. If you are always running behind, are always rushing from place to place, are always late, others are not responsible: *you* probably are! Find the cause of what keeps you from being on time and address the issue. For example, if you are constantly running late in your office, is it because you arrive late in the morning? In that case, start at the office earlier. Do you overbook patients? You need to identify the optimum number of patients to see in an hour, and stick to it. Do you have patients who take a lot of time? Identify them with your receptionist; book sufficient time to see them; and do not book too many difficult patients in a day.

**8. Value relationships.** You are not alone, and relationships are really what make life valuable: parents, spouses, children, and friends. Unfortunately, there is no recipe for a quick fix in this area. It is important to value and take the time to nurture relationships.

## Slowly and consistently

Perhaps you are overwhelmed by all the changes I have proposed. When introducing new habits, the following is important to remember: start slowly; incorporate only 1 new habit at a time and keep practising it for several weeks. Then you can incorporate another new habit. This is the only way to renew your life and mind on a permanent basis—one small step at a time. Keep it easy and simple, and be consistent. 

**Dr Erhard** is a family and sports medicine physician in Winnipeg, Man.

**Competing interests**  
None declared

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