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Hey there... how's everything going? That, or some version of it, is a fairly common question that we likely get asked often. Whether it's a casual chat with friends or while we wait for stragglers to show up for a Zoom meeting, the question serves double duty as a greeting and a proven conversation starter. While the opening line may be somewhat predictable, the response is even more consistent: Busy. Or perhaps, super busy. Maybe the person you ask even breaks out the big guns and hits you with both barrels: *CRAZY* busy. Boom...enough said. We get it because we too are crazy busy and can relate! It's a universal language that we are all fluent in, but it's definitely a language we can unlearn. (As a fun experiment over the next week, keep a running mental tab how many times you hear someone describe their life as some variation of busy.)

This is the part where some law-breaking can serve us well.

In particular, this law is one you may not even know by name, but you're almost sure to be familiar with its effects. Parkinson's Law states that the amount of work expands to fill the time available for its completion. The name comes from the British author, Cyril Parkinson, who studied and first wrote about it in 1955. Cyril was a bit of a subject matter expert, having worked in the British Civil Service bureaucracy. His experiences and research consistently showed that if an employee had a deadline of a week to do a task, then one way or another, it would not be completed any sooner than the maximum allotted time. That held true even if it was something that should only take a day to complete.

In Cyril's workplace setting the logic is easy to understand. There was no incentive for an individual employee to finish their task sooner than required. Doing so would only result in more work being assigned while simultaneously decreasing popularity amongst coworkers who were stretching assignments as long as possible to minimize effort. That reasoning may have worked well in that particular setting, but it isn't doing us any favors in our personal life.

Productivity and procrastination go hand-in-hand with Parkinson's Law, and the 1st step in increasing the former while decreasing the latter is focusing your awareness of how this time creep is taking place in your own life. Curtailing that tendency to letting tasks stretch out to

longer than they should give us a life management technique that rewards us with something we all tend to be chronically short on, which of course is time.

This topic is fresh in my mind as I have had a couple of conversations this week with people struggling to find time to pursue their New Year's goals during the first two weeks of 2021. That by itself wouldn't be noteworthy; often, there are launchpad delays with new endeavors. The real significance to this time scarcity is that these people I was speaking with can easily recall that only a few short months ago, they had more extra time than they could ever remember having! Of the many changes Covid-19 brought in 2020, a windfall of spare time was one of the developments for many people. Some of the reasons include the daily commute to the office being eliminated with working remotely. Social events, after-work happy hours, restaurants, or meetings for associations or clubs, kids activities (and the transport or volunteering) for school or sports all stopped except for the virtual versions. Normal weekend activities were curtailed or eliminated. All of these changes resulted in many of us having this newfound extra time, but ten months later it seems that in many cases, we feel like we are as busy as ever. And just like that, we have Parkinson's Law at work.

Simply put, the amount of time to do something takes longer if we allow it to. For example, in the 'old days' of pre-March 2020, if we needed to clean out the garage, we would get it done on one Saturday because that's the only free time we had available to do it. With extra weekend time, that same task may have been attempted on three separate Saturdays, and it's still not finished. Obviously, the garage size didn't expand; our approach to how we manage the job has changed.

I'll pause here to say that if you're OK with that, then more power to you. You could easily make the case that you are perfectly content with stretching out tasks on the to-do list during these strange times because, frankly, what's the rush? It's not like there are a million other things to do on the weekends. I can appreciate that, and I'm not trying to dissuade you from that mindset if you're fine with how that's working out.

That said, if you are interested in creating some extra time in your week and putting some practices in place at creating efficiency, then there are some simple steps to take:

- **Create a time-journal:** along the same lines of a food journal to help lose weight, tracking and noting your activity throughout the day will help you quickly identify the areas where you are spending the most unproductive time. For instance, checking email in the morning: does that 10-minute task stretch into an hour or more with random scrolling of LinkedIn posts that catch your eye?

- **Social media limits:** This is a super common time vortex that, statistically, most of us fall victim to. In 2020 data shows the average Facebook user spent about 2.5 hours a day on that platform alone, never mind all the others. (I realize how useful it is for staying in touch with people when we can't see them in person. Just saying... that's hours per day)
- **Make a prioritized list of tasks and assign them budgeted times:** It's not uncommon for work projects to come along with deadlines, and we tend to be very adept at getting them done right and on time. This approach also works just as well for the things we need to do around the house, but we don't always use the technique in our personal lives. Take a few minutes to prioritize your to-do list, starting with the 'must-do' items and working down to the 'would be nice' items. Establishing the actual priorities and getting to them first seems obvious, but in reality, it's not the approach we usually take. Most days, we have more of a zig-zag system where we can burn up a lot of time doing relatively unimportant tasks that leave us wondering, "where did the day go?" Even just a couple of days of using the time-journal with detailed accuracy will likely reveal some interesting patterns in your day.
- **Schedule the tasks and assign them budgeted times-** Using your best reasonable estimate of how much time each item on your to-do list would take, you can then put it in your weeks' schedule. Like any other appointment, you can spend that allotted time taking care of it and moving it off the list.
- **Keep a separate list for incoming tasks-** One of the main problems with making plans is that life gets in the way. As great as it is to create a schedule, there needs to be a system that anticipates and accounts for the random things that pop-up every day that demand our attention. As an easy example, think of when you started on something, and about 10 minutes into it, you got a text message that you then responded to. That led you to check out a post on social media, resulting in sending out a couple of emails. Next thing you know, an hour just went by. These small hijackings of our time will always happen if we let them; the key is to block out times and keep a separate list of new developments that you can get sorted after the task at hand. Constantly reacting to every immediate occurrence puts you in a continuous reactive mode that siphons your time away from your pre-determined priorities and inadvertently elevates inconsequential things to the top of the list. All of those 5-or 10-minute detours throughout the day can add up to hours spent on low-value tasks, which can leave you feeling very busy but low productivity.
- **Keep track of what's working!** - Keeping track of your weekly progress is not only a great way to stay motivated in seeing the results of your new schedule-management approach, but it will also show you what areas need further refinement and improvement.

In the BAR40 journal, there is a spot for 'Daily Successes', but I would suggest keeping a separate daily planner that will give ample room for your daily schedule, lists, and notes.

Like many other goals, the simple act of starting is often the most challenging part. If improving your time-management process is something on your to-do list, then move it up to the top of the priorities and put the personal accountability tools in place that will help you reclaim extra time in your life. A great book on the subject (and one that I include in the BAR40 book 'Suggested Reading List) is *Getting Things Done* by David Allen.

Once you get into the routine of being more offensive than defensive with tackling all of the things life throws at you, the approach will become a habit that requires little thought or effort. The result is you won't feel so overwhelmed in your life, and you will end up with more free time every week to pursue the activities you actually want to be doing. Next time someone asks how everything is going, crazy productive has a much better ring to it than crazy busy!