

Coping skills in the current crisis

Jon Siddons, organisational psychologist, suggests time management systems and bypass techniques that can help you cope in this period of anxiety.



| Jon Siddons

The unexpected threat of COVID-19 is a recent example of how therapists can become overwhelmed by being forced to make decisions quickly, throwing out your time management systems. When overwhelmed, we tend to freeze or panic. These strategies can help move you forward in any form of crisis.

First, carefully list all the tasks and activities you want to do. This list should be as complete as possible, so it will include all work activities as well as recreation, exercise and social activities. This list will probably be quite long given the complex lives most of us live. It may be helpful to organise your various activities into areas such as work commitments, exercise, family activities, etc.

The next step involves drawing up a timetable using a large sheet of paper. Have days of the week across the top and times down the left, as follows:

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri
7.00					
7.30					
8.00					
8.30					

The time your timetable begins and ends is up to you and depends on what time you get up in the morning and go to bed at night. Most people need between seven and eight hours sleep. You can also decide whether you need 60 or 30 minutes between activities on your timetable. Now, write into your timetable the

regular and essential activities on your list; for example, regular starting and finishing times, or you may have regular times for some recreation such as a weekly tennis game.

Now, decide your priorities and look at one area of your life at a time. Look under each of the main areas and decide which tasks are most important for that area. The criteria for deciding which activities are essential of course depends on you; but an activity that has been causing a lot of stress, or one that needs to be done soon, could be high priority.

One way to decide what tasks to begin with is by simply tossing a coin – it doesn't really matter if the tasks are of equal importance! After ranking activities in one area in order of priority, go to another area until you have ranked all your activities in your list.

Now, review the priorities on your timetable. Is there time allocated for all your high priority activities? Are some missing, like exercise or relationships? Does the amount of time allocated to each area reasonably reflect its genuine importance in your life?

Rewrite your timetable as much as you need, realising that as your problems and priorities change so will your timetable. It may be desirable to schedule a weekly review of your timetable.

Time management strategies

'Bypass Techniques' help you deal with frustration and anxiety and provide structure so that you can place yourself in the framework to make a decision.

Bypass Technique 1: The knock-out technique

This is a particularly good technique for people who are suffering from anxiety, a lack of self-confidence and low discomfort tolerance. Rather than delaying and conjuring up all sorts of negative reasons for not doing it, just do it! Michael Bernard in his book *Procrastinate Later!* suggests that this technique is especially useful for doing specific tasks and activities which can be accomplished in one hit but which you tend to put off. He suggests that the technique is good for people wanting to develop new relationships: 'attempt to have a

friendly conversation about, for example, a piece of art in an art gallery that you can see someone you like is also fascinated by.'

Bypass Technique 2: Face the music

Problems are often not as bad as you might first imagine. Rather than endlessly delaying something that you have promised to do, this approach involves admitting to yourself and others that what you have promised cannot be delivered at the time that you said. The criticism that you predict will rarely be as severe as you imagine. New arrangements can then be made, and your peace of mind is restored.

Bypass Technique 3: Guided imagery

You can harness your visualisations and consciously employ them to complete tasks you have been ignoring. Not only can visualisations help you achieve your goals, they can also help you relax and reduce stress in specific situations. Suppose you are putting off an exercise program that mainly consists of running; guided imagery could be used in the following ways:

1. Loosen your clothing, lie down in a quiet place and close your eyes.
2. Relax your muscles as much as you can. If you are having problems, try tensing and relaxing the major muscle groups in your body.

Applying progressive relaxation, tense your hands, elbows and biceps. Tense them for about five seconds and then relax and feel a sense of relaxation for about forty seconds. Repeat this procedure by turning your attention to your head and wrinkle your forehead as tight as you can. Relax for forty seconds. Then shrug your shoulders for five or six seconds. Drop them back and feel the relaxation spreading through your neck, throat and shoulders. Again, make sure you feel the relaxation for at least forty seconds. Repeat and do the same procedure to your stomach, back, buttocks, thighs and toes. With your toes, make sure that you curl them downward, making your calves tense. With your back, make sure that you arch your back without straining it.

3. Form mental sense impressions. Involve all your senses including sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Once you feel relaxed imagine yourself after running along your favourite track. Feel the pressure to run up a hill, the exhaustion after several kilometres, then the exhilaration and sense of satisfaction as you finish your run. Make sure you can vividly imagine the running track, feeling yourself getting tired and all the prominent features in the surrounding environment: the trees in the background, the birds singing, the wind in your face and the color and texture of the track. Feeling yourself confidently striding along, getting fitter by the minute.
4. Use positive affirmations that affirm your ability to relax and enjoy the run. Use the present tense and avoid negatives such as 'I am unfit'. Some examples of affirmations are as follows:
 - I feel confident and relaxed.
 - Running is interesting, I can feel myself getting fitter
 - Enjoy the run and take it easy.
5. Guided imagery works best if it is done regularly. Try doing it every day. Best results are often achieved early in the morning and at night lying in bed.

Bypass Technique 4: The Catastrophe Scale

This technique is premised on the notion that when you delay something, it is often because you view the task as awful and similar to how you would feel if you had a terminal illness. When you think about, for example, having to write that report, you blow the unpleasantness of the tasks out of perspective. Rather than thinking to yourself 'this is a pain in the neck, but the sooner I do it the sooner it will be out the way', you think, 'I can't stand writing reports. This is terrible and awful. I'll avoid this, it's not really that important'. To use this technique effectively, it is important that you are as specific as possible about what you have been putting off.

The Catastrophe Scale measures the degree of badness. At the top of the scale are world's worst disasters – those events that are considered 'awful' and 'terrible' and the worst things in the world. Below the scale are things that can be considered as 'VERY BAD': for example, bankruptcy, a serious car crash or a

serious illness. At three to five on the scale are events considered to be bad: for example, a bike crash, fight with a close colleague/friend, or not being promoted. Lastly are events that might be considered a bit bad: for example, the ice cream you just bought falls to the ground, or you have a prominent pimple on your chin.

Considering this scale, how bad was the last difficult situation you had at work? It was no doubt bad and let's not trivialise it, but was it a 'fate worse than death'? Was it the worst thing in the world that could happen to you?

By changing your mindset about the event at work from 'this is the worst thing imaginable' to this is 'bad but it could be a lot worse,' you will be able to stay calmer and emotionally in control. You will then be in an optimum position to provide, for example, corrective win-win feedback to a colleague, or complete the reporting task you were putting off. This will help you get back on top and even go one better with a new and fresh perspective.

Think of a number between one and 10: where on the scale would you put having to do the task that you have been putting off?

Bypass Technique 5: Worst-first approach

People sometimes avoid tasks not because they do not want to do the entire task, but because the most difficult aspects drag them down. So instead of tackling the easy parts, do the hard parts of the task first. For example, if you enjoy delivering treatment and chatting to clients, but dislike reporting and administration, undertake the latter tasks first. This technique can be used for people who keep forgetting to do a task.

Rather than delaying doing it or a part of it, such as clinic notes, do some of it immediately. Do not make excuses that you are too busy to do it, but rather attend to the task as soon as you remember to do it. This technique will help you to get that start which has eluded you.

Bypass Technique 6: Salami technique

This technique is premised on the notion that seeing a task as a series of segmented steps is much more appealing than one large overwhelming task. Michael Bernard suggests in *Procrastinate Later!* to 'list all the different steps you have to take to complete a job. Concentrate on taking the first step, then the next, until you complete the whole journey'. The technique is known as the Salami

Technique because the thought of eating a large, greasy salami, by itself, may be uninviting. However, by cutting it into thin slices it becomes much more appealing. Once one slice is sampled, it tastes good and encourages you to try more.

About the techniques

Understand that not all the techniques described will suit everyone, and that some are more appropriate for different problems and situations.

What have you been putting off? Apply one or more of the Bypass Techniques that resonates with you to help overcome it. Apply the Bypass Technique that seems most relevant to your problem. Remember, one technique may suit some people better than others

A final note

There is only so much that you can achieve in any one day. Don't become a martyr. Be realistic, you cannot solve all the problems in the world in just a day. Remember, life is a long distance run and not a sprint. Workaholics generally burn out and are not very efficient nor work effectively, so 'work smarter and not harder'.

It is important to work steadily throughout the day and work your circadian rhythms to your advantage – complete tasks that require more creativity and brain power earlier in the day. Allocate enough time to relax doing whatever activities you find rejuvenating after your workday is over. As the old proverb says, 'Rome wasn't built in a day.' Be kind to yourself: goals and objectives are better achieved that way.

With a Masters degree in Educational Psychology from the University of Melbourne, Jon is a registered Organisational Psychologist. He has over 20 years experience in creating custom-designed Leadership Development, Talent Management, Career Coaching, Psychological Assessment, Employee Assistance Programs and Career Transition programs. Email: jon@siddons.com.au Web: www.siddons.com.au.