

PRIORITIZING AND TIME MANAGEMENT: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Lunch and Learn Series

Beckie Gierer, Director,
Missouri Department of Mental Health



Missouri Department of
MENTAL HEALTH



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH &
SENIOR SERVICES**



TIME MANAGEMENT AND PRIORITIZATION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Prioritization and time management aren't about squeezing every second out of your day or waking up at 5 AM because someone on the internet said you should. They're about making intentional choices—so your time and energy go toward what truly matters, instead of being consumed by constant urgency and distraction.

Prioritization is simply deciding what matters most and what needs your attention first. Time management is how you organize your time to make those priorities actually happen.

When these two work together, you feel more focused, less overwhelmed, and more confident that your effort is going toward the right things—not just the loudest things.

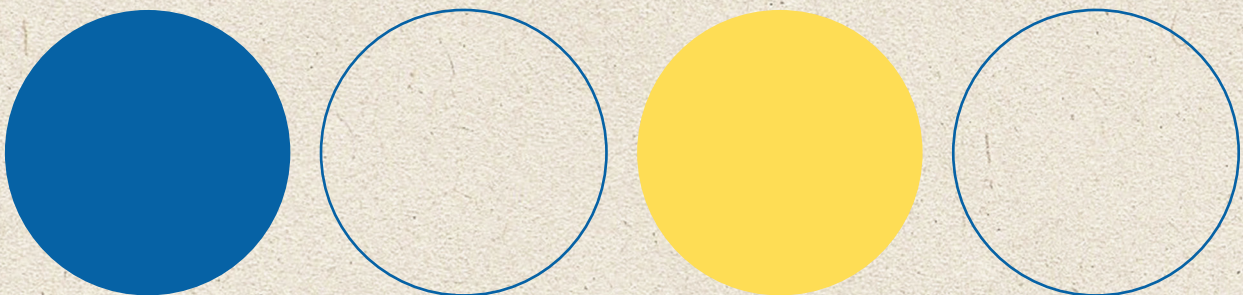
WHY THIS MATTERS

Modern work often pulls us in a dozen directions at once: emails, meetings, deadlines, crises, and personal responsibilities. Without a plan, it's easy to:

- Spend your day reacting to everyone else's priorities
- Work hard but make limited progress on what really counts
- Feel burned out, scattered, or behind, even when you're busy all

Many professionals discover that the problem isn't a lack of effort—it's a lack of clarity and structure.

One way to think of it is **'learning to triage life's demands'**. Not everything is an emergency. Some items truly need attention now, others can wait, and some don't belong on your plate at all. That mindset shift alone can change how your entire week feels.



CHECKING IN: WHERE IS YOUR TIME ACTUALLY GOING?

Before you change your time management, it helps to understand your starting point.

A time audit is a simple tool: for 1–2 days, jot down what you're doing in 30–60 minute blocks. You can use a notebook, spreadsheet, or a printable time log (such as those available at mindtools.com). The goal isn't perfection—it's awareness.

As you look back, notice:

- Where your time goes that you didn't intend
- How often you're interrupted or pulled off task
- How much time goes to email, meetings, or rework

Common patterns often show up:

- **The email reactor** – The day starts in the inbox and never leaves. You end up dealing with everyone else's urgency instead of your own priorities.
- **The overcommitter** – Saying yes to every request, committee, or project. You feel helpful, but your workload becomes unsustainable.
- **Wasted time and rework** – Fixing preventable mistakes, duplicating efforts due to poor communication, or "presenteeism" (physically at work, mentally checked out).

This isn't about blame. It's about having honest information so you can make better choices.

Alongside your time audit, write down your top personal and professional priorities. What actually matters most to you and your role? We'll connect your time back to those priorities.

FRAMEWORKS TO HELP YOU PRIORITIZE

This classic framework organizes tasks into four quadrants:



The goal is to protect more time in quadrant two—important but not urgent—so fewer things become last-minute emergencies.

THE 80/20 RULE (PARETO PRINCIPLE)

Often, about 80% of your meaningful results come from about 20% of your efforts. Your job is to identify that high-impact 20%:

- Which tasks move projects forward the most?
- Which work directly supports your mission, outcomes, or clients?
- What activities create the most progress or satisfaction?

Once you know your high-impact work, protect it fiercely with focused time blocks and fewer interruptions.

SMART GOALS

SMART goals help turn vague intentions into concrete plans:

- Specific – Clear and detailed
- Measurable – You can tell if it's done
- Achievable – Realistic for your time and capacity
- Relevant – Connected to your priorities
- Time-bound – Has a deadline

Instead of “I need better time management,” a SMART goal might be: “I’ll complete a 48-hour time audit by Friday, identify my top three time-wasters, and test one new time management technique next week.”

Breaking large projects into weekly milestones (review material, draft, get feedback, finalize) can turn something overwhelming into a series of doable steps.

PRACTICAL TIME MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES



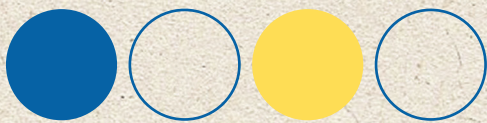
Time Blocking

Time blocking means assigning specific time slots to specific types of work—on purpose.

For example:

- **9:00–11:00** – Deep work on high-priority tasks (no meetings, email closed)
- **11:00–12:00** – Emails and quick admin tasks
- **Afternoon** – Meetings, follow-up, lighter tasks

The key is to treat these blocks like real appointments. A program coordinator might protect 9:00–11:00 as “grant-writing only,” because that work is mission-critical.



THE TWO-MINUTE RULE

If a task will take less than two minutes, and **won't derail your current focus**, do it right away: a quick reply, filing a document, making a short call.

This prevents small tasks from piling up into a stressful backlog—while keeping your larger priorities intact.

BATCHING SIMILAR TASKS

Switching between very different tasks (writing, meetings, emails, data entry) drains mental energy. Batching groups similar tasks together reduces that friction.

You might:

- Check email in 2–3 scheduled blocks instead of all day
- Batch report reviews into one afternoon
- Make all phone calls back-to-back

This helps you build momentum and finish more with less mental fatigue.

BOUNDARIES THAT PROTECT YOUR TIME

You can have the best system in the world, but without boundaries, everything will expand to fill whatever time you have.

Helpful boundaries include:

- **Communication boundaries** – Setting expectations for when you respond to messages.
“I check email at 9 AM, noon, and 4 PM. If it’s urgent, please call.”
- **Time boundaries** – Knowing your capacity and saying no (or “not now”) when needed.
“I’m at capacity right now. Can we revisit this in two weeks?”
- **Digital boundaries** – Turning off notifications during focus periods, using Do Not Disturb, and limiting social media during work hours.

This helps you build momentum and finish more with less mental fatigue.

COMMON CHALLENGES (AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM)

Interruptions

Interruptions will happen. A simple tool to manage them is a “parking lot” list. When a thought, request, or minor task pops up during focused work, jot it down and return to it during your next admin block instead of breaking focus immediately

Procrastination

Interruptions will happen. A simple tool to manage them is a “parking lot” list

- Write annual report → “Draft intro section”
- Create training → “Outline 3 main topics”

When a thought, request, or minor task pops up during focused work, jot it down and return to it during your next admin block instead of breaking focus immediately

Overcommitment

If you’re asked to take on more, it’s okay to ask for clarity:

- “Can you help me understand the timeline and expected time commitment?”
- “I’m working on X, Y, and Z. Which should I pause or reprioritize to make room for this?”

This isn’t being difficult—it’s being realistic and responsible.



THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE CULTURE

Time management is not only an individual responsibility. Workplaces can either support or sabotage good practices.

Helpful cultural shifts can include:

- Regular conversations with supervisors about priorities
- Shared calendars and project tools to increase clarity
- Fewer, more purposeful meetings
- Designated “no-meeting” blocks or days for deep work

Before scheduling or agreeing to a meeting, it can help to ask:

- What’s the purpose of this meeting?
- Do we need to meet, or could this be handled by email or a shared document?
- What other work will I have to set aside to attend

When teams ask these questions together, everyone’s time is used more wisely.

ACTIVITY

Don't try to implement everything at once. **Start small.**

Choose **one or two actions** you will take this week:

- Complete a short time audit
- Try a morning time block for your most important work
- Set one clear email or notification boundary
- Batch one type of task (like emails or reports)

Write down:

1. Your top 2-3 priorities for this season
2. One time management technique you'll test
3. One boundary you'll set to protect your time

Keep it somewhere visible and revisit it at the end of the week.

Time management isn't about cramming more into your day. It's about spending your limited time and energy on what matters most—at work and in your life.

For additional tools and resources to support your well-being and effectiveness, visit **[dmh.mo.gov](https://www.dmh.mo.gov)**.