

How to Juggle it All While Reducing Stress

By Andy Kaufman

Institute for Leadership Excellence and Development

Life on the Hamster Wheel

If I asked you to describe what life is like right now, what would you say?

- “Running like crazy from when I wake up to when I fall into bed!”
- “Stressed!”
- “Out of control!”



These are just a few examples of what I hear from participants in my workshops on personal productivity and work life balance. One of my all time favorites was, “I feel like I’m on a hamster wheel! Day after day after month after year goes by.... I’m busy, but when it comes right down to it, am I getting anything meaningful done?”



Can you relate?

The pursuit of the American Dream has many of us now proclaiming the American Scream: “I can’t keep up!” If you have found yourself sensing some of these same feelings, you’re in good company! I’ve been on the hamster wheel myself. I’ve run in circles to watch years go by, surviving the daily sprint from the alarm clock to collapsing in bed late at night.

Here’s the good news. I have found there’s an exit ramp to the hamster wheel! Life does not have to be a matter of daily survival. If you’re ready to get off the hamster wheel, you’ve come to the right place! Go grab a cup of coffee or tea, sit back, and soak in these key lessons that have been helping thousands of people around the world get a better handle on all the demands being served up. You truly can juggle it all while reducing stress. Ready to learn? Let’s do it!

Time Management Myths

Personally, I think the term “Time Management” has a fair amount of baggage associated with it. People often think of “To Do” lists, Planners, Palm-sized computers, and calendars. There are a lot of myths regarding managing our time. Have you ever heard yourself say....

- **“I’m just not an organized person....”** I’ve played that card for most of my life! It’s as if we think there’s an organization gene that you either get or don’t get! Here’s the truth: Everyone can improve their skills at organizing their life and calendar. You really can! Some people are wired up to do this more naturally, but they, along with the rest of us, can each improve our skills. We can because they truly are skills—ideas, steps, tips, etc. that anyone can put to use.
- **“I know where everything is and I can remember everything I need to....”** Hmm. Guess what the desk of the person who tells me this one often looks like? That’s right!

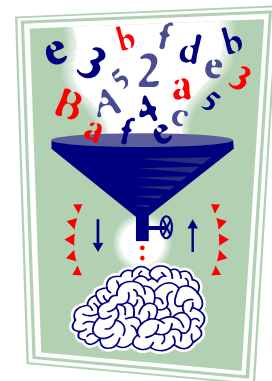
Piles. On top of the desk. Beside the desk. Next to the door. On the window sill. They may know what area code an item is in, but they often waste a lot of time everyday searching for that piece of paper “that I just saw”. It’s true that many people have very good memories. I’m amazed what people can remember. But the truth is that even if you have a great batting average, you won’t bat “1000”. Our brains were just not wired up to be able to remember everything and remind us of what we need to know when we need to know it.

- **“I have a system that has worked well for years and do not need to change it.”** That’s an easy one to fall in to, but here’s the reality: Life typically scales up faster than the habits we have formed to deal with it. Remember cramming in school? It got us by, so we might find that cramming an assignment helps us deliver during our first job. But then we get assigned more stuff! Suddenly cramming doesn’t work. We change, get our feet under us, and just when we’re getting good at doing one thing at a time, we get promoted and have to do multiple things! Then perhaps we get married. And have kids. And then they fool us into letting them play sports so we spend weekends driving from field to pool to gymnasium. Then they become teenagers. Ahhhhhhhh! Chances are life has scaled beyond your current way of handling it all. It’s time to upgrade the systems.
- **“The problem with all that time management stuff is that it assumes you can schedule all surprises out of your life.”** If you believe the marketing material, it does seem to imply that at times. The reality is that surprises are part of what make life rich and memorable. The problem is most of us are sprinting through our days so tightly booked that when a surprise presents itself, we don’t have the ability to react. Surprises will come. My teaching is about how to get what you know about under control so you have more “spandex” to adjust to surprises that will inevitably come your way.

Out of My Mind!

The process I teach in my workshops is more detailed than what we can cover in the scope of this article. But one of the key principles I want to share with you is what I call “Out of my mind...onto a list!” It’s based on the premise that our mind was not designed to remind us about what we need to know when we need to know it.

Here’s an example. I’m walking out of the house on a Tuesday morning. I glance up and notice that the hallway light is burned out. Mental note: Next time I go to Home Depot, buy a light bulb. Saturday rolls around and I end up at my second home, which is Home Depot! I return home from shopping, walking into the hallway, looking up to see....a burned out light bulb. Guess what I forgot to buy? Yep! The replacement light bulb.



Our mind was designed to recognize patterns in ways that computers will never catch up with. It wasn’t, however, wired up to help us remember it all. The answer? “Out of my mind...onto a list!” When something comes into your mind that you need to remember, you have to get it out of your mind!

When I first learned this concept, I started keeping paper and pencil around me all the time. An idea would come to mind of something I needed to do and I'd quickly write it down. It worked OK, but there are situations where writing is not easy, such as driving the flow of traffic—75 m.p.h.—up and down the local freeway each day.

This led me to the best solution I have found to date: a digital voice recorder. Perhaps you remember the old mini-cassette recorders that some people used to use. It's like those but only smaller and without the tapes. The one I currently use (Sony ICD-67) is much smaller than the palm of my hand and can hold 180 minutes of things to remember! I got it for \$30 off of eBay, but you can get this or other models at office supply stores.

Have you ever called your answering machine to remind yourself to do something? I use my recorder like that. When a thought comes to mind that I need to remember, I get it “out of my mind” by speaking into the handy little recorder. Have you ever had a thought right as you're about to doze off at night and you tell yourself to remember it when you wake up? What happens? That's right! Two days later you remember! OK, so I know this is too much information, but I actually have pajamas with pockets in them! I keep the recorder next to the bed so if I have some thoughts that need to be drained before I snooze, I can easily do that before more restfully dozing off. Silly? Maybe. Do I forget things less often? You bet!

Onto a List



The second part of “Out of my mind...onto a list” speaks to what you need to do once you get the idea onto paper or into a voice recorder: You need to put it in a place that you'll use instead of your personal memory.

Now it could be you have an allergic-like reaction when talk turns to the subject of lists. I've never been a fan of lists, primarily because I didn't know how to usefully organize them. In my sessions I go into significant detail on how to organize them in a way that works for many items. In short, it's best to organize them by context.

Context? Here's what I mean. When you're not by a phone you can't make a call. When you're not by a computer, you can't look up that web site that a friend recommended you check. When you're not at home, you can't work on a home project. Put actions on a page for each context or in a tool such as Microsoft Outlook using a “Category” field as the context. Organizing your actions by context allows you to deal with a lot of actions in a more manageable way. How do I know? Because this approach helps me manage a load of around 500 actions items at any one time.

500 action items? You might be thinking, “Andy, get a life!” Well, you might be right, but can I challenge you with something? You probably don't have any less. The problem is you're keeping them in your head and often forgetting them. Think about it... I'm not trying to remember what movies I want to rent, what gifts my wife wants, places we want to go on vacation some day, books I want to read, calls I need to return, assignments I have delegated, favorite restaurants in Boston, etc. I don't have to. They're in a list that is at my fingertips for easy searching and review.

More Done, Less Stress

An obvious result of following “Out of my mind....onto a list” is that I forget fewer things. However, a great side effect of the process is that I’m less stressed! I’m not wasting mental energy wondering what I’m forgetting! I’m getting things done that are meaningful to me, not just surviving through days.

Hmmm... Sounds Interesting

If this is a topic you would like to delve deeper into, here are some ideas for next steps:

- Make a commitment to grow your personal and your office staff’s skills in the area of time management. Learning together is a great way to make the process fun. You’ll be amazed at how much your colleagues know about the topic!
- Consider allocating time at a staff retreat or staff meeting to cover this subject. I train teams on this information all the time and it would be a real privilege to go into much greater detail with you and your office staff to help you all learn how to get more stuff done with less stress. Just call us at (847) 550-0974 for details.
- If you don’t have the opportunity to learn in a retreat or staff meeting setting, there is another way you can get more detail on this. I have an audio version of the workshop available for purchase. Just call us at (847) 550-0974 for ordering information. It’s a great way to get introduced to this powerful material, and it makes a highly valued gift to a friend or colleague that would benefit from increased productivity and less stress.

Get Started

Perhaps you’ve gone to a time management class or two, or picked up a book on the topic. Like a good New Year’s resolution, you’ve tried to implement the ideas but the reality of life crowded in and the principles are now, for the most part, a distant memory. Take action now to get off the hamster wheel! You really can! I look forward to hearing from you!

About the Author



Andy Kaufman is president of the Institute for Leadership Excellence and Development. Andy helps organizations improve productivity, individual and team performance, and project management effectiveness. Over the last 15 years he has provided keynote presentations, training, and professional coaching services for organizations around the world. Andy has a real passion for helping people learn to thrive in the midst of uncertainty and change, and his clear and entertaining style has helped thousands of people learn how to successfully navigate these challenges. Andy is the author of *Navigating the Winds of Change: Staying on Course in Business & in Life* and *How to Organize Your Inbox & Get Rid of E-Mail Clutter*, both published by Zurich Press. For information on how to bring Andy into your organization to help develop you and your staff, contact us at (847) 550-0974 or by e-mail at andy@i-leadonline.com.