Module 3
Time Mastery in Practice: How To Work Your System Every Day, Effortlessly

Hello, everyone. Welcome back. We're now on Module 3: Time Mastery in Practice: How to work your system every day, effortlessly, so it just becomes a seamless part of your life.

We've heard this a million times in our life, but it's true: Do first things first. Parkinson's Law is that a task will expand to fill the amount of time we have to do it.

It's unfortunate, but it's very true. This means that if you just willy-nilly about, "Well, I can do this whenever," it will take forever. It will take so long. It's always important to remember you've got to give yourself deadlines, even if they're just deadlines to you that no one else knows about, you need hard deadlines and to work on things for a set period of time.

Again, you have finite time, energy, and willpower. You need to really get those big things done. Think about a great big container and you fill it with a bunch of gravel, those little tiny rocks, and then you've got this boulder you want to put in there. You can't do it because the gravel has filled up, has sucked up, all of that available space.

However, if you put in your great big rock first, and then fill in the gravel around it, you're going to have room for a lot more stuff overall. You're going to be able to get that big rock in. Think of your big rocks as your really important goals and tasks. The gravel can fill in around them, and that's fine, but you want to make sure you get that boulder in first.

It's important to always look at each new day. We all have long lists of things to do but just look at what one big thing, the one thing, that if I got it done today would make me feel satisfied. That I'd been productive and really done what I wanted to with this day and got what I wanted to get done, done. Do that thing first.

We all know things come up, then if the rest of the day is a wash, if you get sick, if a family member gets sick...who knows what can happen. In all our lives, every day is a real adventure! If you get that thing done early, you have the whole rest of the day.

Ironically, you wouldn't think it would work this way but it does. You might think you get this thing, this great big thing done, and then you just slack off the rest of the day. That's really not how it works. What happens is when you get your important stuff done early, it energizes you to power through the rest of the day and get all that other stuff done too.

It really is almost like exercise. You do it, it seems counterintuitive, but if you're a runner and you run every day you think it would tire you out, but it actually makes your body stronger so you have more energy to get everything else done in your life.

Time management, getting your big stuff done first, works the exact same way. There's a little thing to watch out for, and that's respect your energy levels. Most of us – especially as you get older in your life – surely are at our best in the morning. Some of us want to get up, left to our

own devices, earlier than others, but most of the time people your mind is sharper, your energy levels are higher.

I've got this little owl here because there are some people who are true night owls out there. You might say, "Jen, that's all well and fine, but I am really productive after everyone else goes to bed, after the house is quiet. 10:00 PM to midnight or 1:00 AM, that is my time." If that's truly who you are, I say more power to you and respect that about yourself.

But I would add that most of us aren't really like that, and so you don't want to use that as an excuse. You'll know pretty quick if you are really like this because you are actually cracking stuff out at 10:00 PM and you are feeling wonderful about it, or every night you are yawning and saying, "Oh, maybe tomorrow night is my night."

No, that means you're trying to fool yourself and game the system! So, again, respect your personal energy levels but be honest with yourself about how those work.

Email and voice mail, yes. Let's talk and spend a little more time talking about it because it's important. The one thing you should never do is wake up in the morning, put on your computer or look at your phone, and check your email first thing.

The reason is, whether it's your personal email or your work email, it kicks you out of that quiet time, your own time, to set your own schedule and brings you into the rhythms of other people's questions and priorities and other things that they want. You get immediately pulled into the world of the inbox.

Even if you think, "I'll just check it for a minute, see what's in there, close it out, do my thing," it doesn't work that way. As you know, even if there's stuff in there that's not legitimately super-pressing, we feel it pressing on us. You think, "Oh, I should get back to Jim on that," or "Oh, it will only take me a minute to answer this."

The problem is once you've done that, once you've opened that door into that part of your day, it's very, very hard to close it back up and get back into your own time and your own priorities.

I know a lot of people will say, "Well, don't ever check your email until late afternoon, check it only at night." I think that's really not practical for most of us, even if you work for yourself. Stuff comes in that you need to deal with, you need to address it. I'm just saying do not do it first thing in the morning. If you can get that most important task out of your way before you check email, that is fantastic.

You can even get a good chunk of it knocked out and get your momentum going to the point where you know you can bounce over the email and then bounce back. Definitely, whatever you do, don't just crank up that email and look at it first thing. It seems so innocuous and it's not – it knocks us off our game for the entire rest of our day.

Now, you might be in a position where someone is expecting you to check email pretty early in the day, and in that case, say that's your immediate supervisor, I would talk to them.

Now, obviously, in child care you're not sitting at a desk quite so much as with other jobs. But if for some reason you do have someone who's expecting you to check emails, just talk to them and say, "Look, I find myself much more productive if I can have a little time at the beginning of the day to work on XYZ before I look at my emails. If you need me, feel free to text me, feel free to call me. I'm not trying to avoid you but this would work well for me…"

They will respect that, especially if it's a boss. They will understand that. They will want you to be productive in the way that you see fit. If they don't understand, you can try to work with them in different ways on this. But, generally, if you have something that says, "This will increase my productivity, make me do my job better," they're going to be receptive to that.

You might even put a little note on your outgoing emails like this: "I check email at 10:00 AM and 4:00 PM. If you need me urgently between those times, feel free to call me…" or whatever.

Again, that's a good way to try to manage other people's expectations because so many people have this expectation of hearing back before a message is barely out of their outbox. But you have to be able to look at it and say, "I'm not going to do that. *I'm* going to set the pace of my day. I'm not going to let other people do it for me."

That is really the secret of being productive, is setting your own pace as much as possible. Kind of aligned with that, as I just mentioned, I do recommend…there are always days (we all have them) when you are expecting something important/urgent to come in but you don't know when exactly. In that case, you do need to keep checking for it.

We all have those days, but they're really pretty rare – they are not every day. On your average day, it's best if you can check emails just a few set times a day and as few as you feel you can get away with. Some jobs might be once, some might be twice and that would be enough. Most of us can probably check emails three times a day and that is plenty.

The more you check it, the more the email you are going to get because you are living in that inbox – sending emails, getting emails, more back-and-forth responses. This is one area where you really need to be proactive about how much time you spend there and set your schedule there.

This is also a big win in that email can be a huge time commitment for so many of us. So the more you effectively manage this, the more time you're going to find yourself with.

The power of batching. What I mean by this is doing similar tasks together. You don't want to be bouncing around from checking emails, then I'm going to do a little writing, then I'm going to check on this classroom, then I'm going to go back. You lose time in the transfer. You always, always do. Batching is doing similar tasks all at once.

Email is an example. You check emails twice a day, deal with all those emails during those times. You might have a few long ones you need to research something or whatnot, but process your emails twice a day. Don't be popping in and out your inbox all the time.

Housekeeping is like this. It's probably more efficient, might not be as pleasant, but might be more efficient to say, "For the next two hours, this is cleaning-the-house time. I'm going to scrub, I'm going to clean, I'm going to wash the sink, and wash the toilet." You get it done all at once because you are in housekeeping mode.

Again, laundry: If you do a batch of laundry every day, it's not as effective as doing one big batch every few days. Then again, depending on how many kids you have, how dirty they are, laundry can be one of the things that piles up. You want to try to clump things together in a natural fashion as much as possible so that you're not losing a lot of time in the transfer between different types of tasks.

The BIC method. This is what I call the Bum-in-Chair Method. It's hard, but again, because you lose so much time in the transfer between tasks, if there's something that you really need to get done, I have found the best way to do that is...you go to the bathroom, get your coffee, get your water, and set a timer and you commit to sitting in your seat and doing that task. Doing *nothing* else.

Close all your browser windows, just do that one thing. Depending on your attention span, depending on the specific task, and maybe you will allow an hour for this, maybe you will allow half an hour, maybe you can just commit 20 good minutes to it. Whatever it is, for the amount of time you decide to commit to this project, you do nothing else.

What this does is it really focuses all your attention and all your energy on this one task, which is great. Focused attention is just more efficient and a better quality of attention than giving something in and out – I'm going to answer a call, I'm going to make a sandwich, whatnot.

You might also find out – I find this all the time – even if it's a big, intimidating thing I've been putting off and putting off, once you actually sit down and do it, it's amazing. You'll find that it probably takes you a lot less time than you expect because you've actually sat down and done it.

A lot of these big, daunting things that you dread...It's tax season right now, so doing your taxes might be one of these things: You get all your tools together, all your materials, and you sit down and do it. You really dive deep – and then it's over.

It might take a lot less time than you expected it to. That's because you're not hopping in and out of it. This is a very effective way to jump into a big project, and get it all done, or a huge chunk of it done. You sit down and you do it.

Next thing: Figure out how much time you need, and then double it. As I mentioned, if you are able to sit down and completely devote yourself to a task, oftentimes, you will find you get it done in a lot less time than you expect. That's a wonderful thing.

Generally speaking, when I promise something to someone else, I always build in some extra time. This is just a human tendency, we underestimate the time needed.

I grew up in New Hampshire, and we had a family friend who lived in New York City. It was about a five-hour drive, and that's with good traffic.

Uncle Bill always said, "Oh, I made it. That's a three-hour drive." Maybe at 2 a.m., on Christmas Day, when there's no one on the roads. Theoretically, if you're driving 85 miles per hour all the way, that could be a three-hour drive…maybe.

But in real life, it's never going to be much less than five. Uncle Bill was always late getting to our house because in his head, the best-case scenario was three hours. Real life is not like that. In real life, there are red lights, there are accidents along the route.

Uncle Bill had five kids. Somebody always needed to stop and pee, get a snack. It always took well over three hours. My point is, we all have a tendency to underestimate the time we need to do something.

Once you start paying more attention to how you're using your time, where that time is going, we get better and better at this. But even so, I know people that say, "Oh, I live 10 minutes from Sally, so I'll be at this party till 6:00. Then I'll be at Sally's at 10 past 6." It doesn't work that way, because there's time to say goodbye, and find coats, start the car. There's always more time than we expect.

The great thing is that if somebody is saying he needs a report from you, and you say, "I can get it to you." You think it'll take about a week. But if they're OK with it, tell them you'll get it to them in *two* weeks. That gives you some wiggle room, and it means you won't be late.

Worst-case scenario, if you need the whole two weeks, you've asked for it, budgeted for it, and you're good. If it doesn't, then you're the rock star. "I was able to finish this in just eight days," and then you look wonderful. So get into the habit, when you can, of under-promising and over-delivering.

Don't defer your decisions. This is a biggie. A lot of us do this, especially if it's something we feel we should say "Yes" to, but we really don't want to. Let's say, "Hey, Jimmy. Do you want to volunteer for the charity auction this year? We need someone to spearhead it," and you think to yourself, "That's the last thing I want to do."

Do we ever say that? No. We say, "Let me check my calendar, and get back to you, and I'll let you know." You get a phone call a week later. "Have you thought any more about the auction?" "Yeah, I'm still not sure."

Maybe, eventually, you get to the point where you say, "Really sorry, I just can't do it," which is fine. But by that point, you've already strung this person along with your "maybe" for two or three weeks now. They could have gotten someone else to do it. You've really not been very fair to them. Meanwhile, you've had it on your mental plate, worrying about it, making you feel guilty all that time, and you knew on Day One you didn't want to do this.

When you have enough information to decide something, decide. It doesn't mean you need to be rude about it. It doesn't mean you need to be brusque with people. It just means, if you know, you know. Then you can say, "I'm sorry. It doesn't fit in with my priorities this month. I hope you find someone great."

It's off your plate, and they can go on (knowing that you've said "no") with Plan B, whatever that is.

Deferring decisions is a very common thing. It eats away your time, eats away your energy. If it's something where there's two legitimate alternatives, you can wrestle with things almost endlessly.

Generally speaking, once you have all the information you need to make a decision, putting off that decision, even if it's a hard one, doesn't give you a better result. It just means you spend more time and energy worrying about it, thinking about it, maybe leading other people along, so just don't do it. Get into the habit of being decisive, and communicating those decisions as soon as you have them.

Compartmentalize. The picture here is a Bento box, one of my very favorite things. If you're not familiar with them, it's a Japanese presentation of food, where everything is in its own little compartment. It's wonderful. It would be great for toddlers when they don't want their meat touching their peas.

This is the same idea with your life – compartmentalize. As much as possible, keep your work stuff separate from your personal stuff. Even someone like me, who works from home, I try very hard to say, "OK, my work stays in my home office. When I'm done for the night, I'm really done. I'm not going to run in there and go check email just a few more times."

It's very detrimental. Work time should be work time, and personal time should be personal time. When you're off, you should be off. Then you're able to recharge and relax and get your time ready for the next day, when you're actually back at work.

I would say spillover is time-consuming and stressful because you always feel you should be at the other place. If your boundaries are clear, you don't have that problem.

This is a big problem, especially if you have kids at home who want your time and attention. You say, "Well, I'm going to hurry home, so I can spend time with my child. Then I'm going to be on my phone or my computer for the next three hours, kind of hopping on and off."

That really doesn't do anyone any favors. I think in that situation, you're better off spending maybe the extra hour at work. Once you're home, you're really home to play that game of Candyland or to make cookies with your daughter, or whatnot, because then you're really present.

It's also very hard to enjoy your time when you're thinking you should be somewhere else. Obviously, things come up in all of our lives, but have a plan for "This is my work time, this is my personal time," and try to keep them separate.

Don't multitask. This ties into what I was just talking about. We all think we're really great multi-taskers, especially some people younger than me – I'm in my early 40s – who've grown up with cell phones, iPads, and so on, and they think they're really on top of it all. Probably they're more on top of it all than me, but the problem is, our brain can only focus on one thing at once, truly.

Multitasking doesn't enable you to do more things. It just means you're doing more things badly. It also means you're not giving any of those things your full attention.

If you try to get your meditative walk in at the same time you're on the phone with someone, you can technically do both those things. Unless you're in a very busy area, you're probably not putting yourself in danger, being on the phone, while you go for your walk. But you're not going to notice the things on your walk and you're going to be giving the person on the phone half your attention.

Because you're thinking, "When do I cross the street," and, "Hey, look at that car going by," and whatnot, and we're not equipped to do it.

Another problem with multitasking is, again, you lose, as I've mentioned, time and energy in the transfer between tasks. If you're bouncing back and forth between two things you're trying to do simultaneously, you're not really focusing on either one of them.

You're not saving any time. Oftentimes, I've found when I've tried to multitask, the thing does end up getting done. But I need to end up redoing one of the things, if not both, because it really wasn't done well – because I wasn't giving it my full attention.

This is something, I think intuitively, we know when we teach children. "OK. Slow down. Take your time. Pay attention to what you're doing." The same thing is true for grownups.

Don't even attempt it. It's not going to get you where you want to go, and in the case of something, obviously, like texting while you're driving, then it's just dangerous. Don't do it.

A surprising lesson from *Seinfeld*: We're going to wrap up this module with this one. I don't know how many of you remember this particular *Seinfeld* episode. But Jerry, in his stand-up, is talking about, "There's night guy and morning guy, and night guy says, 'Let's stay up late and do all kinds of fun things,' and then morning guy is always mad at night guy, because morning guy didn't get enough sleep, isn't very productive."

I like to think about it in a different way that you can use night guy and morning guy to your advantage. Let's say you're trying to get up and go for a run. Night guy can say, "OK. Tomorrow I'm going to go for my run."

You set out your sneakers and your keys and your socks, and you get everything all set to go, put it out right next to your bed, so that morning you, who might be not quite so motivated – still a little sleepy, bed seems awful cozy – morning guy has a harder time putting off that run, since night person has put out all this stuff.

All you need to do is put on your running stuff, and out the door. You really need to figure out your own energy levels. It's almost like tricking yourself, and taking your best, most forward-looking self, and using that planning and momentum to power your slow or less-motivated self through those hard times.

If you know you're going to need a certain amount of office supplies to get a project done, get them done, get them laid out the night before, so you can hit the ground running in the morning.

We all have our times when we're inclined to put things off. If you can use your energy levels to avoid those excuses, you will be much better off.

That's it for that module. I will catch you in the next one. Thanks.