



Overwhelmed?

How is it that some people seem calmly to manage their careers and lives while the rest of us become overwhelmed, feeling like we are not doing anything as well as we could and that we are letting important tasks slip through the cracks?

Is multitasking the answer to our problems?

While that may sound good, it turns out that answering email while simultaneously consulting with a colleague on the phone and perusing the latest issue of *Molecular Biology of the Cell* may actually be turning our brains to mush.¹ Instead,

consider some ancient and low-tech strategies for living a fulfilling, productive, and healthy life. Even the Dalai Lama, if he had the life of an assistant professor with young children at home, might occasionally need to be reminded of these basic principles.

Try some of these strategies to get the most out of your day. They are endorsed by His Holiness (we're pretty sure) and by the Women in Cell Biology thespians who performed at the mentoring theater at the 2010 ASCB Annual Meeting in Philadelphia.²

Appreciate

First, anything is more enjoyable when done with the realization that, all things considered, it is exactly what you want to be doing. Remember to enjoy the process; goals serve to motivate, but the pleasure in life is found en route. Be glad you are a cell biologist instead of, say, an investment banker. Savor the small victories, be it capturing the perfect image of your fluorescently tagged protein, seeing the face of a student light up as she suddenly grasps the concept you're explaining, or fixing a broken shaker in the lab.

Meditate

Do you ever feel like your scattered brain is on overdrive? Do you try to concentrate on troubleshooting your latest experiment, but find yourself thinking about 10 different

things instead, including the clogged toilet that's waiting for you at home? Developing a meditation practice is one way to train your mind to focus. Try this 10-minute exercise: Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Count each in breath until you reach 10 breaths and then start again at one. Notice when your mind has

wandered and bring it back to the breath. When this happens you will have lost count, so start again at one. How many times did you manage to count all the way to 10? With practice, your ability to achieve mental focus will improve.

If meditation is not for you, find something that does work and stick with it—take a walk, go for a run, or listen to a piece of music. Most importantly, find a way to rein in your thoughts so you can apply your attention to the task at hand.

Calculate

Once you've focused your mind, there is still that monumentally important skill called organization, without which you will continue to feel overwhelmed. Along with the dream job that allows you to follow your passion come many obligations that may not lie directly under the umbrella of your personal priorities. The trick is to balance tasks that are critical to you with those that are critical to others (e.g., your department chair) and those that are essential for your sanity (e.g., sleeping, eating well, exercising, and having a social life).

Try making a list of the immediate tasks at hand, and calculate how much time each will take. Schedule major tasks into your calendar and consult your list for small tasks to do in those in-between moments. Be sure to break projects down. Instead of "Write manuscript," make several entries: "Prepare figures" or just "Prepare Figure 1." List things that can be accomplished in a single sitting to maximize the satisfaction you feel when a task is finished.

If an item remains on your list for several days, it's time to assess why the task has not



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been accomplished. Does it need to be broken down? Does it actually need to be done? Is it distasteful? Start a new list that includes only tasks you deem worthy, and employ appropriate devices to overcome procrastination: “If I write 2,000 characters, then I get to go for a bike ride.”

Relegate

Did you ever notice that the hour you set aside to work on a grant or manuscript evaporates when you check your email every 10 minutes? We all have ways of tricking ourselves into being “productive” while failing to address the most important task of the day. One way to avoid this pitfall is to relegate your favorite time-wasting activities to a specific time of the day. If you are most alert in the morning, set aside that time for writing and limit email correspondence, student advising, committee meetings, and gossip time with your colleagues to the end of the day when the brain cells are flagging.

Delegate

As your career progresses, your duties will rapidly expand beyond the scope of any one individual’s capabilities. Happily, this provides an opportunity to develop your mentoring skills. Ask junior scientists, either in your lab or in your department, to help you with appropriate tasks. Give them direction and support, and be sure to acknowledge and appreciate their efforts. Before you know it, the number of tasks on your list has shrunk, and your mentee’s confidence has grown.

Discriminate

Ever heard of “just say no”? Be realistic about your available time. Forget what you’ve read about relativity—you’re a cell biologist, not a physicist, and there really are only 24 hours in a day even if you fly across three different time zones. Do everything in your power to avoid being sucked into tasks that you and everyone you know see as low value.

A career in cell biology is a privilege; be grateful for the opportunity you’ve been given. Take charge of your life, but do it your way and have fun. And about those people who seem to be doing it all, smiling and laughing

all the way to high-impact papers, big grants, and prestigious appointments. Fabulous! Let’s celebrate their accomplishments and be grateful for their leadership, but let’s not adopt their achievements as our goals. We each have our own personal circumstances, limitations, and values. It is only by a genuine assessment of ourselves that we can define our own meaningful work and ways to achieve it. Celebrate and cherish your own accomplishments! ■

—Lynne Quarmby, *Simon Fraser University*, and Martha Cyert, *Stanford University*

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Take charge of your life, but do it your way and have fun.

References

¹Ophir E, Nass C, Wagner AD. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 106, 15583–15587.

²Quarmby L. (2011). WICB mentoring theater: overwhelmed! *ASCB Newsletter* 34(3), 9.

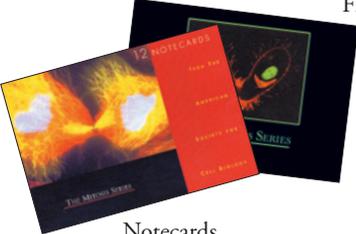
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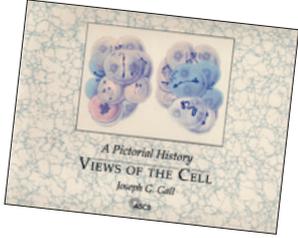
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