

Three Behaviors to Stop: Enhance Your Professional Performance by Doing Less

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ABSTRACT

Financial service professionals strive to serve others every day. However, when we are stressed out or worse, burned out, not only are we hindering our productivity, but we are less effective for our clients. The key to reducing our stress is not doing more but doing less. This article focuses on three behaviors to stop in order to experience less stress and more joy, and to live a life filled with purpose. This article is written in the first person because it is meant to be personal, a conversation between two professionals over a cup of coffee.

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Introduction

We face stressors every day. Almost anything can be a stressor. In fact, just because we are financial service professionals who regularly counsel and advise clients on financial and estate planning, we are not immune from financial stressors. Some common stressors are:

- Money issues
- Health concerns
- Political disagreements
- Career challenges
- Relationships
- Caregiving
- Holiday pressure
- Overloaded responsibilities

You will likely not be able to control many of the stressors in your world, but you can alter your reaction to them. This discussion focuses on three behaviors that, if left unchecked, can reduce your effectiveness and add to your stress:

- Working on low priorities
- Multitasking
- Talking too much

I encourage you to stop working on low priorities, stop multitasking, and stop talking too much.

Many of us are motivated primarily by a desire to help others. When we fly on an airplane the flight attendant instructs us to put on our oxygen mask first before assisting a child with their mask in the event

of a drop in cabin pressure. Is that selfish? No, it is smart. How can we help others if we do not first take care of ourselves?

Stop Working on Low Priorities

“Mr. Carnegie,” Taylor said. “I would advise you to make a list of the ten most important things you can do. And then, start doing number one.” And, the story goes, a week later Taylor received a check for \$10,000.

—Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*

Are you like me? Do you have an endless list of things to do? My memory is not strong enough to remember all the important things to do, so I need to write them down. I use an organizational app called Asana that syncs with multiple devices and contains multiple categories of my to-do lists. Check it out—it is free for basic users. I have individual lists such as financial, bucket list, and clients.

To-do lists are great. They keep us organized and ensure that we do not forget to follow through on commitments. The problem is not the lists or the number of things on our list, but how we prioritize our focus and energy. The quote above is from a famous story in which Andrew Carnegie, the Pittsburgh steel magnate and richest man in the world in the mid- to late 1800s, inquired of Frederick Taylor, an efficiency expert, on how to become more effective. The brilliance in Taylor’s advice was not making a list of the most important things but starting with number one and not proceeding to number two until you take number one as far as you can.¹ Deciding on your number-one most important thing to do, with the understanding that you will then invest the majority of your time doing one activity, forces you to reflect on your priorities.

I developed a method early in my career that I continue to follow to this day. It was inspired by the Carnegie-Taylor story, but I am not certain where I learned it. Some of the great books that I read in my early twenties included *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, and

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey.² This method may be a combination of things I learned from those books:

1. Make a list of important things to do the next day either before this day ends or early in the morning of each day.
2. Reorder the list with the number-one priority at the top, number two next, and continue in descending order.
3. Decide whether any of the tasks can be eliminated, delegated, or delayed, and either cross them off the list, move the date out, or take some time asking your delegate to complete the task.
4. Finally, begin working on your number-one priority and get as far into it as you can before moving on to number two.

Of this list, the last step is the most important step, but it starts with determining your most important priority and then forces you to focus on that priority to the exclusion of all the others, if necessary. The goal is not to accomplish as much of your list as you can in a day, as rewarding as that may be, but rather to make meaningful headway on your top priorities, sticking to the order of priority you have assigned each to-do item. If all you do today is make meaningful progress on your most important priority, even without completing it, you have used your time wisely.

Although this method has produced fantastic results for me, it has often been difficult to execute. It has become more challenging over the years as I work in more-complex and -distracting environments. Open floorplans in offices, the proliferation of digital devices that call out for attention, and increased demands on my time make this level of focus challenging. I will admit that I am not able to do this every day, but when I do, I accomplish significantly more. Incidentally, I rarely face criticism for not completing something of lesser importance when I am focused on my most important priorities.

Setting aside time in the week to follow up on e-mails and other tasks helps keep me more focused during the rest of the time. Reviewing my calendar at

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the beginning and end of each week and eliminating meetings, setting aside preparation times, and prioritizing work fits right into this method.

We work in teams in my company, and that involves many meetings, conference calls, and frequent coordination with colleagues and clients. I have found that sharing my top priorities with my team and my clients, as my boss does with his team, serves multiple aims.

First, it lets everyone on my team know where my priorities are and how I plan to spend the majority of my time. Others give me more grace when I do not complete other tasks that are not high priority, because my team understands the importance of focus. Second, it allows team members to align their priorities and workflow with mine so that we are all working on high priorities. Third, while the priorities of each individual differ, my priorities are aligned with those of my boss, his with corporate objectives, and my team's priorities are aligned with mine. The result? We reach most of our goals and see the impact of our work.

What would your day be like if your to-do list were shortened and more meaningful? Would you have more energy? Carnegie said, "The men who have succeeded are men who have chosen one line and stuck to it."³ The broad application of this saying, to me, is not that we have only one career in life, but that we will accomplish more by deliberately choosing what not to do, in life, in a career, or educational pursuit. Having your key priority top of mind allows you to sharply focus each day.

Hyrum Smith, cofounder of Franklin Quest (which would eventually become Franklin Covey) said, "When your daily activities are in concert with your highest priorities, you have a credible claim to inner peace."⁴ Therefore, when you stop focusing on low priorities, you will find that your schedule yields less stress, evokes more joy, and allows you to achieve greater well-being and higher personal performance.

Stop Multitasking

We all do it: Texting while walking, sending e-mails during meetings, chatting on the phone while cook-

ing dinner. In today's society, doing just one thing at a time seems downright luxurious, even wasteful.

—Amanda MacMillan, *12 Reasons to Stop Multitasking Now!*

I had the opportunity to visit the Kaiser Innovation Center in Oakland, California, to learn how Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest integrated health systems in the United States, improves the quality of the care delivered to patients. The center is located in an old warehouse and is fascinating because Kaiser builds mock operating rooms and patient rooms and tests several environments to find the ones that contribute most to quality and safety.

One of the simplest innovations discovered at the center, our guide explained to us on our tour, was amazingly inexpensive. Nurses who administered drugs to patients in hospital rooms made far too many errors, which resulted in adverse outcomes. After studying the problem over several weeks, they discovered that the number-one factor contributing to errors in drugs administered by nurses to patients in the hospital was distracted nurses. That is right—distracted nurses.

The fix was easy. When it came time for a nurse to administer drugs, the nurse put a brightly colored sash around his or her neck, and all other staff were instructed to not talk to the nurse who was wearing the sash. Also, a circle was painted on the floor around the med cart, and no one was allowed to distract a nurse preparing drugs inside the circle. This sash, like that worn by a contestant in a beauty pageant, and some bright paint cost less than \$10, reduced the cost of drug errors by millions of dollars, and, more importantly, saved many lives.

We all multitask at times. Some people claim to be great multitaskers and take pride in their ability to balance many things at once. I have known people who feel guilty if they are only doing one thing at a time, like listening on a conference call without keeping up with e-mails and text messages simultaneously. Writer Daniel Leviton describes the pressure to multitask on *The Guardian's* Web site:

Our smartphones have become Swiss-Army-Knife-

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like appliances that include a dictionary, calculator, Web browser, e-mail, Game Boy, appointment calendar, voice recorder, guitar tuner, weather forecaster, GPS, texter, tweeter, Facebook updater, and flashlight. They are more powerful and do more things than the most advanced computer at IBM corporate headquarters 30 years ago. And we use them all the time, part of a twenty-first-century mania for cramming everything we do into every single spare moment of downtime. We text while we are walking across the street, catch up on e-mail while standing in a queue—and while having lunch with friends, we surreptitiously check to see what our other friends are doing. At the kitchen counter, cozy and secure in our domicile, we write our shopping lists on smartphones while we are listening to that wonderfully informative podcast on urban beekeeping.⁵

The reality is, however, that our brains were not built for multitasking. That is a widespread myth that contributes to our constant feeling of being on overload. According to MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller, one of the top researchers on divided attention, “Our brains are not wired to multitask well. . . . When people think they are multitasking, they are actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there is a cognitive cost.”⁶ So to get the most joy out of your life and ease that guilt that you cannot juggle a half-dozen balls at once, you can relax and stop multitasking.

When we frequently switch between tasks, we train our brains into developing bad habits. When we complete a small task, such as responding to an e-mail, we feel a tiny sense of accomplishment. Our brains release a little bit of dopamine, our reward hormone. We like this instant gratification, and so we develop a habit each time we give in to the craving for more dopamine. We get the illusion that we are accomplishing more than we are, because we are checking things off our mental list. In addition, studies show that children who multitask while using electronic devices showed lower self-esteem and social skills.⁷

The problem is that multitasking actually lowers our work quality and efficiency. It becomes more difficult to organize thoughts and filter out irrelevant information because we are not focusing. A University of London study demonstrated that subjects who multitasked while performing cognitive tasks experienced significant drops in their IQs. In fact, the IQ declines were similar to what you see in individuals who skip a night of sleep or who smoke marijuana.⁸ So dopamine addiction is the equivalent of an addiction to dope.

How do we stop multitasking? First, try to use the rule of two: Do not perform more than two tasks at a time, and preferably take on just one. A French study found the human brain can handle two complicated tasks without too much trouble because it has two lobes that can divide responsibility equally between the two. Add a third task, however, and it can overwhelm the frontal cortex and increase the number of mistakes you make.⁹

I hasten to add, however, that driving and looking at your smartphone are not acceptable tasks to perform together. Ten percent of all fatal automobile accidents are due to distracted driving, whether texting, talking, or looking for directions.¹⁰ If you use your phone for navigation, set it up before you start driving and then leave it alone and just listen. Multitasking can be dangerous, and it creates a false sense of accomplishment. There is no substitute for monotasking because it offers the highest level of focus and concentration.

Second, put away the things that distract you. If your Swiss-Army-knife smartphone is too tempting to have on your desk during a meeting, put it away or, better yet, turn it completely off. If the TV in the background keeps you from listening to your spouse, either pause it while you talk or turn it off. One study from the University of Essex found that just having a cell phone nearby during personal conversations—even if neither of you is using it—can cause friction and trust issues.¹¹

Third, practice OHIO—Only Handle It Once. Efficiency experts have recommended this simple practice to increase effectiveness for many years. If you handle an incoming item only one time, then the

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task is completed more quickly, and you can move on to something else. For instance, if you open an e-mail and scan it quickly only to leave it in your inbox with the thought of revisiting it later, you will handle it more than once. Rather, open it and quickly determine whether it is important. If so, read it and either respond, file, forward, or delete. Done. I like to keep a clean inbox and leave only items in my inbox that I have not yet read or addressed. Financial service professionals can expand the quality of their advice by talking to their clients about these issues as well as building their own healthy habits.

Stop Talking Too Much

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Listening is a skill and an art. It is hard work and takes discipline. A good listener monitors and mirrors to some extent the body language of the person talking. A good listener clarifies or repeats back what is said to make sure he or she understands. If you are forming your next comment in your mind, getting ready to get it out the moment the other person stops talking, then you are not listening. If you interrupt, you are not listening. Most of all, it is difficult to listen if you are talking. So just stop talking too much.

We have all been in situations where people talk over each other, constantly interrupting to get in their point. It reminds me of the presidential debates in 2016 when you could hardly hear what the candidates were saying for all the talk-overs and interruptions. By truly listening to another person, you build trust and develop empathy. If you talk too much, the other person may feel like you really do not care what he or she thinks. You send the message that you care only about expressing your opinions, your knowledge, and your information that you want to impart. There is a reason we have two ears and one mouth: We should listen twice as much as we talk.

In my first career job after graduating from college, I was trained in insurance sales by one of the finest sales

organizations in the country, Northwestern Mutual Life. While I have not sold insurance for years, I have continued to put into practice some of the key lessons I learned from the extensive sales training I received.

First, we learned listening skills and practiced them in the training room. We put this into practice when meeting with prospective clients in what we called an interview, because we asked several guided questions about our prospect's goals, finances, resources, insurance coverage, and the like. At no time during the interview were we to "sell" our company, our products, or ourselves. The focus was squarely on the other person.

Of course, when agreeing to meet with an insurance salesperson, a prospect naturally has defenses up and often up high. The prospect expects to be sold. At the end of the interview, however, I would say something like, "Thank you for meeting with me today and sharing this information. I would like to have some time to think about it and get back together soon to share some ideas. Is that okay?" Rarely did I receive a flat "no."

At the second interview, the conversation would begin with my asking more questions to clarify the information. Only when I had gone through this process did I share a proposal, tailored to the needs of each person, family, or business.

The best salespeople are the best listeners because they set out to match a product or solution to a specific need or desire. I learned that as a 22-year-old kid right out of college and have found that it works in just about every situation. Some of the best meetings involve few words spoken by me other than questions that open a dialogue. I cringe when I observe colleagues walk into a meeting with a client and proceed to dominate the conversation.

You know you might be talking too much once you open your eyes and look for cues. As in a game of tennis, if someone decides to hog the ball instead of volleying, the game will not be much fun. People generally let us know when we are hogging the ball. Their eyes wander, and they get fidgety and appear distracted. They will respond with polite smiles and nods while they look for

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the closest exit. These are cues that you need to stop talking and serve the ball to them.

A helpful tip: Control your talking by responding to a question with a single thoughtful sentence. Composing your response carefully before speaking is harder than a come-to-mind, come-to-mouth response. If people are interested in what you have to say, they will prompt you for more information. Mark Twain said, “I sat down to write you a short letter, but I did not have enough time so I wrote you a long one instead.” The point is clear: It is easier to talk too much than to think about the most appropriate words to say.

Being a good listener is not just about being less annoying or showing someone you care; it is essential in understanding another human being. One of my favorite professors in the MBA program at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business was Nick Epley, professor of behavioral science. In his book *Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want*, he describes that to truly read someone’s mind, not in a mystical sense of the term, but to really understand what and how someone thinks, we need to work very hard at perspective-taking, putting ourselves inside of their mind. He suggests asking questions like: Would I like this movie if I were a woman? If I were my wife, what would I want for my birthday? How would I feel if I were living in poverty? Would I understand this presentation if I were one of our clients?¹²

Really understanding where a person is coming from goes beyond perspective-taking to perspective-getting, as Epley describes. Asking someone what he or she thinks directly, or surveying a group of people, will help to get perspective. For instance, I could ask Sherry what she wants for her birthday. Her first response will be something like, “Oh, nothing,” but follow-up questions like, “What have you been wanting for a long time but did not want to spend the money on?” might help get perspective.

When Abraham Lincoln was asked to offer a few appropriate remarks at the dedication of the military cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, he was not

the keynote speaker. Edward Everett, the Massachusetts statesman, was the lead speaker and spoke for 2 hours before Lincoln came to the podium to deliver the Gettysburg Address. The talk was so brief, 200 words, that he was finished before the photographer could take a quality photo. And yet, we love to visit the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, to read those famous words carved in granite. By contrast, relatively few people even know Edward Everett’s name. Lincoln said that day: “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here.” Quite wrong; we do long remember Lincoln’s profound few words, but Everett talked so much that no one remembers. Lincoln knew, more than most, when to stop talking.

Conclusion

At a world health conference of leading health care professionals, the results of a long-term study were released that tracked whether people who had been told that they would die in 5 years or less if they did not make drastic lifestyle changes actually did so. Shockingly, only one out of every nine people elected to stop the behaviors that had led to such a poor prognosis.

Even when faced with death, most people did not stop stressing their bodies and minds. If you are stressed out, your life may depend on how willing you are to stop doing what has gotten you into your current state. Remember, Albert Einstein said the definition of insanity was doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. ■

Portions of this article are excerpted from STOP! 21 Stops to Reduce Stress and Enhance Joy, by Eric Parmenter.

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