

The 168 hour question

How do you spend the hours of your life? What do you do, exactly? Take some time to make a list of all the different activities that you perform in a given week. Figure out the number of hours each week that you spend on each activity. Make a rough guess, and don't get too obsessive about the total – at least, not yet. You guessed: 168 is the number of hours in a week.

A partial list is below. Fill in the number of hours per week for each one. Try not to count the same activity twice. For example, if you use the telephone at work, don't count the time under both work time and phone time. Use the blank spaces for additional activities. Also consider breaking some activities down into separate categories if that seems appropriate. For example, you might have four categories instead of one for socializing (with spouse, friends, family, and work colleagues). Use additional paper if necessary.

- ___ Sleeping
- ___ Trying to get to sleep
- ___ Work/school
- ___ Overtime/homework
- ___ Continuing education (e.g., night school)
- ___ Commuting
- ___ Preparing food and eating
- ___ Shopping (incl. groceries)
- ___ Grooming (showering, brushing teeth, using washroom, etc.)
- ___ Household cleaning, laundry, etc.
- ___ Home maintenance, repairs
- ___ Reading
- ___ Television/videos
- ___ Computer (apart from work)
- ___ Exercise
- ___ Socializing
- ___ Sexual activity
- ___ Talking on phone
- ___ Relaxing

- ___ Pet or plant care (incl. gardening)
- ___ Childcare
- ___ Caring for other relatives
- ___ Spirituality (meditation, church, etc.)
- ___ Drinking, smoking, drug using
- ___ Creative work (crafts, arts, writing)
- ___ Volunteer work
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____
- ___ _____

Now go back and total up the hours spent on the different activities you have listed.

Total: _____

Do they add up to a lot less than 168 hours? If so, see if you can track down the missing hours. Some people are surprised, for example, at how many hours they actually spend watching television.

Do they add up to *more* than 168 hours? Don't be too surprised. Many people schedule themselves so tightly that there is almost no time left over. They feel harried and stressed, always on the run.

A lot of people also engage in excessive multitasking: they manage to do two and three things at once (for example, ironing while cooking dinner and watching television). Although some multitasking is normal, chronic multitasking strains our ability to attend to the different activities and can be a major source of stress.

Do you *really* want to reveal something about your life? If so, go back again and rate each item in terms of how much you usually enjoy it. (If you're depressed right now you may not enjoy much of anything. Rate how much you enjoy it when you feel well.) Use a 0-100 scale, where 0 means you hate the activity, 50 means you neither like nor dislike it, and 100 means you really enjoy it. Squeeze in your rating to the right of each item.

Getting into it? If so, feel free to make other ratings.

- How important is each activity to you? Use a 0-100 scale, or rank Rank them from first (#1) to last.
- Which activities do you do because *other people* think they're important for you to do?
- If you know someone whose life you greatly admire, how much time do you think they spend on each activity? What are *their* priorities?
- Which of these activities have a tempting pull ("*This will be great*") but don't really turn out to be fulfilling? Hint: A good test is to ask yourself whether, when you're done, you think "*That was great, I'm glad I spent time on it.*" Examples of activities that often don't pass the test: drinking, drug using, internet surfing, compulsive shopping, looking at pornography, and others.

There's no way of scoring this exercise, but completing it is almost always enlightening. It shows you how you spend your time, and invites you to question the priorities that you seem to have set for yourself. Here are some sample realizations:

- *"I say my priority is the kids, but I spend most of my waking hours at work or watching TV."*
- *"I spend 10 hours a week surfing the internet, but almost never enjoy it."*
- *"The activities I value the least are the ones I spend the most time doing."*
- *"I love the time I spend with friends, but only do it once a week or so."*
- *"I have two conflicting priorities: I want to be the perfect parent and the perfect employee, and in my business the only way to be appreciated is to work 14 hours a day."*
- *"I never realized how much time it takes to keep the house and meals organized."*
- *"I reached 168 hours before I mentioned anything about time with my partner."*

Looking at your own responses to this exercise, what are some observations you have about your own life and priorities?

Are there any shifts you would like to make in your life or situation based on this exercise? What are they?

If you decide that you want to make changes, remember that change doesn't happen overnight. Use goal-setting strategies to clarify your goal, divide it into steps, brainstorm about actions, and create plans.

This is a good exercise to complete every few years or so. You may make new realizations each time, or discover ways of bringing your life into a better balance.