- Time poverty / Workaholism

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TIME TO CHANGE

Feeling time poor isn't an inescapable part of today's world. With a few science-backed strategies, it's possible to reclaim lost hours and finally feel in control of your day

by PROF RUTH OGDEN

Ever get that feeling there aren't enough hours in a day? That no matter what you do, and how hard you work, it's impossible to fit everything in? You may well be suffering from time poverty.

And you certainly won't be alone. Time poverty – defined by psychologists as a chronic feeling that you don't have enough time for the things that you need to do – is worryingly common. Research shows that the majority of us are battling with it, with one US study suggesting 80 per cent of people feel they don't have enough time in their day. That's a jump of 10 per cent from a decade ago.

Could these rates grow further? Considering how bad time poverty is for a person's health and happiness, it's a worrying thought. Studies show that time poverty is associated with increases in levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which can lead to increased blood pressure and risk of cardiac disease. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that three-quarters of a million people die each year from heart disease and strokes due to overworking.

B IS FOR BURNOUT

Time poverty can also change our eating habits, increasing cravings for sweet, high-fat food, which result in an increased likelihood of weight gain and obesity. Worse still, if any major health issues do arise, somebody experiencing time poverty is much less likely to seek help from a doctor. This means serious conditions can go undetected in those with the least time, resulting in poorer health outcomes in the long run.

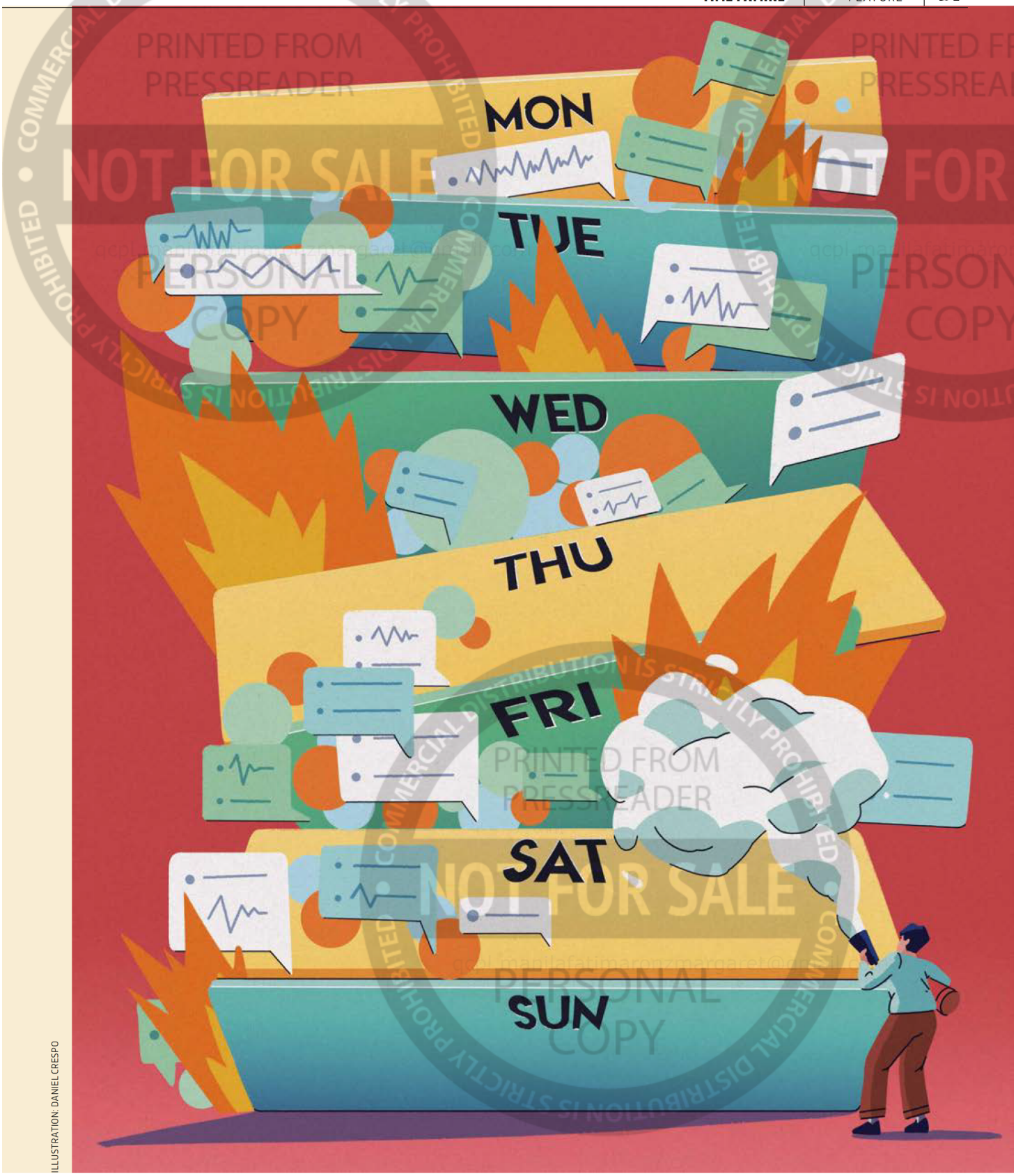
Time poverty can also spill into our relationships. Rates of divorce, depression and anxiety are all greater in people who experience a chronic lack of time than those who don't.

And then there's the big B: burnout. Time poverty is its number one cause, creating frazzled, unproductive and unhappy workers. Research shows that feeling like you don't have enough time can cloud your thinking, impair your memory function and focus, and leave you prone to making riskier decisions that can backfire. One analysis of 2.5 million Americans even found feelings of time poverty had a stronger effect on mental wellbeing than being unemployed.

This is all fairly alarming. Yet feeling time poor isn't inevitable in our modern world. There are people out there who feel they have enough time and – here's the kicker – they don't necessarily work less. In fact, one survey found that, on average, people who felt they weren't time-starved worked similar levels to those who did.

So what gives? Is it actually possible to carve out more hours in your day? Are there simple ways to feel more in control of your schedule? Absolutely.

First, we just have to find out the root causes of your time poverty – and then form a plan of attack with a few choice research-backed strategies. →



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TIME POVERTY: THE CAUSES

It's no surprise that the rise of time poverty is largely down to changes in our work lives. But not in the rise of work hours: there's some evidence that hours per week have actually dramatically and nearly consistently *fallen* over the past 100 years. According to one study, the average employee in the UK works 514 *fewer* hours per year – the equivalent of 64 working days – than 70 years ago.

However, while our work hours have fallen, the intensity and speed of that work has rocketed. After all, in the pre-digital era, the absence of email, video calls and instant messages created a naturally slower work environment. Just imagine it: how many letters would you send each day if they had to be handwritten and posted? How many people would you meet with if you had to physically travel to see each one in person?

"BACK-TO-BACK ONLINE MEETINGS AND THE PINGING OF MESSAGES MEAN WE RARELY HAVE BREAKS"

The immediacy created by modern technology has created a pressure-cooker working environment, dense with tasks. Back-to-back online meetings and the constant pinging of messages mean that we rarely have breaks in our day. And, unlike much of the past, our working hours have blurred with our leisure. In a world of permanent connectivity, many people feel pressure to always be available to 'jump on a call' after dinner, and to read and respond to emails on a Sunday. When the office is in the spare bedroom, it is all too easy to let work spill over into



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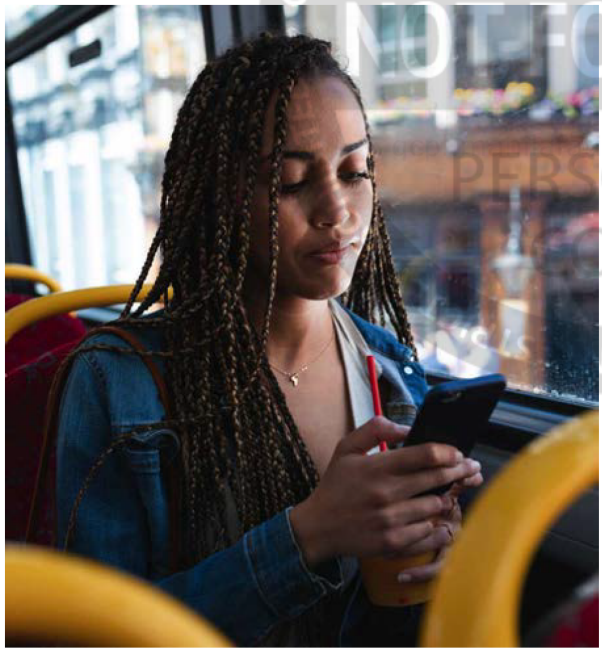


family time, reducing the time we have for the things we love.

It also can't be ignored that the creeping of work into home life is particularly problematic for women. They're more likely to feel more time pressure as they still shoulder the biggest burden of household tasks – in developed countries, women spend on average twice as many hours on unpaid domestic tasks than men.

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

It's a hard truth, but our jobs aren't the only cause of time famine. There's been a big shift in our personal lives and the very concept of 'free time'.

Recently, TIMED, a time perception research group that I lead, conducted in-depth interviews with 300 people from across Europe about how they use technology in their day-to-day lives. The research highlighted that there were scarily few moments in the day – from first thing in the morning to last thing at night – when people weren't using tech, particularly their phones. Now, we all secretly know our screen time is too high. You've probably spotted swarms of worrying headlines about it while looking at a screen. But the reason behind this staggering tech use is often missed. As the TIMED research showed, time spent on screens was motivated by people's desire to avoid having *any* periods of 'empty' time in their lives.

ABOVE Constant notifications make it harder to relax and socialise

ABOVE RIGHT Many of us pick up our phones instead of enjoying the chance for a quiet moment

LEFT Modern technology has revolutionised the way many of us work, but can leave some feeling unable to 'switch off'

In a culture in which productivity is *the* measure of success, 'empty' time is now perceived to be wasted time. This means we're driven to fill all our non-work hours with digital activities that ensure no time is 'lost' – that every moment holds some form of productivity, authenticity and intellectual depth. From watching recipes, to brain-training and, well, reading articles about how to reframe your time, the march of self-improvement is endless. It all leaves us trying to shift that immovable feeling that our lives, at this time, aren't enough.

However, the research showed that periods online are prone to distraction, and that you can easily lose track of time on your phone. We've all been there: one minute we are logging on to Instagram for a quick look around, and the next thing we know, an hour has passed.

The result? Our online activities not only eat into our precious time, but they also foster feelings of guilt about how we've 'wasted' our time so far. As a result, we feel under even greater pressure to use what remaining time we have 'well'. Ironically, in an attempt to avoid wasting time, we often lose more than we gain. →

FIVE WAYS TO TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR TIME

Try the following to see if you can improve the way you manage your time... whether to free up an hour here or there, overhaul your life or appreciate how you spend your days



JUST SAY NO

Modern society tells us that saying yes to everything is at the heart of being a good friend, parent or employee. Whether it's taking on more at work or organising another hobby for your child, it can soon eat into your time.

Saying no can be daunting. You may worry people will think you're impolite or inconsiderate. So it may require some practice. What's the best way to say no calmly and assertively? Research suggests you won't look particularly likeable if you cite a lack of time (the thinking is everyone is in control of their own time and you're choosing not to use yours). Instead, consider a) asking for more time, b) being clear you're saying no due to circumstances out of your control, or c) not giving an excuse at all.

DO A TIME AUDIT

Mapping out how you use your time is a great way to see where you might be able to find some more. Start by doing a 'time audit': log all your activities over a period of time, a week, for example. Note: record *all* your activities – the meetings, doomscrolling, cooking, even sorting socks.

Don't worry, you don't need to track your time to the millisecond. Breaking down your day into 30-minute windows will keep things manageable. And it needn't be every day – just pick one weekday and one weekend day (avoid Mondays and Fridays as these tend to be atypical days). Once you have your time audit, you can start to take control. For some, time auditing can reveal small changes in routines that can free up extra time. For instance, something simple like batch cooking could help you claw back the 30 minutes per evening you usually spend preparing dinner. For others, however, a wholesale reappraisal of life beckons.

OUTSOURCE YOUR CHORES

One proven way to gain time is to buy it. You really can outsource those tasks you find particularly unrewarding and repurpose that time for leisure. Hiring a cleaner (even occasionally), purchasing a robotic vacuum cleaner or paying for a food delivery are all examples of ways that you can purchase time to reduce time famine.

But won't this cost you more financially? Yes. But it's worth thinking about the reason behind your spending – research shows that investing your money in time, rather than things, is much better for your wellbeing. One study suggested that spending £32 ($40) a week on outsourcing tasks can bring you more happiness than if you spend the same amount of money on material goods.

Of course, this won't be possible for everyone. But you can also outsource without spending money. Redistributing tasks among household members, or trading your least favourite domestic chores with one another, can help you to free up time without spending a penny.

Just remember: outsourcing will only make you feel less time impoverished if you use your newfound time wisely. Fill it with more work and you'll end up with less time and money than you started with. So if you do decide to outsource, make sure you have a clear goal for the time that you'll save, and stick to it.

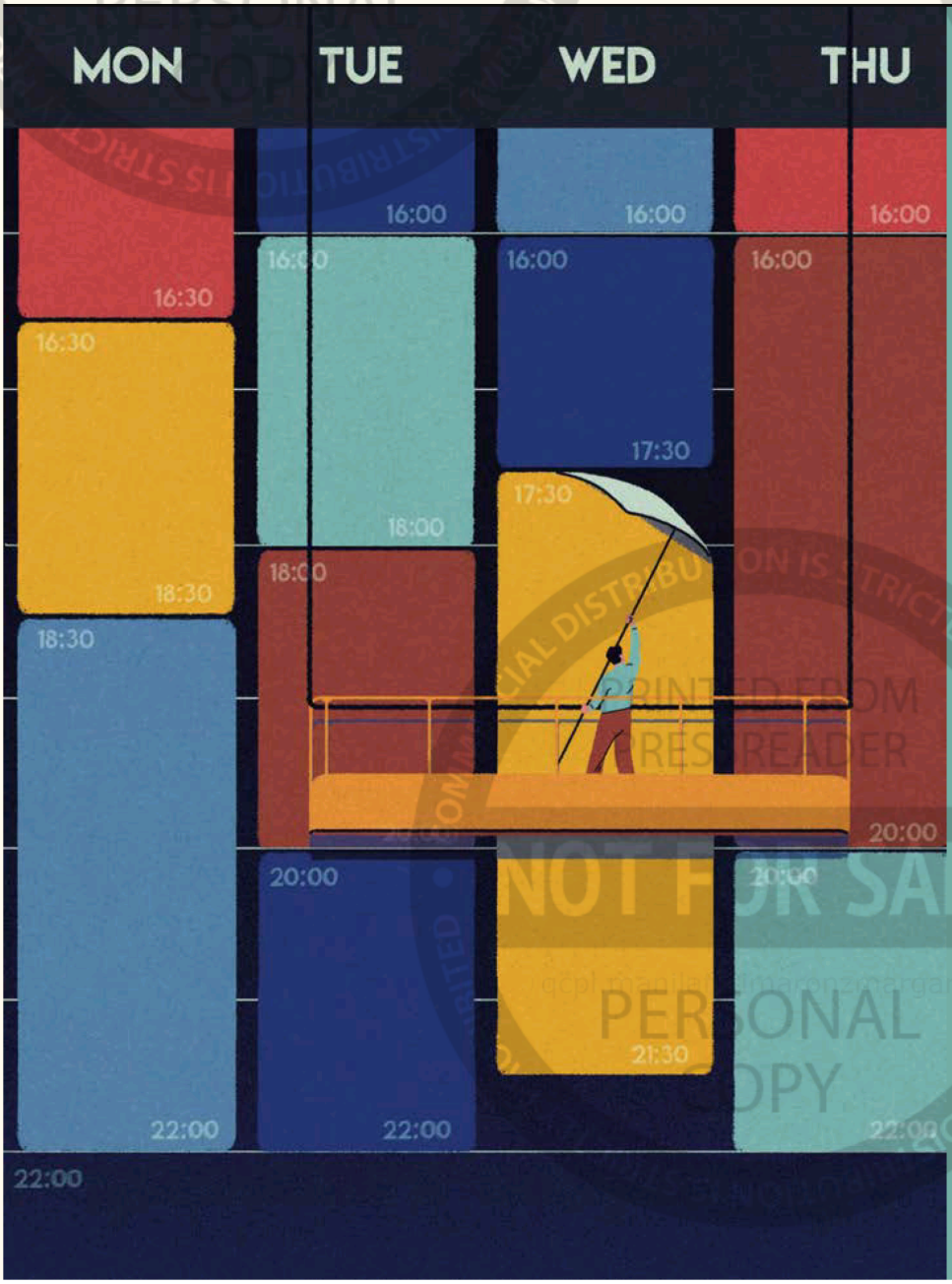
WRITE AN 'I DID' LIST

We all want to look back on our days and feel like we accomplished a lot. However, life is so hectic, and we're so busy adding things to our to-do lists, that we rarely take stock of just how much we have achieved. This can leave us with a constant sense of 'needing to do more'.

Keeping a diary of your daily achievements is one way to help you develop that much-needed sense of triumph. Try setting aside five minutes every few days to acknowledge just how much you have done.

Seeing this all down on paper also gives you the confidence to say no to new requests, helping you to free up future time.

Your 'I did' list could also make it feel like you've fitted more into your days. It's all down to how we perceive time: in general, periods that contain many memories are remembered as much fuller than those with few memories. Keeping a diary of your activities may therefore help you to remember the days, weeks and years as longer – there's some evidence that marking our time like this even combats the feeling that time passes more quickly as we age. Ultimately, though, it's a strategy best used to help confirm that you *are* doing enough – that your time, no matter how much you have, is being well spent.



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BLOCK YOUR TIME

In essence, time blocking involves setting boundaries with yourself about your time use. This is done by allocating specific tasks to specific time-limited periods of the day. For example, you can allocate yourself just 30 minutes of social media use per day, which can only occur when you are commuting.

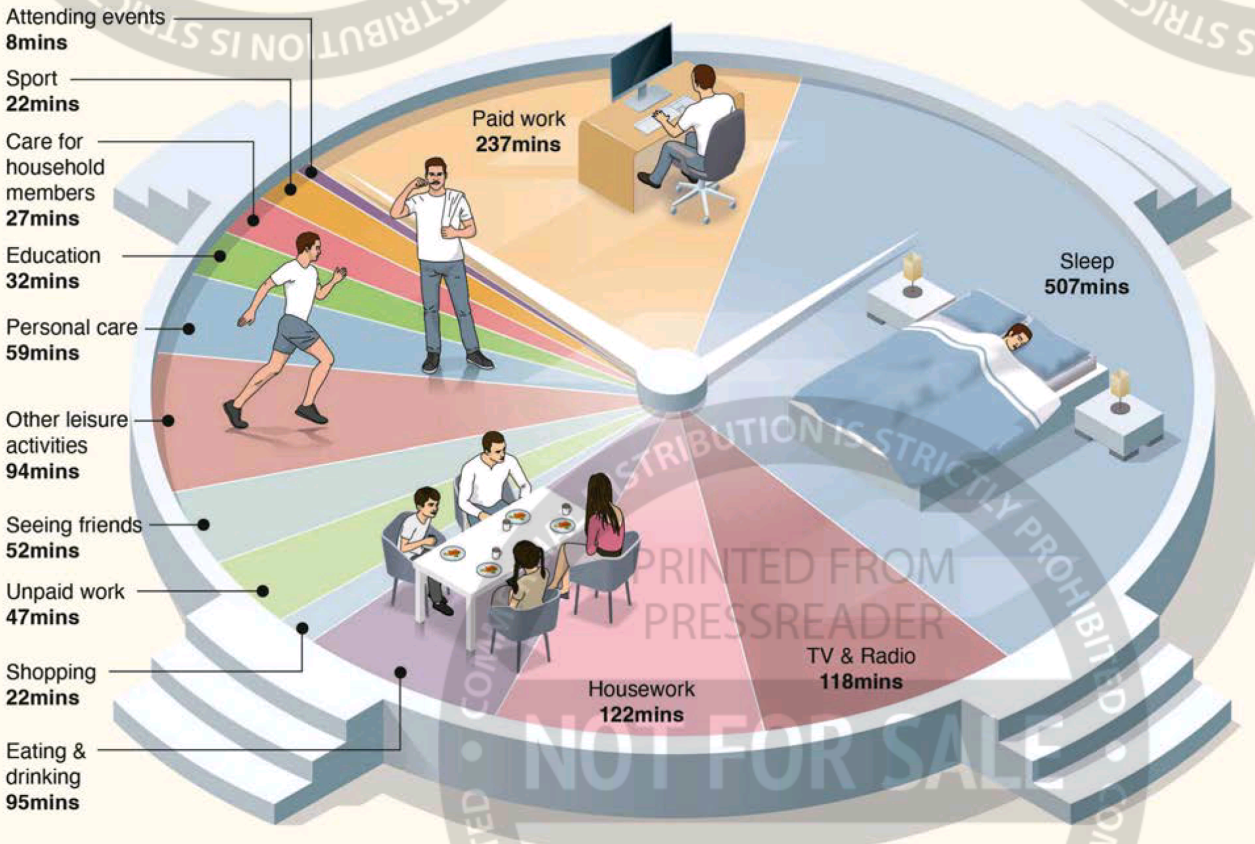
Time blocking helps us to compartmentalise activities. By stopping tasks from overlapping, or interrupting one another, we gain a sense of control over our time. One time block, one task. And with less need to do everything at once, your day won't be shredded into unproductive multitasking.

To succeed at time blocking, you need to know where you're wasting time and why – time auditing will help. For example, if you can't relax after work without clearing your emails, and as a result constantly check and respond to incoming messages, block off 15 minutes in the evening to do only email. After that, turn off email alerts or use downtime functions on your phone so you can't access them.

Alternatively, block time for relaxation. Even 15 minutes a day where you consciously decide to be uninterrupted and focused on a single leisure activity will help you to feel like you have a greater abundance of time. →

MINUTE-BY-MINUTE

Everyone in the world has 24 hours each day, but how does the typical person spend them? According to hundreds of time surveys from 38 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries – including the UK, US, Japan and Canada – here's how our days break down...



THE AVERAGE HUMAN DAY

How the average person aged 16-64 in OECD countries spends their time on various activities

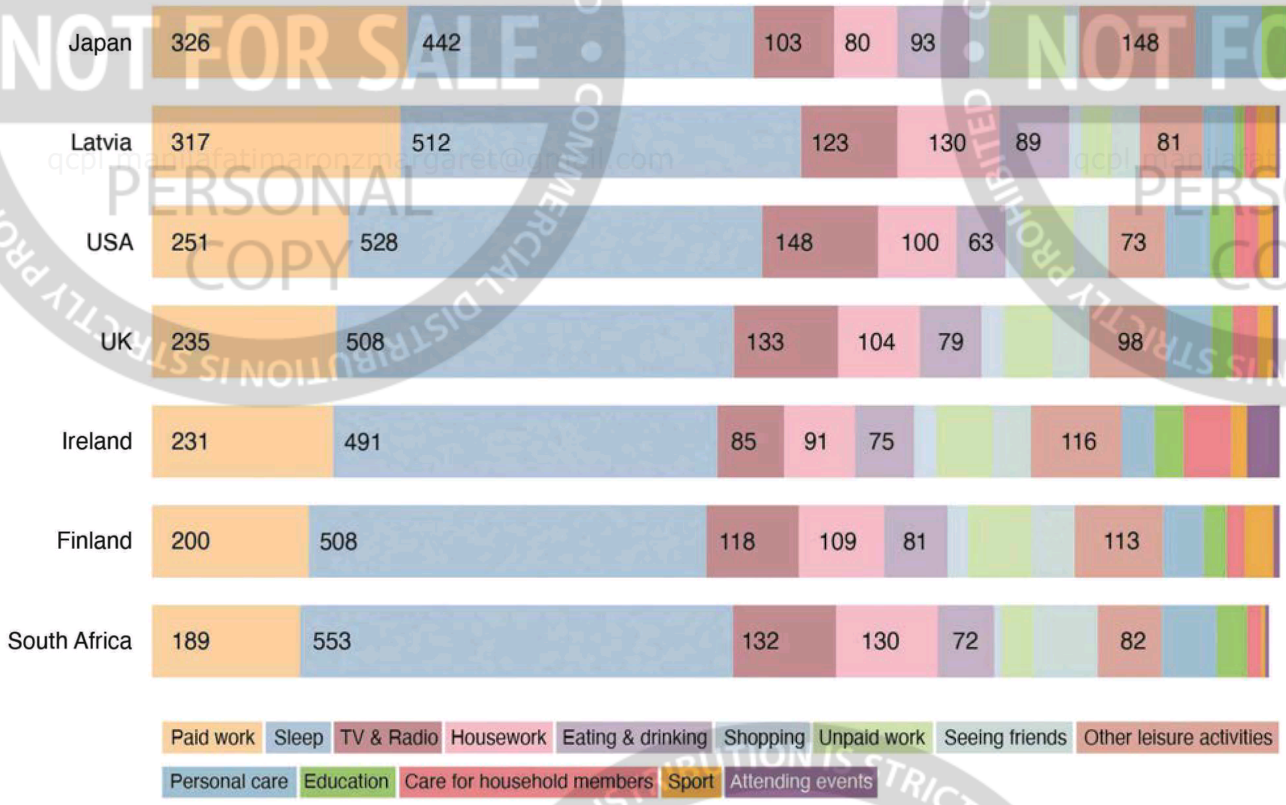
SOURCE: OECD

by PROF RUTH OGDEN

Ruth is professor of the psychology of time, and a lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University.

HOW DOES EACH COUNTRY SPEND ITS TIME?

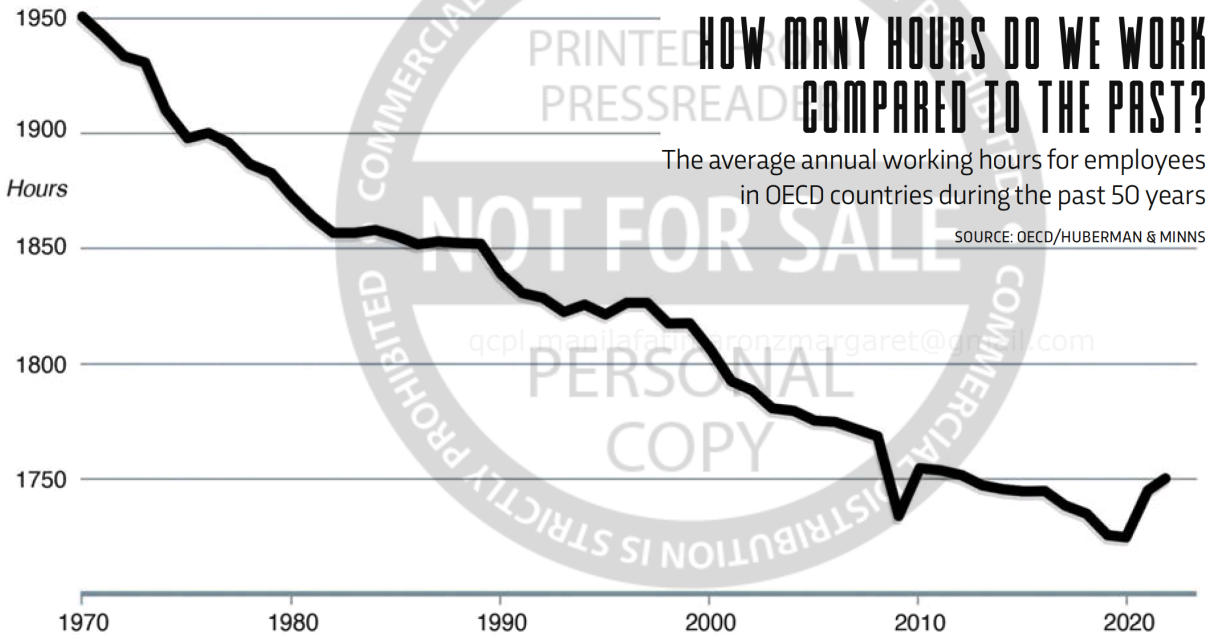
The average time (in minutes) people aged 16-64 spend on various activities SOURCE: OECD



HOW MANY HOURS DO WE WORK COMPARED TO THE PAST?

The average annual working hours for employees in OECD countries during the past 50 years

SOURCE: OECD/HUBERMAN & MINNS



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