Time Management Workbook

Professional Support and Well-being Service
Health Education England, Thames Valley

Contents

PSWS

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT
AND WELLBEING SERVICE

Introduction

Time Management – Negative Connotations?

The management of time is highly valued in the busy healthcare environment and to find that you are not apparently able to be effective in this regard may be, at best, unsettling. It may also feel like suggestions to develop your time management skills are damaging to your chances of success. The high value placed on effective time management within the NHS culture means that any indication, either from others or from your own observations, may be felt as a suggestion you are not capable of doing the job.

There can also be a sense of frustration when sometimes the reason that you are not able to get things done effectively seems to be a consequence of wider systemic issues. Most people working within the NHS can identify points in the system that could be more efficient and would save time for many people. These may be useful ideas for quality improvement projects but often they are areas of the workplace over which you have limited or no control. This can be frustrating, and certainly system wide improvements may be pursued, but it does not mean that there may not be benefits from reflecting on your own practice, consider your personal perspective and use of time and focus on those aspects that you can control.

Cultural aspects of time

Approaches to time management can often assume that everyone has a similar viewpoint of time. In reality, different cultures have a different perspective on time which can be described in three dimensions:

Scarce or plentiful?

Scarce   **Plentiful**

- A scarce perspective treats time as a resource and views time as a highly valued construct in its' own right.
- A plentiful perspective views time as abundant, it is something that everyone has and can give for free.

Monochronic or polychronic?

Monochronic   **Polychronic**

- A monochronic viewpoint prefers to concentrate on one activity and/or relationship at a time and values the opportunity to undertake activities in a sequential manner. Those with a monochronic perspective may find themselves forced into multi-tasking behaviours, this does not represent the favoured mode of working.
- A polychronic perspective prefers to undertake multiple activities/interactions simultaneously. Those with a polychronic viewpoint of time will often be part of multiple conversations at once and find the input of multiple stimuli preferable.

Past   **Present**   **Future**

- A past oriented approach views the present as an extension of the past, this viewpoint highly values reflection on and learning from past experiences.
- A present oriented approach focuses more on the here and now with a high value placed on short term benefits.
- A future oriented approach values long-term benefits and sees time as moving forwards towards a constructed vision.

Sometimes it can be difficult to unpick which end of these dimensions represents your personal cultural preference. It can be difficult to separate your behaviours, which may adapt in different situations, from your preferences. It may be helpful to take a different approach, it is often the case that one end of a dimension will negatively judge the opposite end. For example, someone with a scarce resource viewpoint, might judge a plentiful viewpoint as wasteful or inefficient. Conversely, a plentiful perspective might judge a scarce viewpoint as someone who does not find time for people. If you find yourself automatically drawn towards a negative judgement of one end of the dimension, it may reflect your preference as the opposite.

Typical Time Consumers

Before selecting the strategies that you might want to try implementing, you first need to identify where time is 'lost' in your day. Time spent diagnosing the parts of your day that might be made more effective, allows you to implement the right treatment plan. The following list are just some of the typical cognitive and emotional processes that can consume time, work through them and reflect on those that represent an opportunity to adapt. You may find it useful to set a timer for every half hour for a couple of days, each time the alarm goes off make a note of what you have done for the previous half an hour. Which of these time consumers has had an impact on your effectiveness in the last half hour?

Decision Making and Prioritisation

Decision making

Decision making is generally viewed as a linear process from data gathering to analysis to conclusion and there are many models for decision making in various different contexts to promote effective and efficient decisions. When time is wasted in decision making, the chances are that too much time is spent on one or more of these stages.
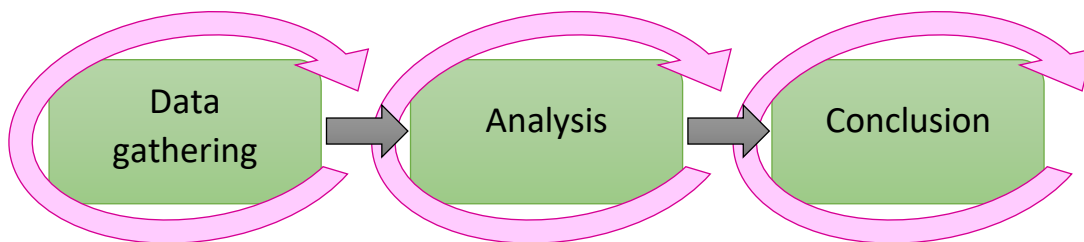
If you are someone who takes a maximiser approach to decision making, you may feel that you need all the possible data before making a decision. This is often a positive thing for well-informed decision making but it can become a time consumer if it is paralysing and prevents you moving forwards in the process.

It is also possible that you get stuck in a loop in the analysis, you may feel that you are not able to sort through the information in a useful manner, that you cannot link up the different factors or weight the importance of different parts of the data you have gathered.

Finally, perhaps it is in the final conclusion, it may be that you have conducted good data gathering and effective analysis but you find the final conclusion is hard to determine. The difficulty is in identifying the action or steps that would be taken.

Unnecessary, additional time on decision making in the clinical context can quickly add up – so many decisions are made in a typical day. It is obviously important that decisions are not rushed but slowed decision making can also be a problem in a busy environment.

Prioritisation is a form of decision making but within a specific part of the work process, it may be that you find the process of making a decision good enough in many circumstances but find the decision to prioritise one thing over another challenging. You may have become aware of this through feedback you have received – often difficulty prioritising is observed by others who would expect you to prioritise differently.

Procrastination

Procrastination is a behavioural delay that can be viewed as evolutionarily favourable because it represents a present oriented focus that is functional in unpredictable environments. However, in many modern contexts, things are more predictable, so planning and control activities are more functional. In this modern-day environment, procrastination behaviours are often less useful, even maladaptive, and can result in present oriented behaviours that delay the intended, planned behaviours.

The active procrastination scale

Not all procrastination behaviours are negative and active procrastination has been linked to purposive use of time, the perception of control over time held by the individual and also some positive stress coping behaviours. The difference seems to lie in whether procrastination is active or passive. It is, therefore, useful to first reflect if any procrastination behaviours you may identify are passive (and therefore potentially unhelpful) or active (and therefore potentially helpful).

The active procrastination scale is a framework to consider your procrastination activities. explore if you are actively choosing to procrastinate and identify why this might happen. Have a go at answering the following questions and then use the scoring grid.

	Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	My performance tends to suffer when I have to race against deadlines					
2	I'm upset and reluctant to act when I'm forced to work under pressure					
3	If I put things off until the last moment, I'm not satisfied with their outcomes					
4	To use my time more effectively, I deliberately postpone some tasks					
5	I often start things at the last minute and find it difficult to complete them on time					
6	I'm often running late when getting things done					
7	In order to make better use of my time. I intentionally put off some tasks					
8	I'm frustrated when I have to rush to meet deadlines					
9	I achieve better results if I complete a task at a slower pace, well ahead of a deadline					
10	I feel tense and cannot concentrate when there's too much time pressure on me					
11	I intentionally put off work to maximise my motivation					
12	It's really a pain for me to work under upcoming deadlines					
13	I have difficulty finishing activities once I start them					
14	I finish most of my assignments right before deadlines because I choose to do so					
15	I often fail to accomplish goals that I set for myself.					
16	I don't do well if I have to rush through a task					

Scoring

Score your answer using the following instructions:

- Work out the score for each of the questions and fill in the scoring grid below:
  - Strongly disagree = 5
  - Disagree = 4
  - Neutral = 3
  - Agree = 2
  - Strongly agree = 1

- Unless it is one of the reverse scored questions (identified in the scoring grid), in which case:
    - Strongly disagree = 1
    - Disagree = 2
    - Neutral = 3
    - Agree = 4
    - Strongly agree = 5
- Each question loads onto one of four different factors: Outcome satisfaction, Preference for pressure, Intentional decision or Ability to meet deadlines.

Question	Reverse the scoring?	Outcome Satisfaction	Preference for Pressure	Intentional Decision	Ability to Meet Deadlines
1					
2					
3					
4	Yes				
5					
6					
7	Yes				
8					
9					
10					
11	Yes				
12					
13					
14	Yes				
15					
16					
Total					

The aim of this questionnaire is not to allow you to compare how much you procrastinate with another person, the self-report approach limits the usefulness of inter-person comparisons. However, it is useful to allow you to dissect the details of your own procrastination behaviours.

Are you actually an active procrastinator?

Higher scores in each of the columns suggest that you may be making an active choice to procrastinate.

If you are actively procrastinating, why are you making this choice?

6.

Outcome satisfaction – procrastination is because of an awareness that the outcome to be better if you have taken time over things.

Preference for pressure – procrastination because you are energised by the pressure of the deadline.

Intentional decision – procrastination is actually a decision made to be most effective in the use of your time.

Ability to meet deadlines – the apparent delaying behaviours are actually because you have accurately predicted the amount of time that the project will take

If you are aware of significant procrastination behaviours that do not fit these patterns, it suggests you may be undertaking less helpful, passive procrastination. If this is the case, procrastination may be a root cause for difficulties with time management.

Motivation and Procrastination

Another aspect to consider is that many people who procrastinate only do so in some parts of their lives – there are times when they procrastinate and times when they don't. This can be related to the level of motivation felt for the task and there are a number of different theories of motivation, one of which is known as expectancy theory. According to expectancy theory, a person is motivated when three factors are satisfied: the outcome must be desirable, the individual must believe the action will lead to the outcome and they must feel that they are capable of successfully completing the action.
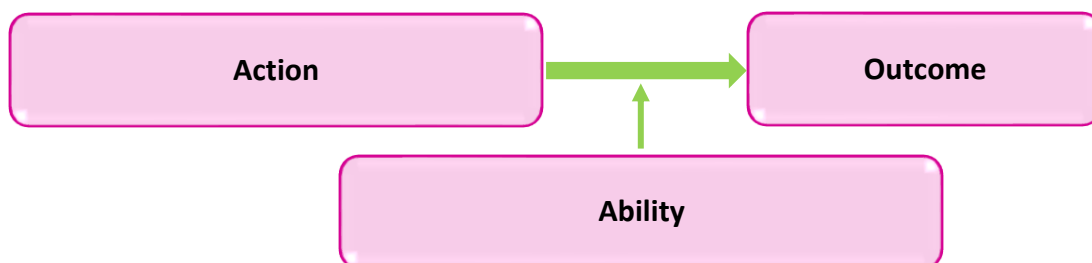
Keep a brief record of the things you are supposed to be doing when you procrastinate. In each case, ask yourself three questions:

1. Do you think the outcome has value?
2. Do you believe that the action will result in the intended outcome?
3. Do you believe you are capable of successfully accomplishing the action?

If you answer to one of these is 'No' you may have an indication of the reason for your procrastination.

Task switching

The ability to multi-task is often viewed as a positive or necessary skill, however, multi-tasking is actually just rapid task switching. The individual is rapidly switching their attention from one task to another and this has a cost for memory function. The central executive of the working memory is responsible for, among other things, attention, and repeated attentional shifting comes with a

measurable cost. It has been found that responses are slower and error rates increase after a task switch. An awareness of an upcoming switch can reduce this effect, but it still does not eliminate it. The cost is very small each time but with repeated task switching the small cost can add up to very significant cost to productive time. With each task switch, the limited capacity of the working memory is used to shift the goal (I am going to do this now rather than that) and to activate/deactivate the rules needed to accomplish the goal (I am going switch off the rules needed for this activity and switch on the rule for the chosen activity).
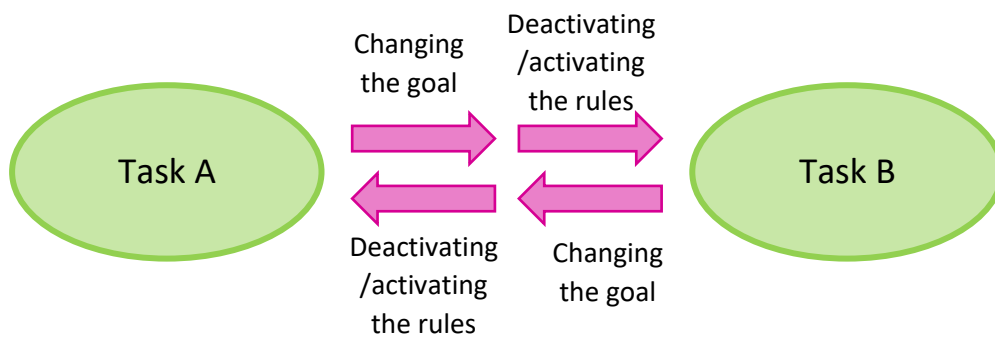

The clinical environment and the existence of the bleep means that many trainees find themselves constantly switching tasks. This task switching can be an inevitable consequence of the immediate nature of clinical need, however, it is also a real problem for effective use of time. Does the root cause (or one of the causes) for your challenges with effective use of time lie in regular task switching?

Expertise development

It may be that time management difficulties lie in the development of expertise in some areas of your work. Novices have fewer habitual activities and less routinisation in skills and their pattern recognition is less developed.

When an individual can recognise patterns in information the links allow for more information to be processed in the working memory. This is the process of expertise development at a cognitive level – where a novice sees eight different pieces of information, an expert can link a number of them together to make them easier to remember and process.
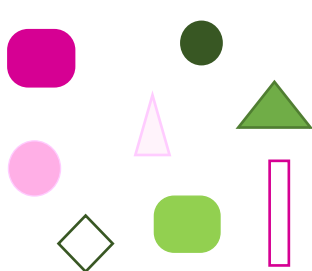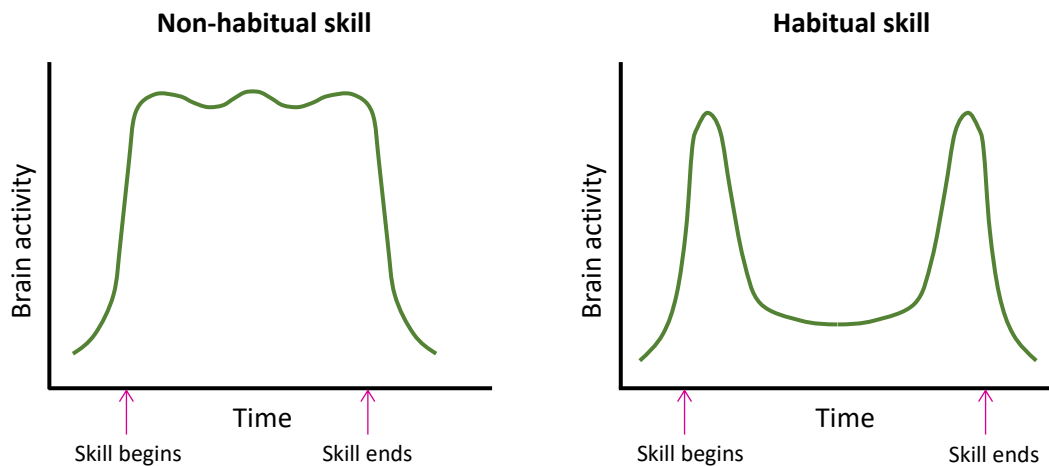

A novice sees unlinked pieces of information which is an overwhelming amount of information for the brain to process.
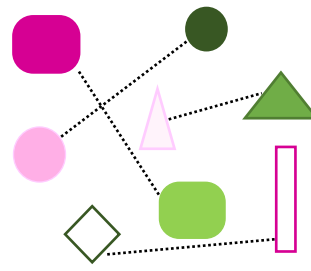
An expert can link some parts together in patterns, reducing the demand and making it easier for the brain to manipulate it.

When a new skill is being learned there is significant brain activity throughout the process. However, once it becomes habitual, there is a burst of activity at the start as the neuronal patterns for the correct behaviours are selected followed by a drop in activity and a final burst of activity at the end as the use of the habitual behaviour is evaluated and reinforced or adapted if needed. 8.

Non-habitual skill   **Habitual skill**

Brain activity — Time — Skill begins — Skill ends

Brain activity — Time — Skill begins — Skill ends

If you feel a sense of being cognitively overwhelmed, or a high level of brain activity when you are trying to get things done, it may be that there are some key cognitive or motor skills that you could invest time in. Have you noticed that there are particular things that you have to do taking more time than you think they should? Could this be related to the development of expertise, routinisation or habituation?

Confidence

For many people, the biggest challenge for effective time management is confidence – the confidence to not second guess your decisions or double check jobs that have already been completed. It is common that these doubts surface as negative automatic thoughts such as:

- Catastrophising – assuming that the absolute worst case scenarios lie at the end of every decision you are making.
- Over-generalising – drawing overly general rules about likely outcomes from specific incidents.
- Fortune telling – making assumptions about the future that are not based on rational, objective evidence.
- Mind reading – assuming that other people can do the work easily, or are thinking you are less than competent without any evidence.
- Dismissing positives – not seeing those times when you have made the right decision.

If you are aware of this type of thinking, it may be the root cause of anxiety related checking behaviours. If so, the strategies you will want to choose to help you work more effectively may be quite different to other root causes.

Diagnosis?

Having spent some time considering the root cause of any difficulty with managing time, hopefully you are now in a position to be more specific about the challenges you may face. Looking at the list below, or any other thoughts that you have had, what might be the diagnosis?

- Decision making
    - Data gathering
    - Analysis
    - Conclusion
    - Prioritisation
- Procrastination
    - Passive not active procrastination behaviours
    - Motivation
- Task switching
- Expertise development
- Confidence
    - Catastrophising
    - Over-generalising
    - Fortune telling
    - Mind reading
    - Dismissing positives

What do you think is the root cause of your challenges with time management?

Strategy Choices

Having spent some time reflecting on and looking in depth at the particular aspects of your cognitive and emotional processes that consume your time, you can then select appropriate strategies to try out. In each case you may find a choice between a direct or indirect approach. An indirect strategy will deal with the observed issue and may free up some time, whereas a direct strategy will go to the source of the issue to prevent or minimise the time demand arising in the future. A direct approach may actually consume time in the short term, so a consideration of the cost and benefits of these strategies may be necessary.

There are many possible strategies that you might explore – through your own research, from courses or through discussion with other people in your speciality or involved in your training. The following are just some ideas that might help you to work on effective time management.
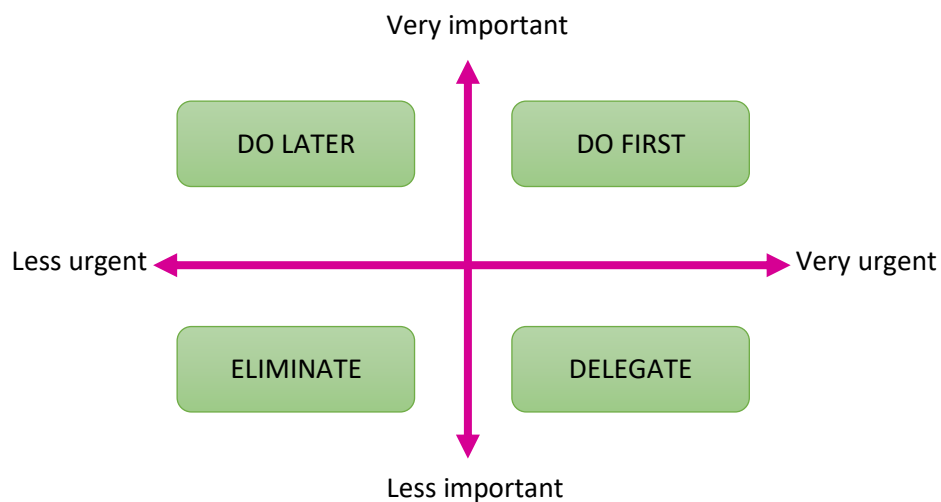
When you are selecting strategies to try out, you may want to consider what your personal cultural preferences are in relation to time: Scarce or plentiful? Monochronic or polychronic? Past, present or future? Strategies that fit better within your natural preferences may be more comfortable for you to implement.

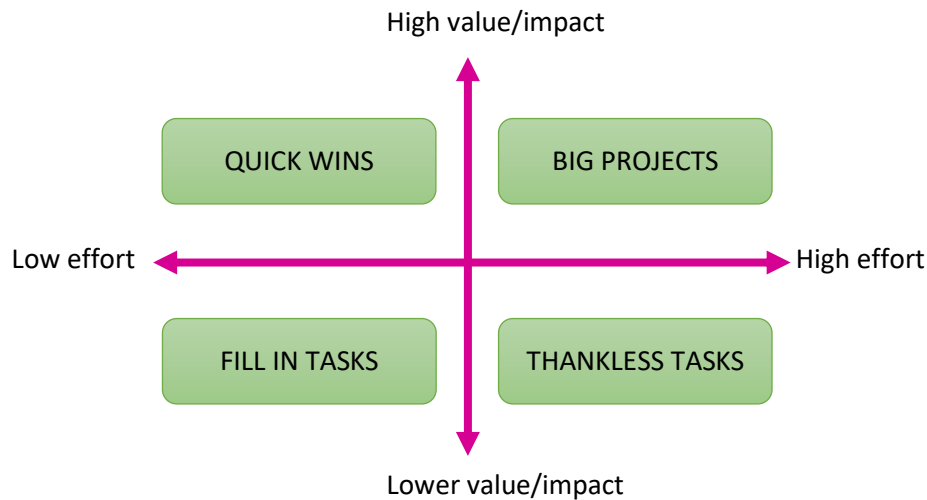## Decision Making and Prioritisation

Matrices

There are any number of different grids, usually two by two, that can be used to prioritise or decide on next steps. The type of grid you use depends on the context and the decision you are making. Two examples are an urgency-importance grid and a value/impact-effort grid

Urgency – importance grid

Value/impact – effort grid

High value/impact

| QUICK WINS | BIG PROJECTS |

Low effort ← → High effort

| FILL IN TASKS | THANKLESS TASKS |

Lower value/impact

There are many different types of simple matrix like these that will allow you to organise your thoughts, finding one or two that work for you and your context may be an exercise of trial and error to see what helps the most.

Four 'D's

An alternative to the grid is a simple sort approach: Four 'D's. For any task that you are about to undertake ask the question:

Should I…

a) …do it well?
b) …delegate it?
c) …do it less well?
d) …dump it?

Whilst it does not always feel comfortable, sometimes, it is best to choose answers b, c or d. Delegation is a key skill that you will be developing as you move through your training but it involves trusting others to undertake the task you have delegated to your standards and within an acceptable timeframe. Delegation is often about learning to accept there are different ways of doing things that are not necessarily wrong.

Doing things less well can also be uncomfortable. However, it is often the case that a task can be done to 'good enough' with less than the proportional amount of effort. If 'good enough' is 80% of perfect and it takes 50% of effort to achieve it, the subsequent 50% effort is only going to improve the outcome a further 20%. Learning which tasks are worth the extra effort and which are not, is itself a skill that takes focused reflection to develop.
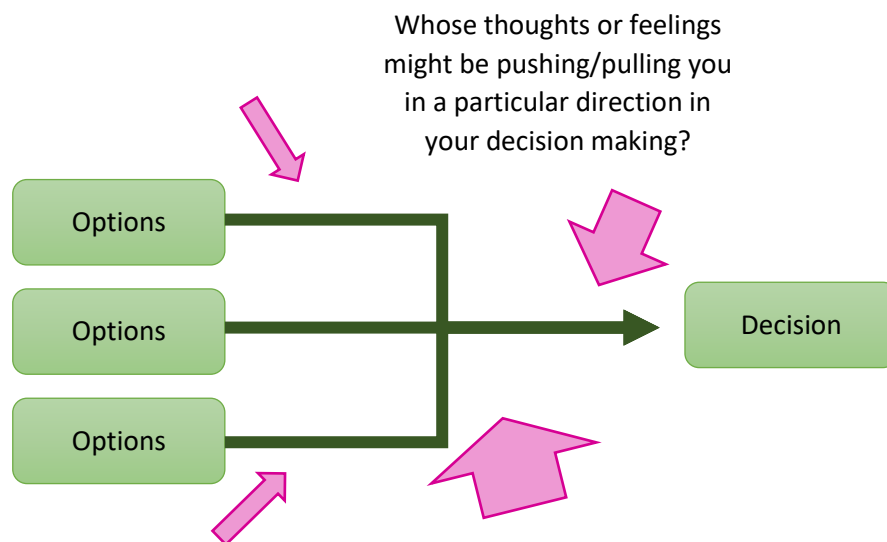
Finally, do you really need to do this? There are things that it is simply not worth doing and whilst it does not always feel satisfactory, for effective use of time, these ought to be left. If this is an active decision, rather than a passive, procrastinating decision, then this is a positive process.

Another factor to be considered is the differing ideas and perspectives that others may hold. Often, in a clinical environment, there will be more than one potential decision or different reasons to prioritise one activity over another. Where people around you hold a different perspective on your decision, it will inevitably influence your decision making.

It is worth reflecting on your decisions to identify those people who impact on your decision making and whether it is an appropriate impact. There are times when we can be made to doubt decisions or be swayed into viewing options with a different set of priorities. This may be useful when it is considering someone with greater expertise in the area, but it can also be a disproportionate influence if it is someone who you particularly like or respect.

If you are easily swayed by others that could be nudging you in different directions, this can be a root cause of indecisiveness. So, if you feel yourself being indecisive, reflect on which specific people could be pulling you or pushing you in different directions.

Whose thoughts or feelings
might be pushing/pulling you
in a particular direction in
your decision making?

Options

Options

Options

Decision

Procrastination

To-do lists

A common solution to unwanted procrastination is to create to-do lists, the increased number of devices in our lives makes it increasingly easy to find a way to make a list that suits different preferences.

Having said that, for some people, a to-do list will be created and then ignored, either because starting the to-do list becomes another thing to procrastinate over, or because the number of things on the list is overwhelming and so avoidance creeps in. Where the latter of these is the case, starting simple may be the answer, accomplishments tend to breed further accomplishments. Add a few easily achieved tasks to the list and start there to allow yourself to tick off some quick wins early on.

The pomodoro technique is a widely-used and adaptable approach to focused working. Essentially, working time is divided up into 'pomodoros' which are a time box of 25 minutes, individual tasks are assigned a number of pomodoros to represent the length of overall time they should take. At the beginning and end of a period of time, perhaps a day, perhaps half a morning, the number of pomodoros taken for each task is reviewed to facilitate self-regulation and accurate time predictions.

For each pomodoro, you set the timer and then focus entirely and completely on the allocated task, without distractions, without interruptions. When the timer buzzes, you must stop work, even if there is only a few more minutes of the task. The idea is to never maintain focus beyond 25 minutes so temptation to continue working because you are 'in a rhythm' or to sustain 'flow' must be ignored. The break between one pomodoro and the next is only 3 to 5 minutes, just long enough for your mind to move away from the task or to switch to the next task. Use this time to specifically not think about the work, disconnect from the task, think about a holiday or do some breathing exercises. After four pomodoros, you should take a longer break of 15 to 30 minutes during which time a proper break is taken. Do not do anything that requires complex thinking, activities undertaken during the break should be simple, such as making lunch, going for a walk, to allow your mind to subconsciously organise your thoughts from the previous work. This diffuse thinking allows for creativity and the formation of different connections between ideas.

Instructions

If there is a specific task that you are avoiding, start out by writing a list of detailed instructions so that someone else would be able to complete the task for you. The process of writing the instructions can help you break the task down into small steps that seem more manageable. By undertaking this process, hopefully, you come to realise that you are capable of being successful at each of the steps and so boosting confidence to complete them.

Task Switching

Unfortunately, task switching in the clinical environment is sometimes unavoidable, however, it can be reduced if you are able to clearly and quickly prioritise and identify the times it is appropriate to say "later". Some simple strategies can help minimise task switching demands in your context.
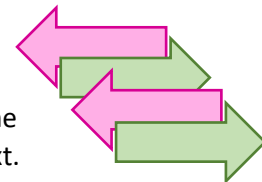
Modern technology does not help, so switching off unnecessary push notifications, turning off alerts or even taking email off your phone.

Putting up a 'please leave' sign, either in reality or virtually may help in some contexts. Some apps allow you to advertise yourself as 'unavailable' for periods of focused working. Or actually tell your colleagues you need some uninterrupted time or space.

Going back to some of the decision-making tools that will allow you to quickly prioritise the tasks in front of you. It is important that, once prioritised, you are cognitively disciplined and avoid thinking about the next task on the list until the preceding task is completed. To achieve this, you will need to be confident in your prioritisation in order to avoid worrying that you ought to be doing something else.

Delegation can be a crucial tool for avoidance of task switching, if there are two tasks that need doing simultaneously because they share urgency and importance, perhaps it is possible to delegate one to someone else.

Once you reach a point in your training where you have some control over timings for meetings, try to group them together. This leaves you with open space elsewhere in the week to concentrate on other work without having to break away to attend meetings.

Expertise Development

If you have identified specific skills that take you more time than might be expected, this could be a cause for short term, high intensity, time input for a time benefit in the long term. It is important that you have identified specific skills, simply recognising a need for 'more experience' is likely to be too general for you to put in place the specific developmental steps.

Once you have taken the time to identify the specific skills you need to develop, put in place an action plan that answers the following questions:

- What is the specific learning objective?
- How will I know I have met this objective?
- Who do I need to speak to?
- What resources will I need?
- When can I make this happen?
- Am I capable of this?

Confidence

Developing appropriate confidence in your work can be a real time saver if you tend towards second guessing yourself or double checking your work. This self-doubt may well manifest as negative automatic thoughts that can be conquered using strategies from cognitive behavioural therapy. These negative automatic thoughts stem from your basic beliefs and basic demands. So, the first step may be in identifying these core parts of yourself that can have positive or negative consequences.

Examples of basic beliefs:

I am good enough	People are basically good	The world is exciting
I am helpless	People are judging me	The world is isolating
I am a fraud	People are naturally nurturing	The world is intimidating

Examples of basic demands:

I must be right	People should treat me with respect	The world should be easier
I must be unnoticed	People should treat me with indifference	The world should be more predictable
I must be a superhero	People should treat me with disdain	The world should be fairer

Whatever your basic beliefs or demands are, they will give rise to automatic thoughts, thoughts that spring into mind without conscious effort. These could be positive or negative, but it is the negative automatic thoughts that usually give rise to unwarranted self-doubt. If confidence is a time consumer for you, it may be beneficial to spend some time exploring your basic beliefs to identify any negative thoughts that might arise from them. Then it is possible to use rational, Socratic thinking to objectively shift your thinking from permanent and global to temporary and specific. Asking yourself for the evidence for your thinking in an objective manner to help stop the cycle of negative thinking followed by time consuming behaviours that reinforce the feelings of self-doubt because it seems no-one else has to go the same lengths as you to do the job.

Management?

There have been a number of strategies suggested in this workbook and you may have identified your own through reflection, reading or discussion with colleagues. Which of the strategies that you have come across do you believe are the appropriate management for the diagnosis?

What are you going to try out to work towards more effective time management?