

ASSISTANT GIRLS MINI-COURSE

5 Simple Steps to Maximizing Your Time & Minimizing Your Stress



by Alyson Mead

LESSON #1: Focus is a Five-Letter Word

It's almost a cliché to say that the world has become busier than ever before. The Internet brings us news and other information so fast, most people find they can't keep up with it *and* the other responsibilities in their lives. Most of us have children, mates, friends, spiritual and leisure activities in addition to our work. We have goals and aspirations that exist side-by-side on our best days. On our worst, however, we seem to get lost in the swirl of meeting other people's deadlines, other people's needs, and other people's wishes.

The most important part of starting any new business is **focus**. You need it to get started and move through all the challenges that will come up, and you need it to overcome any self-doubt that may creep in. But while this may sound simple, maintaining focus is anything but.

Focus is also important for managing your time, and making sure the most gets done in the least amount of time. Though multi-tasking can seem like a virtue, many times it's actually a drawback, since everything gets done half-well in half the amount of time.

True focus means applying your mind to one task at a time, and giving that task all of your attention. It means breathing, and being completely present in your body at that moment in time. Focus allows you to get things done more conscientiously, and therefore in a more timely manner. If you have ever finished a project quickly and made a ton of mistakes, you know what I mean.

Exercise:

Try this exercise to extend your practice with focus. Spend one hour of your day attending to just one task at a time. No surfing the Internet while you're on the phone. No sharpening pencils while you're putting a document through the copier. For each task you perform in that hour, do it mindfully. If you're talking on the phone, talk on the phone. If you're writing an email, write that email and nothing else. Notice how this effects your mind and emotions.

Next we'll look into how you can manage your time better by clearly defining your services. Until then, good luck practicing with focus!

LESSON #2: At Your Service!

In the last lesson, you discovered that focusing on just one thing at a time helped you to engage our tasks in a more mindful way. Most people find that practicing focus in this way gives them a more accurate sense of time, and a better sense of how to use it.

Today we'll concentrate on how **defining your services**, to yourself and your clients, can help you manage your time and maintain your sanity level. One of the first tasks any business owner faces is setting out the services or products they will offer. If you are a Virtual Assistant, for example, you might offer typing, transcription and mass mailings.

But what happens when you deliver the file to your client and he or she says, "But wait! I wanted something else?" Your client may become upset, or begin to doubt your trustworthiness. You begin to may worry that your client won't pay you. This simple lack of communication has now unleashed a series of worries.

Setting your services is not as simple as putting out a sign that says: Get your typing, transcription and mass mailings here! It's equally important, for time and sanity management, to explain to your clients what that means. Will you deliver their documents in MS Word, or another program? More importantly, does your client have that software on his or her computer? When is payment expected?

All clients will also need a date when they can expect to receive their material. You might provide this information in an email, which is considered "in writing" by law, or even in an agreement signed before any work is performed. Obviously, it's crucial to assign a realistic deadline, and never to miss one, so your clients will learn to rely on you. Doing things this way will save you tons of time spent on emails and phone calls calming your client down!

Exercise:

Try this exercise to extend your practice of clearly defining your services. Write down the top three services you plan to offer, or are currently offering. Then, in a few sentences, describe each service. Write down how these services will be delivered to your clients. Add how much time an average job is likely to take, or how much you can get done an hour. Now you have a template that can help you judge larger or smaller jobs in the future.

Next time we'll look into how you can manage your time better through Realistic Scheduling. Until then, good luck practicing with clearly defining your services!

LESSON #3: Saving vs. Doing: The Art of Realistic Scheduling

Everyone I've ever talked to about it believes that time management is about everything you can cram into one day. Of course, like all rumors, this has an element of truth to it. Each of us moves through the day needing to accomplish certain tasks to make money, assure our survival, or just establish the quality of life we want.

But in reality, scheduling is only part of the picture. Focus is important, as we have found, as well as the ability to clearly define your services, and stay in communication with your clients. Today, we're going to look at the concept of Realistic Scheduling, to make sure you're not setting yourself up for failure before you even begin your day.

Realistic Scheduling is based around the notion that little things take up a lot of our time. We may not notice the 90 minutes spent answering emails, or the 50 minutes spent talking on the phone (10 calls per day @ 5 minutes per day still equals 50 minutes – almost an hour!), precisely because these tasks are small. Instead, we may need to build these unnoticed tasks into our schedules, by estimating how long they will take.

What small tasks take up a lot of your time? Beginning to get in touch with how much time email takes each day, for example, or how much time you spend talking on the phone can really be an eye-opener. Forgetting to leave time to eat lunch, for example, can also make it seem like you have less time than you have.

Exercise:

Write down the major tasks you need to do today. Meetings with clients, as well as anywhere you will need to drive should go on your calendar first. Next to each item, write down the timeframe for each (e.g., 3:00 – 4:00 pm) and put them in order, from morning until evening. Now fill in the blanks around each of these tasks with the time it will take you to walk or drive there, if applicable. Next, fill in time for your meals, as well as the work you absolutely need to accomplish today. If there are any spaces left, fill them with projects you would like to accomplish, but have been putting off for too long. This is Realistic Scheduling at its best.

Next time we'll look into how you can manage your time better by setting strong boundaries. Until then, good luck practicing with Realistic Scheduling!

LESSON #4: Setting Strong Boundaries

No one likes to set boundaries. It makes you look like a bad person, or a person who doesn't want to listen to the needs of others. As humans, we are socialized enough to fear the shunning we are sure to receive. But as businesspeople, we cannot be at the mercy of others or we can kiss our profits goodbye forever.

One way to set strong boundaries is to start with tasks you can control. As we discovered last time, email and the Internet are time management's worst enemies. Setting limits on how much time you spend on emails a day will work wonders for your time management strategy. I like to spend no more than an hour per day responding to email. Unless it's urgent, from a client, it can wait until tomorrow. Also, never check your email after you stop working for the day, and confine your Internet research to what has to be accomplished now. If you want to surf during your lunch break, or after work, go for it. But never let it interfere with the work that's making you money.

Another important boundary exists between you and your clients. It's crucial to show or tell them right off the bat how you will communicate and when. Otherwise, you are likely to be adding hours to each day of your life, in extra emails and phone calls.

Setting strong boundaries does not make you a bad person. It makes you a smart businessperson and will not only save your profit margin, it will help you resist falling into resentment towards people who may be taking up more than their share of your time.

Exercise:

Today, identify the area of your life that takes the most time from other tasks every day, or nearly every day. It could be clients, email, Internet research, or something else entirely. If it's email, try limiting the amount of time you spend on email to one hour. If it's with your clients, take one step towards repairing the communication and restoring your time. This could be calling this person and making sure all of their questions are answered before closing the conversation something such as, "I'll send your work on or before Friday, but if you have any other questions, would you mind emailing them? I can get back to you faster that way. Thanks so much."

Next time we'll look into how you can manage your time by taking and enforcing breaks. Until then, good luck practicing with setting strong boundaries!

LESSON #5: Don't Bother Me, I'm on My Break!

Have you had a break today? Or have you been sitting in front of the computer, pounding out your work and forgetting that you are a human being with needs? No one can maintain a time management schedule that offers nothing back. Most of us would find that we would begin to resist somehow. Our minds would wander, we would start feeling resentful or angry, and we would want to stop doing our work.

It's not the work itself that's at fault in this scenario, it's the fact that you've neglected the very person you rely on most—yourself. You are not a machine. You're a human being with the limitations of average humans. You need food, water, sleep and shelter. When you're working, you also need periodic breaks. Using what we learned yesterday in our lesson on Realistic Scheduling, start to build breaks into your day. You need to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner—that's not negotiable—but you also need one or two brief breaks, preferably five or ten minutes at the end of each hour you work.

Even if you just walk around your living room or your cubicle, taking a few minutes to clear your head is going to make you more productive and more focused when you return to your work. So though taking and enforcing breaks may seem counter-intuitive to time management, it's actually something that will keep you sane and energetic, instead of tired, resentful and distracted from your work.

As you get more comfortable with taking breaks, put them on your calendar. They may need to move, depending on your scheduling needs, but keep them there every day, no matter what. Remember your lesson on setting boundaries. You are just as important as your clients, your emails, and anything else you might be doing today. Prove it to yourself.

Exercise:

Today, build two breaks into your schedule. The amount of time you spend taking breaks is not important. It's the fact that you are giving them to yourself. Doing things this way shows your inner self that it can trust you to nurture it. When you take your break, get in touch with how it makes your emotions change, and how it changes the sensations in your body. Listen to what your body is telling you. If you need more time to rest, take it.

That brings us to the end of our mini-course 5 Simple Steps to Maximizing Your Time & Minimizing Your Stress. We hope that you will be able to put these concepts into practice to ensure your continued growth and success!

About the Author

Alyson Mead's fiction, essays and articles have appeared in over twenty-five publications, including *Salon*, *In These Times*, *Bitch*, *BUST*, *the Whole Life Times*, *Punk Planet*, *MSN*, *The Sun*, *AOL*, *LA Tribe*, *Rockpile*, *ChickClick*, *Tapestry*, *The Stylus*, and the *New York Daily News*, among others.

She has received the Columbine Award for Screenwriting, the Roy W. Dean Filmmaking Grant and a *Writer's Digest* Award. Her work also appears in the anthology *Stories of Strength*, benefiting the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

She founded Find Your Prosperity, a web-based community providing free content on building a life of wealth and wellbeing, to serve the working population of the world. If you have ever hated your job and wanted to make a change, this site is for you. Sign up for her free newsletter, web deals and prosperity meditations at <http://www.FindYourProsperity.com>.