

# FILLING THE TIME JAR

***Ever feel like there isn't any time or energy left  
to accomplish your big goals & dreams?  
These 5 time management steps to change your life can help!***

After three years of balancing stay-at-home-motherhood with building my own business, my daily routine was well established. I started early—usually around 4 a.m.—so that I could get at least four or five uninterrupted hours of work in before the kids woke up. I am at my best in the morning, so those quiet pre-dawn hours were always the most productive. The rest of the morning was spent tidying the house and then homeschooling. After a late lunch, the girls would settle in their room for a quiet time and I would sneak in another hour or two of work before starting dinner or rushing off to all those afternoon activities. Every day was jam-packed and I was often exhausted, but the routine was set and it was mine.

And then my husband left his job to become a stay-at-home dad. Suddenly my carefully regimented routine was turned upside down. Having him at home was a major goal we had been working towards for years, one we had talked at length about beforehand, and a change we really, truly wanted to make for our family. I thought I was prepared. I thought I was ready.

I was so not ready.

The reality of having Chuck home and in my space all the time was so much harder than I had ever imagined. For months I just felt “off.” I would try to wake up early, but then he would wake up too. I would sit at my desk to work, but almost instantly get distracted. Sometimes it was the noise around me, other times it was email or Pinterest or the latest status update on Facebook. I began spending an inordinate amount of time glued to my laptop or phone, but I wasn’t really accomplishing anything. To make matters worse, the more time I spent “working,” the more frustrated my husband became. You’re always on the computer, he would say. You’re here but you’re not present. We need you to engage.

Though I didn’t want to admit it, I knew, deep down, that he was right. My life was out of whack. I lacked a clear direction and focus, and as a result I was wasting far too much time on the things that didn’t matter at all, and not finding any time for the things that did. Something had to give.

It wasn’t the first time in my life I’ve devolved from competent go-getter to utter disaster, seemingly overnight. Unfortunately I’m pretty sure it won’t be the last. I think we all suffer from these “slumps” once in a while, those days or weeks or months where we feel completely overwhelmed and hopelessly unproductive. We all have those moments where it feels like no matter what we do, we simply can’t pull ourselves together or get caught up. The treadmill is moving just a little too fast and there are one—or ten—too many things pulling us in all directions. The demands and stresses of the everyday become just a bit too much to bear, so we start looking for a way to escape. We respond

by getting distracted, wasting time, and procrastinating the things that are most important. This, of course, creates a vicious cycle, because the more we procrastinate and allow ourselves to be distracted, the more behind and more overwhelmed we feel.

Perhaps you are even feeling like this right now.

There is a very famous story about a professor who held up a jar of rocks to his class. Perhaps you've heard it, but it bears repeating. He asked them, is this jar full? They all agreed that it was. Then he took a bag of small pebbles and poured it into the jar. The pebbles filled in the space around the jar and he asked, now is it full? Everyone again said yes. He then took a bag of sand and poured it into the jar. The sand filtered through the rocks and pebbles until all the space was filled. What about now, he asked, do you think it is full? For the third time the class said yes. Finally he took a pitcher of water and poured the water into the jar until it was all the way to the brim and began spilling over the top. Now, he said, we can say the jar is really full. He then asked his class an important question: Do you think, he said, if I had started with the water, then the sand, and then the pebbles, there would still be room for the rocks?

If we think of our lives and our time as a jar of rocks the illustration is pretty clear. We have to fill it with the big stuff first, before we tackle the easy and the mundane.

Although I had heard that illustration before, this time, as I was searching for a solution to my time management issues, it stuck. I started applying that strategy to my life. Almost immediately I started getting more done in less time, and having more time to do the things I really wanted to, like swimming with my kids, going on date nights with my husband, and spending more time with friends.

**These five simple steps can change your life too!**

## **1** LIST YOUR PRIORITIES

You can't prioritize your time if you aren't clear--even if just to yourself--about what is most important to you. Is it your family? Your spouse? Serving your church or community? Getting your blood pressure under control or losing 50 pounds? Is it finishing your degree? Getting your house in order or remodeled or ready to sell? Getting in shape or training to run a marathon? Getting a promotion or establishing your own business? Getting your budget under control, paying off all your debt, or starting an emergency fund?

Your priorities can and will change based on your season of life, but the first step in taking control of your time is determining what matters most right now. Take ten minutes to write down the 5-10 things that are most important to you in the season of life you are in right now. Don't base them on how you

have been spending your time, but on what actually matters most to you.

## 2 SET SPECIFIC GOALS

Close your eyes and imagine your life in detail five years from now. Where do you live? Where do you work? What is your job title? What do you look like? What does your house look like? How much money do you have in the bank? Where did it come from? What is your relationship with your kids and spouse? How do you spend time together? What do you do in your free time? What are your hobbies? Where do you volunteer? Spend a few minutes day-dreaming about what your ideal life would look like five years from now, then write it down.

With this vision of the distant future fresh in your mind, it is time to set your long term goals. List five major things you would like to accomplish by this time next year. Be as specific as possible. Use dates and locations and quantifiable goals whenever possible. Thus, if you want to run a marathon, write down which marathon on what date. If your goal is to read more, write down how many books, or better yet, how many fiction, non-fiction, biography, etc. Don't list more than five or you might forget some of them.

With your long term vision and goals in place, give some thought to your short term goals. What is it that you want to get done in the next month? Is there any small chunk of your long term goals that you could do right away? Set five manageable goals for the things you would like to accomplish in the next month, then repeat this process every 30 days.

## 3 EAT THAT FROG

I read a book several years ago that totally changed the way I approached my daily task list. It was called *Eat That Frog: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get Things Done* by Brian Tracy. It got its name from a quote by Mark Twain, who famously once said something to the effect of "if you eat a frog for breakfast, chances are that will be the worst thing you have to do all day." The point of the quote—and the book—was that if you start your day by tackling your hardest but most important tasks, even if you don't do that much for the rest of the day, you will still have accomplished a lot.

Life moves fast and it is really, really easy to get sucked into mundane--though essential--tasks of the everyday. We spend our time putting out fires or escaping into the time-wasting vortex of social media and email. It all seems so important, so urgent, but before we know it, we've spent the whole day reacting to other people rather than proactively reaching our own goals.

My own life changed dramatically when I changed the order in which I com-

pleted my task list. Most importantly, I stopped checking email first thing in the morning, and instead focused those first few hours of my day on long-term projects and goals. As a result, my productivity skyrocketed and I was finally able to start accomplishing the things I really wanted to.

## 4 RESET YOUR HABITS

I read another book more recently called *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* that has also greatly impacted how I structure my day. One of the many interesting points the book made is that our brains are wired to form habits. These habits can become good or bad, but once something has become a true habit, a different part of our brain takes over and we begin to perform that particular habit on autopilot. This means we no longer have to use mental energy to perform the task, which leaves our brain free to focus on getting other things done.

I used to get frustrated with myself because it seemed like I would start out my day so well, but at the end I would just fizzle, with no energy left to put towards any sort of productive endeavor. After reading this book, I realized that because my willpower in a given day is limited, the more good habits I create for myself, the more willpower and energy I will have leftover to use towards other things.

I decided to make a list of the things I wanted to do automatically every morning. My list included drinking a glass of water, planning my day over a cup of coffee, having personal devotion & prayer time, then writing for at least 90 minutes. After several weeks of doing this every day, I finally stopped thinking about it. I would find myself in the kitchen drinking my water before I was even fully awake. It takes almost no effort to get my day started off right, and at the end of my writing session, when I take a morning break, I still feel refreshed and ready to conquer the rest of my day.

## 5 ELIMINATE THE UNESSENTIAL

I think for me getting rid of the things I don't really need to be doing is probably the hardest part. Everyone has a few time fillers they could probably eliminate from their day, whether it be baking something from scratch when it could be store-bought, spending an hour watching TV or drooling over Pinterest, or even taking on a few too many commitments.

This is where the priority list and goal setting becomes so important! If when you look at your day, you find that much of your time is filled with things that don't match up to your priorities or your most important goals, then something has to give. Start small--eliminate 3-5 things in your life that are taking up time but not adding much value. Just stop doing them. Yes, I know it is easier said than done, but making a conscious decision paves the way for change.

To recap, here are five simple steps that can change your life: first list your out your priorities, second set specific goals, third eat that frog ( do the hard thing first), fourth reset your habits to form new ones and finally eliminate the unessential from your day. Following these 5 tips will help you accomplish your big goals & dreams and bring about the change you desire.