Hacks for a Successful Semester

Susanna (Zan) Barry

Community Wellness at MIT Medical
1. Assess your semester
2. Review your time pie
3. What is your best-energy time?
4. Make decisions once
5. Your brain can only take so much focus
6. Plan of action
1. assess your semester
Honest appraisal

• What is my *most time-consuming or intimidating* academic work this semester?

• Are there activities that I feel should consume *less* of my time? (When did I last “waste time”?)
2. review your time pie
Fall time pie

112 HOURS

- Class, 18
- Exercise, 6
- Work/Lab, 12
- ADLs, 20
- Unscheduled, 56
3. what is your “best-energy” time?
You wish to be at your peak performance for a two-hour test which you know is going to be mentally challenging. What testing time would you choose?
Managing Energy: High

• Only 1 or 2 per day: Schedule large projects; things that should not be interrupted; creative projects; material that is most difficult, intimidating, or boring.
Managing Energy: Medium

• 2 or 3 per day: Schedule team projects; moderately interesting reading or math; relatively easy writing.
Managing Energy: Low

• Do a variety of brief tasks; physical movement where concentration is not critical; return calls or messages to friends.
make the best-energy times better:
sprint and recover
finish the workday
“parked downhill”
rewards at the end are most rewarding
4. make decisions once
this is how we make habits
Self-assessment

• Name 1-2 habits you are glad you have.
• How often do you do it?
• How do you know it’s a habit?
new habits: give yourself 66 days

making decisions is expensive
keeping habits is cheap
Pre-commit as much as possible

• Keep a regular calendar
• Make a rule (I go to all my classes unless I’m sick)
• Social commitment can greatly increase motivation
you’ll always want more than one thing at a time
Multiple goal efficiencies

• Can they facilitate each other?
• Can they be combined?
the middle is the hardest – keep it short
Keep middles short

• Break long-term goals into weekly plans
• Break days into segments
5. your brain can only take so much focus
The law of diminishing returns

[Graph showing the concept of the law of diminishing returns]
like a muscle, self-regulation gets fatigued

What eats self-regulation?

- Low sleep
- Low mood
- Low glucose

What do I need more of?:

food, sleep, mood lifts
What strengthens self-regulation?

- Low temptation
- Clear priorities

PRACTICE

What do I need less of?:

temptations, first priorities
avoid the “what the hell” effect
“What the hell” effect  (Polivy 2010)

• A few lapses are inconsequential to the ultimate goal
• The 80-20 rule
• Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good
avoid “bedtime revenge procrastination”
Recovering from setbacks

• Do not take it as a sign of low ability or commitment
• Caveperson brain took over
• Distance yourself: picture it happening to a friend
Productivity warm-ups:

• What is one concrete task I can do right now?
• Start with 10-15 minutes
• Press pause
Remember: everyone has been in this situation.
1. Assess your semester
2. Review your time pie
3. What is your best-energy time?
4. Make decisions once
5. Your brain can only take so much focus
6. Plan of action
6. plan of action
What is my next step?

• Construct your time pie
• Identify task for your best-energy time
• Cut out a low-value activity
• Get support (accountability partner, mental health, academic)
What is my next step?

• Clarify my priorities / temptations
• Turn decisions into habits: pre-commit
• Get better sleep or food
wellnessclasses.mit.edu

CALL 253-CALM AND CARRY ON

performance coaching
meditation classes
wellness workshops
Thank you!

Susanna (Zan) Barry,
Community Wellness at MIT Medical
bars@med.mit.edu