



Ideas for how to make time for life

TN7 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Ministers and other Christian workers know full well that they need to make time for themselves, for family and friends, and for their own spiritual growth.

But with the pressure of life and the expectations of others weighing down on them, many feel guilty at their failure in these areas. Some are frightened to admit that they have a problem. These notes seek to offer encouragement by providing practical ideas.

The following outline includes some of the points that I might include in a self-management training event. Although three distinct headings are used, many of the points apply under more than one heading.

No one reading this should expect all of these to work for them. Use this list as a starting point to develop a number of practical solutions that can work for the kind of person that you are. Or simply pick one or two new ideas and experiment with them. Please email me with further ideas that you have found helpful so I can add to what is here – for everyone's benefit.

How to look after yourself

- **Get help**

Ask someone else (a spouse or a close friend) to work at a plan with you and monitor your performance. Most of us fail unless someone else who knows us well keeps us on track. Taking one day off in seven (as well as most of the following points) requires discipline – and a helping hand.

- **Block out space**

Make your personal spaces the *first* items that go in the diary, rather than the ones that get slotted in when there is time. There usually isn't! If you want an hour out for reflection, pre-book it just like an appointment. Then you can tell people you are already booked for that time if they are trying to meet you.

- **Do things by clockwork**

If you have problems making time for reading or exercise, diarise the same time every day for this; then make sure your spouse/friend (see above) checks up on you.

- **Check your health**

If it is some time since you had a proper health-check, see your GP or visit the appropriate clinic. If you can see the value of having your car serviced on a regular basis, should you not do the same for yourself even more? Then, of course, you need to take any recommended action....

- **Monitor your sleep patterns**

Analyse the time you get to bed and the hours of proper rest and sleep you get. A uniform pattern is helpful, but sometimes new circumstances (from young children to a new job) mean you need to rethink your daily programme.

- **Mix with people outside the church**

Most people find it helpful to have a regular activity mixing with folk they do not come across in the course of their normal ministry. It may be sport or any leisure activity; it can be very refreshing to do it with those who make no claim to be Christians. Go on – be normal!

- **Take regular exercise**

Whether this is covered under the last point or not, your body needs exercise. If sport is not your thing, how about walking or running? You may be able to double this up with thinking time or prayer, regular spaces in life where you can exercise your creative or spiritual muscles as well as your real ones.

- **Get regular stimulation**

It is important that you exercise your mind too in whatever way suits you: serious reading, high-level discussion with others, even crosswords or mental games.

How to make time for family and friends

- **Classify time-off as an engagement**

Block time for being with family and friends in the diary just like an engagement. When you tell people you have a meeting or engagement they are unlikely to ask who it is with. This can apply for short times as well as whole evenings or days.

- **Get away from home**

If your home is your work-base, you may find you can only relax properly with others when off the premises. The garden may be OK for those who enjoy gardening, but days off may need to be planned away from base if the tensions of work surround you there.

- **Replace lost time-off at once**

There will be times when a planned evening off has to be lost because of a pastoral emergency (but do have clear guidelines for yourself as to what constitutes an emergency). When this happens never just shrug your shoulders; have a rule that replaces the time at another slot in the diary, for the sake of your family/friends. If it is not done at once it will not get done at all.

- **Shut the study door**

Again, if you work from home, shut the study door when you leave it for time with family. Make the act a symbolic one. Lock the door if necessary! Imagine that the act of passing through the door is equivalent to a commuter's journey home from work.

- **Go public on Christian responsibilities**

If you are a teacher or preacher, teach on the responsibilities of being a parent, spouse, or simply a human being. Then tell people you find it hard but you are going to seek to apply your sermon to your own life and invite them to do so with you. You might even be bold enough to promise a report-back every so often. Being up-front about it helps many people to make it work in their own lives. But it does of course have its dangers.

How to promote your own spiritual growth

- **Include it in your role description**

Assuming you have an up-to-date role description, check that your own spiritual growth is shown somewhere in it as a responsibility (*see Training Notes TN6 and TN78 on this website for examples of this*). If you are a Christian leader or worker of any kind, it must be your responsibility to ensure that you are keeping yourself spiritually healthy. See the first phrase in Paul's advice in Acts 20:28.

- **Use a different space**

For Bible study or prayer you may find it helpful to use a space other than your work-desk. This is probably littered with distractions (from a computer screen to papers to read) which are hardly conducive to devotions. Have the equivalent of your own private chapel, even if it is just a corner of another room, or a garden shed or (for prayer) a walk outside.

- **Use symbols**

Make your time with God distinctive in some way. There are all kinds of possibilities: symbols such as a lighted candle, or a change in posture such as kneeling or standing rather than sitting.

- **Take a regular retreat**

If you do this already, I need say no more. But if you don't, do consider a spiritual refresher event on an annual or more frequent basis. It may mean going away to a retreat house to be with others, or hiring a friend's cottage and being on your own for a few days. Try it monthly for a few hours, or annually for a few days.

- **Use online teaching**

For Christian workers who are always giving out there is a great need for spiritual input. Teaching (from other churches or national events) can be a wonderful way of ensuring that you are being fed. Many church websites now have sermons online. Do take notes – especially if you encourage others to do so when they listen to you!

- **Get to other churches**

Whenever possible get to a church service of a form you are not so familiar with. Drink in what you find, away from the familiarity of your normal pattern. If necessary ensure it is somewhere where people do not know you.

- **Appoint a spiritual mentor**

Have someone who discusses your spiritual growth with you on a regular basis. Many Ministers do this already, but the idea is just as valuable for any Christian worker. Try to choose someone whose spirituality is rather different from yours.

Those are a few ideas; select one or two from each section and work on them. Dream up better ones for yourself, perhaps using my three main headings as a structure. So many Christian workers burn out in service. Christ insisted that his disciples came aside and rested from time to time. We too need to learn that as weak humans we need to watch our health: physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. In short, we need to get a life.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes then TN7. They cover one aspect of a possible event for Ministers and other Christian leaders on self-management. For ideas on how to keep a track of your time, see Training Notes TN11, *Keeping a time log*. If you would value advice on planning each day see TN23, *How to do 'To Do' lists*. For thinking on a specific type of retreat see TN54, *Creating space for a Planning Retreat*. For home working see Article A25, *Working from home*. For a master-class try TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his providing practical help for you on desk or self-management.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN7 under Leadership.

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