

Ashley Whillans:

Time affluence doesn't necessarily involve major life decisions. It doesn't mean you need to quit your job or change where you live. It can really be the difference of how you spend the next 30 minutes. I'd like to encourage everyone to think about how they can spend 30 minutes today, engage in an activity that's positive, pleasant, or purposeful, because if you can find 30 minutes today, then you can become more time affluent across days and over the course of your entire life.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's Ashley Whillans, Doctor of Psychology, Assistant Professor at Harvard Business School and a leading voice in time and happiness research. Widely published in academic journals, her research has also appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and in her new book, *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life*. Ashley is Canadian, a first-generation college graduate, and a former actor who appeared in the film, *Juno*. Just a few years into her professional career, she's already making her mark in the field of social psychology.

I'm LuAnn Heinen, and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most important health and well-being issues facing employers today. My guest is Ashley Whillans and we're going to talk about our most valuable and finite resource: time.

Ashley, thank you so much for being here and agreeing to talk about your new book.

Ashley Whillans :

Thanks for having me.

LuAnn Heinen:

You've said that you had an early awareness or interest in time. Tell us a little bit about that.

Ashley Whillans:

My parents are not all that surprised that I became a time and money and happiness researcher. I was always meticulously counting all of the ways that I would spend time on an everyday basis. All of my financial goals, even from a young age, my parents said that I used to fill notebooks full of things I wanted to do with my time and ways I wanted to spend my money once I actually started making it.

LuAnn Heinen:

Well, I'm really glad we're here today to talk about, mostly about time and a little bit about money. I'm going to start with a quote from the book that really struck me. You say, "the secret to happier time is simple. Prioritize time over money." So why do we need to choose?

Ashley Whillans:

I would say that it's not necessarily that we need to choose between time and money. We need to recognize that most of our choices in life, both in the context of everyday decisions like where to eat, where to live, and more major life decisions, what careers to choose, when to have kids, involve trade-offs between time and money. Becoming aware of the fact that our decisions don't just implicate our finances, but also implicate our time, can be really important when it comes to happiness.

LuAnn Heinen:

In the context of, let's say choosing a job out of grad school, how does that go?

Ashley Whillans:

The best research suggests that most of us gravitate toward focusing a little bit too much on money and external rewards. How prestigious is the job? How fancy is the title I'm going to get? How big is my office going to be? Of course, how big is my paycheck going to be? And yet what matters most for the amount

of happiness that we experience in a job isn't any of those external factors, it's literally how we feel in the job itself and the extent to which our work and life are able to live in a happy balance with one another and aren't conflicting against one another. It's really important in the context of major life decisions, like graduating and taking our first job, that we don't just focus on how much money or prestige that job is going to get us and we also think about how it's going to shape the way we spend our time on an everyday basis.

LuAnn Heinen:

Is there a chance that it's only the affluent who can really afford to be time smart?

Ashley Whillans:

My research suggests that putting time first in the context of our everyday life is applicable to everyone. I see in large-scale survey data of working adults in the U.S. and all over the world, that individuals, regardless of their income, who prioritize time over money in the context of their everyday lives, both minor and major life decisions, report greater happiness, greater social relationships, they volunteer more and they even report better physical health. It does seem that prioritizing time, focusing on time as the most important resource that it is, regardless of how much money we have in the bank, can really pay off for happiness.

LuAnn Heinen:

So you really need to be a good money manager in order to reap the benefits of the time you have or the time we all have, which is the same amount of time.

Ashley Whillans:

This is an interesting question. Do we need to be better money managers in order to have more and better time? I don't know if necessarily that is a requirement, but I do think that the extent to which we are more financially aware can help us use some of our financial resources to have more and better time. One of the strategies that I talk about in my book for reclaiming time and living a happier life is using our discretionary income to save time and buy ourselves into more positive experiences and out of more negative experiences. One path to time affluence and happiness that doesn't involve any money at all is simply spending more time in activities that are positive, bring us meaning in life, and spending less time in activities that are unpleasant and stressful. One way to tip the balance more in the favor of positive and meaningful experiences is outsourcing our most disliked tasks to others. This could be cooking or cleaning or vacuuming. Whenever we give up even small amounts of discretionary income, as little as \$40 to have more and better time, my data suggests that this pays off for happiness as well as relationship satisfaction. So thinking about the influence of time and money on one another and not just thinking about time or money in isolation, but how the resources intersect with one another can help us make better decisions that are likely to maximize the overall quality of our life.

LuAnn Heinen:

What's going on in our world that 80 percent of us feel time poor and only 20 percent time affluent in your book. We see these statistics; is it really that bad?

Ashley Whillans:

We do observe in representative samples of Americans and worldwide we've replicated these effects, that 80 percent of employed adults report feeling time poor. Just to provide a definition for that term, this is the psychological experience of having too many things to do in a day and not enough time in the day to do them. These feelings of time poverty do matter. People who report feeling time poor, also report lower levels of happiness, worse social relationships, lower physical health, they have less time to eat healthier, to exercise. In one data set of 3 million working adults in the U.S., these feelings of time poverty had a stronger negative effect on happiness than being unemployed. Now that provides a brief definition of what time poverty is and why it might matter. But you also asked why do we feel so time

poor, and this is a little bit more of a complex answer, but there are a lot of individual differences, some psychological factors and societal factors, of course, that lead us to feel time poor. Now, it's interesting to think that we actually have more discretionary time available to us today than we did in the 1950s, in part thanks to modern technology like microwaves and dishwashers, however, we feel more pressed for time than ever. One of the most major culprits of these increased feelings of time poverty is our constant connection to technology. Cell phones, laptops, and other technology constantly interrupt us and fragment both our work and our leisure. I know what some researchers call time confetti, which pulls us out of the present moment into other things we could or should be doing and creates the psychological experience of time stress or time poverty.

LuAnn Heinen:

So many of us can relate to that, time confetti is a great term. You suggest a strategy for dealing with time confetti. Do you want to share that?

Ashley Whillans:

One strategy for dealing with this time confetti, which is this idea that technology pulls us out of our leisure and makes us think about all the things that we could or should be doing and so we don't feel as satisfied with our leisure opportunities, is of course, pretty straight forward, easy to say and harder to do. We want to turn off the alerts on our phone. One of my colleagues has a really simple experiment showing that parents who were taking their kids to a science museum on a Saturday felt a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction from that experience if they turn the alerts off on their phone. If they had their alerts on, they felt more stressed, they enjoyed the experience with their kids less, and that was driven by these opportunity costs and are reminded about all the work they should be doing instead of enjoying some time with their kids, which made people feel guilty and they enjoyed their leisure less. If you can, and especially while trying to enjoy leisure time with friends or family or an opportunity to exercise outside, we really want to be taking our time off the clock to disconnect from our technology so we can be more present in the moment.

LuAnn Heinen:

Technology falls into one of the time traps that you discuss in the book and there are many of us who feel we have to respond to every ping, can't stop scrolling and clicking, obsess with online shopping or social media. Any the other thoughts for getting out of this technology trap?

Ashley Whillans:

I think that workplaces can also help to set clear norms around expectations for communication. We often think that we have to respond instantaneously. This has to do with this idea that's pervasive in our society around ideal worker norms. This is related to something in the organizational behavior literature, which I love, which is known as the autonomy paradox. So technology was supposed to free us from the office, but now our offices are in our back pockets, so we seemingly can't ever escape work. I think setting clear norms and expectations around email can go a long way in helping employees feel like they can truly disconnect at the end of the day. Some companies and some countries have gone so far as fining workers for sending emails outside of normal office hours. But I think a norm setting conversation at the beginning of a project or while joining a new team can be a lower, lighter touch strategy, if you will, for helping us manage all of the technological disruptions, both within and outside of the work day.

LuAnn Heinen:

I discovered the delay send technique for outlook and then realized belatedly that it still has a timestamp for when the original email was created. So it's not so good for role modeling good behavior. You really can't pretend that you weren't working at 11:30 at night.

Ashley Whillans:

At the very least you saved that person's inbox from the pressure of having to respond immediately, even if you were working outside of office hours. So even though there's a timestamp, I think it's still better than nothing. I also noticed that feature on outlook myself recently and was not necessarily so pleased by it as well. It's like, oh no, they can tell I was working on a Saturday afternoon.

LuAnn Heinen:

What are some other time traps that we fall into, especially in the context of the workplace?

Ashley Whillans:

A couple of other time traps that we fall into are idleness aversion and the, yes-damn effect. Now this is pervasive both at work and outside of it, these two traps. Idleness aversion is the idea that we don't see the value in disconnecting, even though, of course, there's proven value to being mindful, enjoying the present and doing nothing. When applied to our personal life this can explain why we might not take all of our vacation, we're not exactly sure what we might do with it, and so we ruminate over whether or not we should take it, especially right now when many of us are working remotely and travel is not something that's easy to do. However, of course, there's research suggesting that the most productive employees are the ones that take all of their paid vacation, that are able to recharge, that have meaningful hobbies outside of work, because one key element of thriving, especially within the context of knowledge work jobs or more creative jobs is pulling from a diverse source of experiences and ideas that are not necessarily directly relevant to your work. So the more that you leave breaks in your schedule to speak with people, not necessarily directly related to your workplace, or to have experiences that are not directly related to your work that are somewhat spontaneous, the more likely you are to bring new novel, fresh ideas back to the workplace. The third time trap that I talk about, out of six so there's a few more that we're not going to cover in today's conversation, is this yes-damn effect. This is related to the planning fallacy. It's the idea that people are overly optimistic about their future time. In general we think we're going to have more time tomorrow than we do today and this overoptimism means that we often say yes to requests for our future time and then regret it later when the time comes and we're over committed. This helps to explain why we seem to catch ourselves saying yes to everything, and of course, this could be a major issue at work if you end up becoming over committed and aren't able to turn in high-quality work to your colleagues. One simple rule to ask yourself before you say yes to something is, could you incorporate whatever it is that someone is asking today, could you spend significant amount of time on it today, and if you can't, chances are you're not going to be able to spend a significant amount of time on it in two weeks from now, two months from now. And so we really want to be mindful of the fact that our future calendars look much more open than the present moment, but chances are statistically you're going to be as busy tomorrow, if not busier, than you are today. Interestingly, we're very good at accounting for the value of money across time. So we know that \$500, \$5,000 is going to be as valuable now as it is in six months or a year, however, when it comes to two to three hours in the future, we don't think that's going to be very valuable. If you tell me you're going to get two to three hours back today, I'm like, oh great, because we're all in constant back-to-back zoom meetings all day every day now, however, we don't properly value that two to three hours of free time in the future. We really want to be mindful of over committing our future time and that's one really meaningful strategy to greater time affluence and happiness.

LuAnn Heinen:

Yes, I'm so guilty of that one. Let's talk about finding and funding time. You have some really interesting strategies and one of them has to do with again, overcoming time confetti, and you talk about a time affluence to do list. Tell us about that.

Ashley Whillans:

This strategy has to do with the fact that we do often find ourselves with time confetti, even if we're good about our schedule. We might find ourselves with 30 minutes in between meetings in a day, if someone cancels, that is unexpected. Most of us will spend those so-called windfalls of free time engaged in activities that are stressful and unproductive, like getting to the bottom of your inbox or trying to do a little bit more of a work task. So this idea of creating a time affluence to do list is to imbue your everyday experiences with more meaning and positivity by keeping track of other activities that you might be able to do in small windfalls of free time that are more likely to pay off for happiness. I have a time affluence to do list sitting by my computer that says, if you find yourself with 15 minutes, text so-and-so, text your friend Jesse, who you haven't talked to in a while and you've been meaning to get back to, text your mom, set up your next virtual happy hour. If you have a longer block of time, like 30 minutes, maybe you could challenge yourself to do 50 jumping jacks in your home office or go for a walk around the block. The idea of a time affluence to do list is really to reclaim your time, not get sucked in by spending the small amounts of time that we often find ourselves with scattered throughout the day, scrolling mindlessly on social media, but rather being more active and deliberate in the way that we spend that time on an everyday basis, such as by engaging in more active leisure activities like exercise or socializing, which are more likely to pay off for happiness.

LuAnn Heinen:

Another one that spoke to me was the difference between urgent and important, making a difference.

Ashley Whillans:

This is something that we observe in our data and other researchers have seen as well. When we're feeling stressed out, we actually are even more likely to take on those stressful and unproductive activities because they give us a boost of competence. So this is an explanation psychologically for why your inbox goes to zero when you're working under a major project deadline to make ourselves feel in control of our work, especially when we're feeling overwhelmed, we're much more likely to take on urgent, but not necessarily important tasks and therefore actually make us even more time poor in the long run. In order to counteract what we call this mere urgency effect, we actually want to build in blocks of time in our calendar each week, week over week to work on important, but not necessarily urgent work. This might be a learning and development course offered through your organization that you've been meaning to get around to for a while, but really haven't seemed to be able to complete. This is related to what time some time management researchers call the 30-30 rule. You really should be allocating some time each and every day, 30 minutes in this case, to do something that's going to pay off in 30 days or longer, so that you're not going to see the direct effect of right away, like updating your resume, looking for a new job, if that's something that's on their horizon for you. What we've observed in our data is that even putting two hour blocks twice a week of proactive time, where you work on important, but not urgent work, and very importantly, you turn off your alerts during this time, can have significant benefits for a self-reported productivity of about 18 percent over a six week period and reduces burnout, even among busy executives that we studied by about 20 percent. So even just blocking time in your calendar to get that must win done and really protecting it can go a long way to promoting greater happiness and reducing time stress.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's a great tip. Another way to find time is to establish your own defaults when it comes to external requests or travel opportunities for work.

Ashley Whillans:

This is a really important strategy because the future is uncertain. We're not always aware of what's going to come up in the horizon and we don't do a very good job of recognizing the fact that when we say yes to something now, we're limiting our ability to say yes to something in the future. By setting a clear default, such as I'm only going to give four external talks this year, once per quarter, you're really

forcing yourself to make decisions about how you're spending time in a really careful and deliberate manner. It also gives yourself an out. If you have opportunities that don't really fit with your top priorities, you can say sorry, I've met my quota on the number of external events that I want to complete this year and so I'll be unavailable, but I might be available next year, why don't you try reaching out then. So by setting internal defaults and by putting them somewhere where maybe other people can hold you accountable so you actually follow through, this can be a very effective way to manage your calendar and to learn how to practice to say no to opportunities that might come your way, but aren't necessarily the best opportunities that will leave you time to take on additional projects or additional opportunities that might surprise you later on in the year that if you would have said yes to everything that came up right away, without having a default in mind, you might not have had time for later.

LuAnn Heinen:

Another thing that's intriguing is when you discuss reframing time as a strategy. What do you mean by reframing time?

Ashley Whillans:

We've been talking about trying to optimize the amount of time that you spend on a daily basis, such that the way you live your life on a daily basis matches how you ideally would want to live your life. So you want to spend your time engaged in productive and meaningful activities that either bring joy or at least positive stress. However, we have to also recognize that some of the things that are stressful and unproductive are not necessarily things we can get out of. At work we all have paperwork tasks that we wish we didn't have to do, but of course there are requirements of our jobs. Or even within the context of our personal lives, maybe given a personal value of yours, you don't want to outsource chores to other people because you're trying to teach your family the importance of cleaning up after yourself, so you're trying to teach your kids and be a good role model to your kids, so you are not going to outsource chores. If this is the case, if there are things you can't or don't want to get rid of that fall into this stressful or unproductive category of activities for you, you can also reframe the way you think about those activities; so very concretely in the personal domain, if there are chores you don't like doing, you can pair them with your favorite podcast or ebook. My partner and I do this while we're washing the dishes or folding laundry. We listen to our favorite ebook and all of a sudden that activity isn't something we dread, but it's actually something we look forward to because we get to listen to a book that we might not have otherwise had time to read. Similarly, at the context of work, we can reframe our negative activities, our paperwork, our data entry, as a way to help our colleagues get their work done. My PhD student has a paper showing that the simple mental reframing reminding ourselves how our work helps someone else in our organization can go a long way in reducing stress and increasing the meaning of some of these low-level tasks we're all faced with in the workplace. As a third example, we can also bring this mindset, this reframing strategy, into our leisure activities. My colleagues recently published a paper showing that if you think about the upcoming weekend like a vacation, you're more likely to enjoy it in part because you're more present in the moment and less likely to be distracted by your technology. These simple, mental reframing tricks, either by imbuing negative experiences with positive experiences or thinking about activities that you have to engage in on an everyday basis in a different way, can go a long way in reducing stress and promoting happiness.

LuAnn Heinen:

Yes, that's so important. We all have the power to find the purpose in the things that we're doing that really do big picture add value, as you say to our colleagues, to our clients, to our patients. As with weight management, this isn't just about individual behavior. Our environment at work and at home clearly factors in. What can organizations do to support people being more time smart and happier about the way they're spending time?

Ashley Whillans:

I think this is such an important question, especially right now during this very challenging COVID pandemic. As I write about later on in the book, we often blame individuals. We've talked a lot about the fact that we need to think about spending our discretionary income differently, maximize the extent to which we have positive emotions on an everyday basis, change the way we spend our time, but of course, so much of our behavior is determined by our workplaces and by the society in which we live. So I also advocate toward the back end of the book about how we should be thinking about coming up with organizational level strategies that can help employees take back control of their time. What we've been observing in the COVID period of time is remote workers feel much more distracted, like they're engaging in much more unproductive work. Part of this is being driven by our new way of working. We have been saving time by not having to commute, so there's some data suggesting when we analyze the best data available for this question, we observed that American workers have saved about 89 million work days from not commuting as frequently or not at all to the office since March. Yet, they have also substituted that commute time, almost completely with work. On average employees are working about one hour more each day. They're sending many more emails now than they did pre pandemic. They're also having way more meetings, because every conversation has a meeting, there's no running into each other in the office. I think, especially right now given that we're in an unprecedented time, organizations have a challenge, but also a very real opportunity to experiment with time management practices within their organizations.

One very concrete strategy that organizations can try is, again, to set norms around email conversation and meetings. Organizations can also recognize that employees are time stressed and encourage employees to ask for more time on adjustable deadlines at work. We've run a collection of studies, have a couple of papers on this now, showing that most employees overestimate the cost of asking for more time on adjustable deadlines at work, which are a key source of stress in the modern workplace, are these internal deadlines with colleagues, and simply by instituting formal policies in a workplace where you say here's how you can ask for more time on adjustable deadline at work, it's totally fine, and to make that adjustable deadline be asked to a third party. This simple organizational intervention can really have a positive downstream consequence for employees, stress and their burnout. It's especially positive for women who are even more reticent, women and junior employees are even more reticent and worried about asking for more time at work, both to work on projects, but also in terms of paid vacation. They're worried about what that will signal about their commitment to the organization. So workplaces especially could benefit from having formal policies and being very clear upfront about taking time off and asking for more time on projects and that this is likely to especially benefit women and junior employees working within the context of organizations.

LuAnn Heinen:

A lack of free time or even a perceived lack of time predicts poor health, looping back to something you said earlier. If we think we're time poor, our health is actually worse along with our happiness. Any other reasons why this is actually a public health issue that we haven't discussed?

Ashley Whillans:

Yes, we observe in our data that the most time-stressed employees are also those who tend to be the most financially constrained. Individuals who are making at or below the poverty line experienced the greatest time poverty. They're working multiple jobs. They may live further away from their place of employment. They might be single parents. I believe that these issues related to time affluence and time poverty are also a public health and policy-related issue because there is vast inequity and time affluence related to financial constraints that are evident. Especially people who are struggling to make ends meet will not be able to go to the market economy to try to offset some of their time burdens. This is where government and organizations can play a role in helping lower income employees, not only by compensating them financially, but also by trying to protect their time and offering them childcare

benefits or commuting benefits that allow them to save time as this is even more likely to promote happiness and physical health among these more vulnerable groups.

LuAnn Heinen:

This reminds me of work that you did earlier in your career overseas, where you talk about just the availability of cooking supports in countries where people are still using very time-consuming methods of washing clothing and cooking and what a huge difference that makes in time productivity and happiness.

Ashley Whillans:

Yes, we recently ran a field experiment in Kenya where we randomly assigned 1500 working women in the largest informal settlement outside of Nairobi, called Kibera. We randomly assigned these women to either receive an unconditional cash transfer for three consecutive weeks over a six-week study or time-saving voucher meals or laundry for that same period of time and compared this to a control condition that received payments for completing the surveys but didn't receive any aid. What we observed despite the fact that unconditional cash transfers are thought to be the gold standard of economic development is that both cash and time performed similarly. Both different resources, so both temporal and financial resources, significantly improved well-being, reduced stress, reduced relationship conflict, and the benefits of both treatments persisted well after the experiment was over. These results provide striking evidence that financial constraints and alleviating those are an important path to greater well-being among more financially constrained groups, but also that rewarding these individuals with time can also go a long way in promoting well-being.

LuAnn Heinen:

There are a lot of strategies and policies that government and business can do to support time affluence or reduced time poverty. At the same time, you've also talked about things that business and government may be doing now that perpetuate time poverty that they could stop doing. I mean, in other words, stop wasting people's time. Let's talk a little bit about that.

Ashley Whillans:

Yes, as I mentioned, organizations and governments are culprits or they can create time poverty for all citizens and all constituents. So within the context of organizations, organizations across industries have been increasing paperwork burdens over the last several decades. This is true for all professions - doctors, teachers, social workers - there's been a lot of large-scale data showing that paperwork and administrative burdens have been on the rise, which of course increases workload and time poverty within the context of these organizations. We've also observed the fact that organizations have started to increasingly systematically waste employee's time. They leave employees with idle moments between meetings or work two hours as opposed to standard. My students often complain about this to me after learning about my research, especially if they work at management consulting firms, they say my work is done at the end of the day and yet my manager just gives me fake work to do because she wants to be seen as always working, so we end up working to hours to this perception of how many hours we should be working in a day and not to standard or to the quality of work. Those are a few very concrete ways in which organizations systematically waste our time. Then, of course, governments do the same with long and complicated paperwork for social security benefits, for educational scholarships, and all of that administrative burden disproportionately falls on more vulnerable groups in society. So organizations and societies could be well-served by eliminating unnecessary paperwork and starting to work more towards standard, as opposed to hours.

LuAnn Heinen:

Ashley, knowing how intentional you are about time, I'm especially grateful for every second you shared with us today. Thank you so much.

I've been speaking with Dr. Ashley Whillans of Harvard Business School about her new book, *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life*. The book contains super practical toolkits and simple exercises to help diagnose your own tendencies and time traps. The goal is to help you manage your schedule and not let it manage you.

This podcast is produced by Business Group on Health with Connected Social Media. If you've enjoyed the conversation, please share this episode with a friend or colleague. I'm LuAnn Heinen and this is Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most important health and well-being issues facing employers today.