

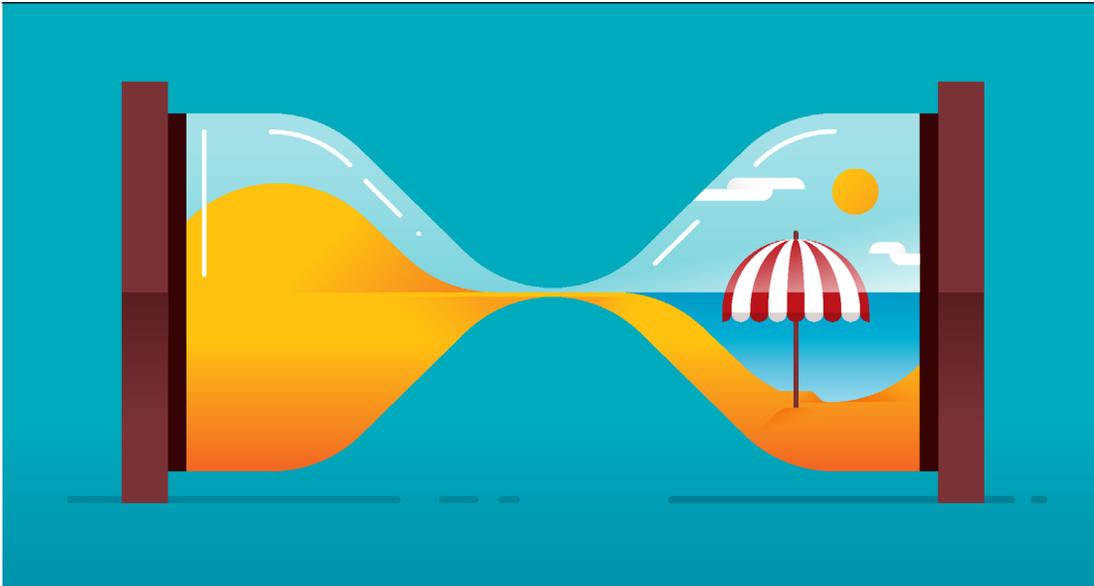
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An illustration of a red car with a smiling face, viewed from the front. A speedometer is visible on the dashboard. The car is set against a light blue background.

TIME POOR AND UNHAPPY

**WE'RE COMPLETELY STRAPPED FOR TIME
BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO VALUE IT.
HERE'S HOW TO BREAK OUT OF THAT MINDSET.**

BY ASHLEY WHILLANS



- 03 **ARTICLE**
TIME FOR HAPPINESS
- 12 **ARTICLE/QUIZ**
CAN YOU IDENTIFY THE HIDDEN TIME TRAPS?
- 14 **ARTICLE**
WHY MONEY MANAGES US
- 16 **AUDIO**
DON'T FEEL GUILTY ABOUT WANTING YOUR TIME BACK
- 17 **ARTICLE**
ACCOUNTING FOR TIME
- 20 **ARTICLE**
TREAT YOUR WEEKEND LIKE A VACATION

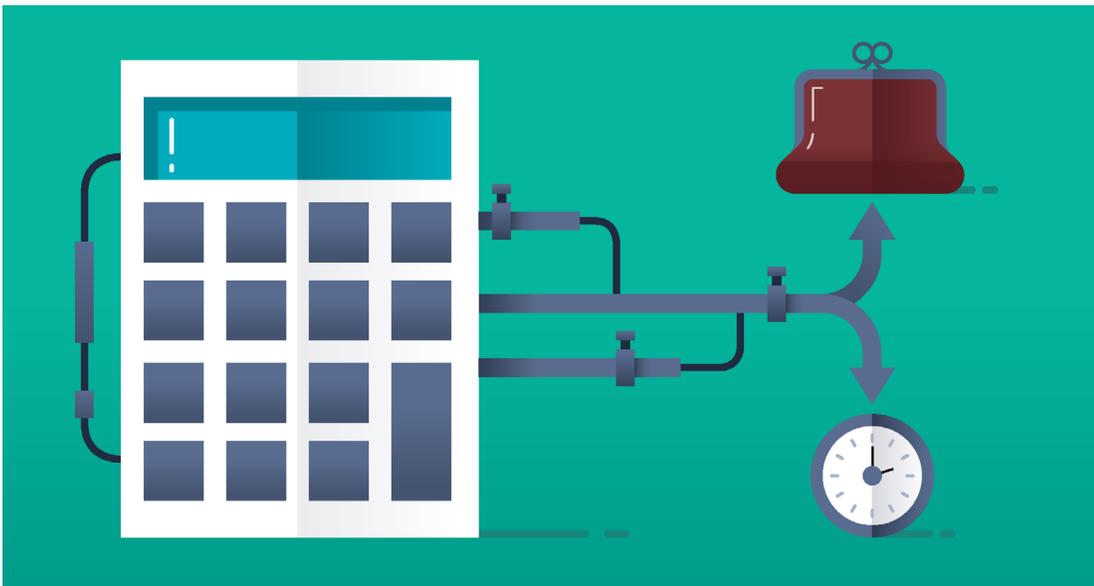


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TIME FOR HAPPINESS

WHY THE PURSUIT OF MONEY ISN'T BRINGING YOU JOY – AND WHAT WILL BY ASHLEY WHILLANS

Adam (real story, fake name) was a good employee who was given a plum project he believed could get him a promotion and a raise. Taking it seemed like the proverbial no-brainer: Work hard, nail the assignment, get more pay. He knew he'd have to put in long days and some hours on weekends, which meant he'd be sacrificing time with his young family. He knew the deadlines would be stressful, as would managing the people and the expectations involved. But he also knew that at the end, he'd be rewarded, and he could make up for the lost time.

Except that he wasn't rewarded. Though his project was a success, the promotion and the raise went to someone on another project, who also was deserving. After receiving accolades for a job well done, Adam continued to run his project successfully, but he wasn't happy. At night, he sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic, brooding over what had happened, calculating all the hours he had put in, and for what? He couldn't

help feeling he had wasted — no, that he had *lost* — valuable time.

While Adam is right, the research shows that even if he *had* gotten the promotion and the raise, he might have felt just as discontented. No matter what the outcome of our efforts, we all feel increasingly strapped for time, and often the things that we think will make us happy —



THE AUTHOR

ASHLEY WHILLANS

the accomplishments we work so hard for — don't. They most certainly do not give us back moments with our families and friends or more hours to ourselves.

A preponderance of evidence shows that the feeling of having enough time — “time affluence” — is now at a record low in the United States. When my team and I analyzed a survey of 2.5 million Americans by the Gallup Organization, we found that 80% of respondents did not have the time to do all they wanted to each day. This situation is so severe it could even be described as a “famine” — a collective cultural failure to effectively manage our most precious resource, time.

Time poverty exists across all economic strata, and its effects are [profound](#). Research shows that those who feel time-poor experience lower levels of [happiness](#) and higher levels of [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [stress](#). They experience less joy. They laugh less. They exercise less and are [less healthy](#). Their [productivity](#) at work is diminished. They are more likely to get [divorced](#). And in our analysis of the Gallup survey data, my team and I even found that time stress had a stronger negative effect on happiness than being unemployed did.

On a broader level, time poverty directly accounts for billions of dollars in productivity costs to companies each year, and secondary costs multiply that number many times over. Public health officials rank it as one of the [top contributors to rising obesity](#). Researchers put the health care costs of time stress at [\\$48 billion a year](#).

The irony is, despite the perception that people today work longer hours, the data reveals that most of us have more discretionary time than ever before. How can we feel so starved for time?

The answer seems to be money. Just like Adam, most of us fall into a trap of spending time to get money, because we believe money will make us happier in the long run.

Our thinking is backward. In fact, research consistently shows that the happiest people use their *money* to buy *time*. My colleagues and I have conducted correlational, longitudinal, and experimental [research](#) with nearly 100,000 working adults from all over the world. We consistently find that people who are willing to give up money to gain more free time — by, say, working fewer hours or paying to outsource disliked tasks — experience more fulfilling social relationships, more satisfying careers, and more joy, and overall, live happier lives.

If there's one resolution that you keep this year, it should be to focus on making choices based on time, not money. It's not easy; our entire world and even our

Ashley Whillans started her career as an actor. She was perhaps best known for playing the “stink-eye girl” in the hit movie *Juno*, but it wasn't long before she turned from making people smile and laugh to studying what makes people smile and laugh.

Now an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, Whillans explores the complex

interplay between time use, happiness, and money, and her research routinely gains notice from mainstream media like the *New York Times*. It's unsurprising that time and money have become her focus; even as a child, she says, she carefully mapped out what she would do with hers, writing long to-do lists. She credits her obsession with helping her get by as a cash-strapped,

overworked grad student who was simultaneously writing a dissertation and planning a wedding. Whillans hopes her insights will help people escape the devastatingly attractive trap of chasing money at the expense of time. “It's so hard to change our mindsets,” she says. “But when we do, it could change our happiness for the better in moments, in days, and across lifetimes.”

brains are rigged to make us value money first. But it can be done, and in this article, I'll share some smart strategies you can start employing today.

WHY WE VALUE MONEY OVER TIME

The most obvious explanation for today's time famine is that we simply spend more hours doing routine chores and working. But there is very little evidence that supports this idea. Some of the [best time diary research](#) suggests that in the United States, men's leisure time has increased by six to nine hours a week over the past 50 years, and women's leisure time has risen four to eight hours a week. And according to [the OECD](#), in 1950, people in the U.S. worked an average of 37.8 hours a week; in 2017 they worked an average of 34.2 hours a week.

Instead, the evidence points to other culprits for time poverty: wealth and financial insecurity. In [studies of middle- and upper-income people across diverse cultural contexts](#) in Europe, Asia, and North America, individuals who earn more money report feeling more pressed for time. In a [survey](#) of over 30,000 respondents from Australia, for example, higher levels of time stress were correlated with higher incomes, and the longer work hours correlated with greater pay could not explain this effect. Considering that wealthier people can afford to, say, hire house cleaners and take cabs instead of public transportation, their greater time poverty may seem counterintuitive.

But it makes more sense if you understand [commodity theory](#), which holds that when any resource is perceived as valuable, it is also perceived as scarce. So, the more we get paid for our time, the more we value it, and the more intensely we feel the loss of any moment.

Feelings of financial insecurity (regardless of actual wealth) may also prompt people to experience more intense time poverty. That's because individuals who feel unsure that they'll have the same job or earn the same level of pay in the future are more likely to

prioritize having more money at the expense of having more time.

Despite the inverse relationship between wealth and time affluence, most of us keep striving to make more money. In my team's research, only 48% of respondents [reported](#) that they would rather have more time than more money. Even the majority of people in the group that was the most time-impoorished — parents who had full-time jobs and young children — shared this preference. The very wealthy didn't always prioritize time over money, either.

Nearly half of the 818 millionaires we surveyed said that they didn't spend anything to delegate disliked tasks to others. In addition, when we asked 98 working adults how they would spend a windfall of \$40 to maximize happiness, only two said that they would make a time-saving purchase. When we asked [300 adults in romantic relationships](#) how they would spend \$40 to maximize their partners' well-being, only three said they would use it to save their partners time.

It's not that people can't think of ways to save time: In one study, [99% of respondents](#) could name a chore they wanted to pay to offload. But across several additional studies, [just 17%](#) of respondents spent money to do so. And it's not that people can't think of anything better to do, either: Most could name several activities, such as pursuing a hobby, that they'd like to have time for, even as very few bought the time to do them.

The core challenge to reducing time poverty and unhappiness is not financial but psychological: the [erroneous belief](#) that wealth will make our lives better. Even individuals with a [net worth of \\$10 million](#) think they need to increase their wealth dramatically to be happier.

Research shows, for instance, that employees frequently [overestimate the value of cash rewards and salary](#) when considering what jobs to accept. They believe that pay, insurance, and other financial benefits like retirement plans will determine job satisfaction. And they [underestimate the value of flexibility](#) regarding their work schedules.

When my team and I analyzed 42,721 employee responses from a Glassdoor survey, we found that noncash benefits such as social experiences and the opportunity to take leaves had a greater impact on job satisfaction than money did. In one analysis, all else being equal, benefits such as generous parental leaves, flextime, and sick days had a larger effect on job satisfaction than receiving an additional \$60,000 in annual salary (on top of an average salary of \$48,000) did. These results held even after controlling for income, age, gender, education, industry, employer type, firm size, and firm revenue.

Research shows that once people make [more than enough to meet their basic needs](#), additional money does not reliably promote greater happiness. Yet over and over, our choices do not reflect this reality.

WHY WE SHOULD VALUE TIME OVER MONEY

It's important to note that some people — particularly those who are struggling to make ends meet or who feel uncertain about their financial future — often [do feel happier when they choose money over time](#). But it's still clear that those of us who are more fortunate may need to rethink our priorities.

To understand which people are happy and how they make time-money trade-offs, my team and I [presented thousands of participants with the following](#) two descriptions of individuals (whose names always matched the gender of the respondents):

Tina values her **time** more than her money. She is willing to sacrifice money to have more time. For example, Tina would rather work fewer hours and make less money than work more hours and make more money.

Maggie values her **money** more than her time. She is willing to sacrifice time to have more money. For example, Maggie would rather work more hours and make more money than work fewer hours and have more time.

We then asked our respondents which person they resembled most. Just by knowing their answers, we could predict what decision they would make when given the choice of a cheaper flight with a longer layover or a more expensive direct flight, and of a housecleaning voucher or a cash prize.

We also learned that people who valued time more (the Tinas) were older, worked fewer hours, were more likely to volunteer, and were more civically engaged. Most important, they were happier by about 0.5 point on a 10-point happiness scale. This difference is equal to about half the happiness bump people experience, on average, [from being married](#).

From this and many, many other studies we can also assert:

Time yields happiness. The Tinas' reports of greater overall well-being cannot be explained by income, education, age, marital status, number of children living at home, or number of hours worked per week. Their broad tendency to prioritize time was what made the difference.

When my colleagues and I surveyed more than [6,000 working adults](#) living in the Netherlands, Denmark, the United States, and Canada we found that people who spent money on time-saving services reported greater satisfaction with their lives. Purchasing

them helped respondents deal with stress and feel less overwhelmed by their to-do lists. This was true even with relatively small, onetime purchases.

Time is social. Across [three studies](#) that I conducted with professor Elizabeth Dunn from the University of British Columbia, people who valued time over money socialized more with peers. In one study, they spent 18% more time interacting with a new peer than people prioritizing money did. This is important because even fleeting social interactions with others can play a [surprisingly large role](#) in reducing stress and promoting happiness, as other researchers have found.

In another study of [nearly 40,000 Americans](#), when people made time-saving purchases on Saturday or Sunday (versus those who did not), they spent about 30 minutes more socializing with friends and family. That in turn promoted greater end-of-day happiness. The people who made those purchases were happier not only because they socialized more but because they derived greater joy from doing it.

Across [nine studies](#) with 4,300 Americans in committed romantic relationships, my colleagues and I saw that prioritizing time over money brought couples closer. Those who spent money on time-saving services reported spending more quality time together and derived greater satisfaction from their relationships. When couples were under stress, the benefits were stronger for time-saving purchases (like ordering take-out) than for experiential purchases (like going out to a nice dinner, which involves more planning, decision making, and travel). Time-saving purchases even erased some of the unhappiness produced by having an unsupportive spouse. In other words, paying for a house cleaner might do as much for your marriage as learning to be a better listener!

A focus on time builds more-rewarding careers. People who value their time are more likely to pursue careers that they love. In another study, [Elizabeth Dunn and I found that](#) graduating college students who prioritized time were more likely to choose careers that offered intrinsic rewards and as a result, were significantly happier one year later. And that didn't mean they were working fewer hours. When people have jobs they truly enjoy and thus are happier, they are [less negatively affected by stress](#) and [more productive](#) and [creative](#). They also are [less likely to quit](#).

WHY IT'S HARD

If the solution to time poverty is so simple — just make choices that give you more time — then why are we all still stressed?

I'm a happiness researcher. I should know better than to sacrifice all my leisure hours to work and making money. Yet I feel as if I must be on call constantly to

keep up with the demands of work. To cope, I email or talk on the phone while commuting to the office, while exercising, while on beaches, and even while on a safari. From time to time, I have been spotted typing on my laptop in a gym locker room. And I confess I spent one and a half hours working (not so secretly) during my wedding reception.

What years of studying time-money trade-offs have revealed to me is that I'm not alone in making suboptimal decisions about how to use my time. It's not easy to make better choices. It may not even be our natural inclination.

There are any number of reasons for our misguided pursuit of wealth, but they fall into two categories:

Behavioral factors. Several cognitive biases make money seem like a more appealing choice than time. Americans, for example, think [being busy signals higher status](#). The desire to feel important is a powerful motivator that may undermine our best interests.

My research suggests that people also [feel guiltier](#) about spending money to have more time than they do about spending money on material goods. Paying someone to complete tasks we ourselves don't like can make us feel lazy, so we opt out to avoid that feeling.

And because we overestimate the amount of time needed to enjoy an experience, we end up wasting small pockets of free time that we could use more effectively. Five minutes spent [socializing with a colleague](#) or 20 minutes on an [elliptical machine](#) often have more powerful mood benefits [than we expect](#).

Last, we suffer from something called [future time slack](#) — the belief that we'll have more time in the future than we do in the present. So, we decide to make some sacrifices now with the promise of enjoying more time later. Of course, when the future comes, we don't have more time. We just repeat the same mistake.

Organizational factors. HR departments may think that how employees choose between time and money has little to do with them, but a [large body of research](#) shows that organizational factors shape the way employees perceive their time and can increase their feelings of stress and undermine social connections and happiness.

We know from [decades of research](#), for example, that financial incentives increase people's efforts to perform better. But we now also know that they make workers obsessed with money. [Across six studies](#), NYU professor Julia Hur found that employees who were paid for better performance reported a greater desire for money and put in dramatically more effort to earn additional compensation. They also became more self-focused and less willing to donate to charity, a sign that they were turning away from activities that we know lead to happiness.

Building on this research, Julia, my student Alice Lee-Yoon, and I analyzed a [publicly available data set](#) to see how performance incentives changed attitudes *outside* work. We found that employees who were paid for performance spent significantly less time socializing with friends and family and significantly more time socializing with their customers and coworkers. This was true no matter how many hours the employees worked or what industry they were in.

Those findings were supported by [additional studies](#) we conducted. They, too, revealed that employees who were paid for their performance were more willing to spend time with work connections instead of friends and family, because they perceived work ties to be more “productive” and “helpful” for getting ahead. But the employees didn’t enjoy this time with professional connections more. Regardless of their pay level or job type, employees who were paid for their performance said they derived greater happiness from spending time with friends. But they didn’t get to do it much.

Policies that make workers think about the monetary value of their time also create time stress. Employees paid by the hour are more likely to think of their time as money and be [more concerned about](#) wasting time, saving time, and using their time profitably. [In one experiment](#), Berkeley professor Dana Carney and Stanford professor Jeff Pfeffer found that simply asking employees to calculate their hourly wage significantly increased their levels of cortisol — a hormone associated with stress. [In related research](#), UCLA Anderson professor Sanford DeVoe and his former graduate student Julian House found that asking people to calculate the economic value of their time made them more impatient — and undermined both their ability to savor their leisure time and their desire to volunteer to help others. And in another study, Elizabeth Dunn and I [found](#) that asking people to calculate it made them less likely to go two seconds out of their way to help the environment by recycling.

HOW TO START

Although your brain and your organization may be conspiring to make you choose money over time, a few daily actions could help you shift your mindset. The following simple strategies can reduce your time poverty and help you reclaim your schedule.

1. Personal Activities

Plan your future time. When it comes to leisure time, our preliminary data suggests that people have a natural bias toward spontaneity: We don’t want to feel our free time is too scheduled. So we do things like leaving weekends up to chance — and then end up wasting

THE LONG VIEW

We should also think about how our money and time decisions might have consequences for our happiness farther down the road. If we choose a job in which we make a lot of money but work 80 hours a week, our personal relationships and happiness could suffer in the long term. My data suggests that college students who choose career paths that enable them to have more money (versus more time) experience significant decreases in happiness one to two years after graduation. And over the span of many years, the negative effects of such major life decisions could really add up.

It is crucial to think about the other goals (besides earning money) you want to achieve in the next five to 10 years. Are you planning to have children? If so, you may try choosing time over money more often, to minimize work-life conflict. Your values will also shift over the course of your lifetime. My data suggests that as people age and have objectively less time left in their lives, they naturally start to favor more time over more money in their decisions. [Other researchers have found that](#) as people get older they start to focus on having more meaningful experiences (versus earning more money).

much of them. But we’re actually happier if we make plans and don’t passively fritter away time.

Be more active. Personal pursuits like volunteering, socializing, and exercising can have a transformative effect on people. Our research shows that *active* leisure is profoundly better at combating time stress than *passive* leisure (such as watching TV or just relaxing) is. When my colleagues — professor Paul Smeets at Maastricht University, professor Rene Bekkers at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and professor Michael Norton at Harvard Business School — and I [conducted a study in the Netherlands](#) comparing millionaires with people who had an average net worth of \$37,500, we found that the millionaires were happier — but not just because they had more money. They spent 30 more minutes a day engaged in active leisure and 40 fewer minutes engaged in passive leisure.

Spend more time eating. When Romain Cadario, a professor at IÉSEG School of Management in Paris, and I recently surveyed 12,000 French and American adults about their dining habits, we found that on average, the French spent significantly more time eating. Americans spent more time choosing their meals than actually enjoying them. Because they savored their food more, the French derived greater satisfaction from it — which in turn reduced their stress.

Meet new people and help others. Although initiating a conversation with someone you don’t know [is hard](#), casual social interactions with strangers [significantly boosts happiness](#). And volunteering is not only [linked to greater happiness](#) but also [increases your feelings of time affluence](#). This seems backward, because

volunteering consumes your time, but the act of giving time away makes you feel more in control of it.

Spend more time experiencing awe. Awe is a positive emotion we feel when encountering something vast and expansive, like a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. It can [increase our sense of time affluence](#) — which is yet another reason that scenic hikes, tropical vacations, or just a few moments of looking up into the sky can rejuvenate us.

Take more vacation time. This is almost too obvious, but in America especially, vacation days are underutilized. This probably relates to our sense that missing work or being able to *afford* vacation time signals lower status; important people are too busy for that. But initial research that my student Hanne Collins and I did showed that employees who took more vacation days reported greater life satisfaction. These results held

[happiness](#), even for people with low incomes. (See the sidebar “Time, Money, Privilege, and Guilt.”) One caveat: My ongoing research suggests that outsourcing *too* much can make people feel that their schedules are out of control, which undermines contentment.

But understand what specifically you want to offload. We often dislike certain aspects of a chore but enjoy others. In new research conducted with the smart-phone application Joy, for instance, Elizabeth Dunn and I found that consumers gained greater satisfaction from food subscription services (like Blue Apron and HelloFresh) than from food delivery services. We speculate that this is because most people like cooking; they just find it tiresome to figure out what to make and to run to the store to buy just the right amount of each ingredient. This brings us back to a broader point: Focus on outsourcing the tasks or aspects of tasks that

PERSONAL PURSUITS LIKE VOLUNTEERING, SOCIALIZING, AND EXERCISING CAN HAVE A TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT ON PEOPLE. ACTIVE LEISURE IS PROFOUNDLY BETTER AT COMBATING TIME STRESS THAN PASSIVE LEISURE.

even after we controlled for age, gender, marital status, and current work hours. And yet 15% of employees reported taking *no* vacation days in the past year, and only 40% said they’d taken all their paid vacation.

2. Buying Time

When considering how we can use money to increase our happiness, most of us think of investing it in positive experiences like Hawaiian vacations. But it’s also important to think about how to eliminate negative experiences from our day. My research suggests that people have a lot of trouble doing this, but here are some ideas to get you started.

Outsource your chores. In the sharing economy, companies like Angie’s List, Rent the Runway Unlimited, and TaskRabbit make it possible and affordable for consumers to “buy” time by hiring out tasks they dislike. Today you can hire people to walk your dog, assemble your furniture, pick out your clothes, chauffeur your kids to their sports practices, declutter your home, and even wait in line for tickets for you. Yet using such services is a big leap for many, who see them as extravagant or unaffordable. It’s the money-first mindset that makes them believe that. In fact, spending money on time-saving services — like shopping, cleaning, and laundry — [can reduce stress and increase](#)

you find most disagreeable. That way, you can spend more minutes engaged in the part that you enjoy about any daily activity.

Do less comparison shopping. The amount of time it takes to find the best price is often more valuable than whatever savings you gain. Driving farther for cheaper gas or going from store to store to find the same outfit at the lowest cost probably isn’t worth the effort. Booking the most affordable travel option isn’t always, either. Flights with layovers eat up lots of time, especially if your connection is missed or delayed, but often save very little money. Reset your thinking so that price isn’t the only consideration. It’s OK to spend more to free up time.

Buy better time. Once you have outsourced chores, devote your new free time to [things that are most likely to promote happiness](#), like activities with your friends and family. Don’t spend all your time on the couch. And each time you open your wallet, ask yourself: Will this purchase change my use of time in positive ways? If the answer is no, you may want to rethink your purchase.

3. Work Activities

Though work may seem like an arena where it’s hard to gain time, there are a surprising number of ways to change your daily professional life to do so.

(continued on page 10)

TIME, MONEY, PRIVILEGE, AND GUILT

Isn't trading money for time just for rich people? Not really. Of course, people who are just making ends meet or are financially struggling are unlikely to face such trade-offs frequently. Yet in developed countries a large proportion of people have a nontrivial amount of discretionary income to play with. More important, what my team and I find across our studies is that spending as little as \$40 to save time can increase happiness (more than spending that same \$40 buying random stuff for ourselves). Consider that in 2017, Americans spent an average of \$1,110 each, or about \$3 a day, buying coffee. So, simply by sacrificing coffee for two weeks, they could each afford to buy about one hour of housecleaning through TaskRabbit.

Even so, many people still associate hiring that kind of help with being privileged and feel guilty doing it. We also feel bad about asking others for help — even when we're paying for it! My data suggests when we outsource tasks we dislike, we feel as if we are burdening the people we hire even though it is their job. We also don't want others to know that we pay for daily services — like cleaning and cooking — since it appears to signal that we aren't managing things well on our own. Yet, as my data suggests, when we find simple ways to get more time, our happiness and productivity benefit.

And if you *still* feel guilty about buying time this way, try asking for time as a gift.

If on the other hand you're looking for a present for someone, take note: Gifts that save people time are perceived to be more thoughtful and are more appreciated than gifts that save money. One word of caution: If time-saving gifts highlight the fact that your partner is always doing more of the chores than you are, they can backfire. They are also more appreciated in professional contexts and for activities that the recipient doesn't enjoy. For instance, if someone likes ironing, he will be less enthusiastic about a dry-cleaning service that saves time than someone who doesn't like laundry.

Still, in our studies, people who made the least amount of money gained the greatest

happiness from time-saving purchases (in the off chance they made them). We believe that this is because people who are struggling to make ends meet [may spend more time commuting](#), working multiple jobs, and waiting than people who are well off. Counter to conventional wisdom, time-saving purchases may be especially beneficial for people living at or below the poverty line.

If I still haven't convinced you that buying time isn't just for rich people, here's a bit more evidence: In collaboration with Colin West of the UCLA Anderson School of Management, I've been conducting a large-scale study in one of the largest, poorest slums in the world, Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. There working women spend 40 hours every week on chores and other forms of unpaid labor. Hand-washing laundry and watching it dry (so that it doesn't get stolen) can take up to 10 hours a week. Yet, even in this slum, where women earn an average of \$5 (US) a day, there is a market for time-saving services. Women sometimes pay others to do their laundry or take clothes to a local laundromat. They also will pay others to purchase vegetables for them to save the hours it takes to walk to and from the market. In this study, we're testing whether the women of Kibera are happier and more productive after they receive vouchers for time-saving services (meals and laundry) than after receiving vouchers for non-time-saving goods (ingredients for meals). We believe that the time-saving vouchers will be most effective. This idea fits with the idea that time poverty often coincides with material poverty.

Yet time-saving services for the poor are often undervalued by policy makers. When Colin and I asked a group of 40 students at the Harvard Kennedy School's program in public policy whether an aid initiative that would save working women time or an initiative that would provide them with cash would be most likely to improve women's welfare, only 10% of these aspiring policy makers said the time-saving initiative would be most effective.

There is also debate about whether the gig-economy marketplaces treat workers well enough to encourage consumers to purchase such services. While my research doesn't speak to those ethical questions, it does find evidence that customers are sensitive to how well their service providers are paid. When consumers feel confident the providers enjoy their jobs and receive good benefits, they feel much less guilt about hiring them and are much more likely to buy time. In one experiment, more consumers clicked on an ad to buy a time-saving service when it highlighted the benefits that the service gave providers than on an ad that highlighted the benefits to consumers. This suggests that companies that offer service providers good working conditions and competitive wages will win more business.

EACH TIME YOU OPEN YOUR WALLET, ASK YOURSELF: WILL THIS PURCHASE CHANGE MY USE OF TIME IN POSITIVE WAYS? IF THE ANSWER IS NO, YOU MAY WANT TO RETHINK YOUR PURCHASE.

Buy back your commute time. Consider taking public transit or an Uber to work once a week. Instead of sitting in traffic, you can spend that time in a leisure activity like reading. Or, if you use it to work, you can leave the office earlier and have more time with friends and family. Even an hour a week adds up significantly over a year.

Ask for more time. A major source of time poverty is tight work deadlines. A simple yet powerful solution is to ask to move them back. Yet across [10 studies](#) involving thousands of employees and managers, Harvard Business School doctoral student Jaewon Yoon, Ohio Fisher College professor Grant Donnelly, and I found that time-stressed employees avoided requesting extensions even when deadlines were adjustable. Employees, and women in particular, worry that if they ask for more time, they'll be seen as less competent and motivated — even though our data suggests that this is not always the case and that employees overestimate any negative reaction their managers might have.

When employees felt squeezed but failed to ask for more breathing room, they ended up submitting suboptimal work, feeling dissatisfied, and disappointing their managers (the very thing they were trying to avoid). These results suggest that you should ask for more time if you need it when your deadlines are adjustable. Your manager will likely grant it to you unbegrudgingly. More important, the extension will give you the chance to put your best foot forward. And if you're the manager, think about how you can help your reports request the time they need to do the best job without worrying about harsh judgment.

Learn how to say no, but don't use time as an excuse. It may be tempting to start turning down requests at work (and life) as a strategy for combating time pressure. It might be even more tempting to refuse by telling others you're too busy. But time-related excuses have a high social cost. Grant Donnelly, HBS doctoral student Anne Wilson, and HBS professor Michael Norton, and I have found in [new research](#) that people who make them are seen as less likable and less trustworthy. This is because time is perceived as personally controllable. (We all have 24 hours in a day, right?) Our research suggests that people respond much more favorably to individuals who decline requests with excuses related to money or provide no excuse at all. If in

reality you don't have the time, try to make it clear that the reason is something outside your personal control, such as family obligations or unexpected travel.

HOW EMPLOYERS CAN HELP

HR departments have great opportunities to improve talent recruitment and retention by helping employees be time savvier and showing prospective hires that they promote time affluence for workers.

Reward employees with time, not money. My research, as well as studies done by others, suggests that employers benefit from this approach because workers who take time off are more engaged, creative, and productive. Yet people often don't take all the days off they're allowed, and when given the choice between time-saving and material rewards, most employees prefer the latter.

I recently obtained data from 207 companies — representing more than 200,000 U.S. employees — that had performance-recognition programs. Thirty-seven percent of those organizations allowed employees to redeem rewards points for time-saving services like housecleaning. Only 3.2% of employees did, whereas 67% of employees redeemed points for material items, such as books from Amazon. (In addition, 16.5% redeemed their points for experiences, and 13.3% donated their points to charity.)

Limiting employees' choices may help. Researchers at Stanford University [conducted a pilot study](#) in which doctors were rewarded with vouchers only for time-saving services. Those who received them reported higher work-life balance and lower intentions to quit than other doctors did. So if organizations want to make the most of time-saving rewards, they probably should avoid making them optional.

Give time-based rewards a cash value. Another strategy is to appeal to that money-first mindset and make time savings *seem* financial. As one Silicon Valley HR leader suggested to me, "To better motivate people to apply for jobs that tend to have lower pay and more vacation time, we should show the total compensation package, not just the salary, putting a value on health care, child care, public transportation subsidies, vacation, and sick leave, and calculating it for all. That way, employees will know what they are truly paid."

To test whether putting a dollar figure on noncash rewards increases employees' interest in them, my colleagues and I conducted [eight studies with more than 3,000 Americans](#). Unsurprisingly, when prospective employees were faced with nearly identical jobs — one paying \$100,000, with two weeks of vacation, and the other paying \$90,000, with three weeks of vacation — the clear majority (75%) chose the higher-paying job. However, when the same decision was presented and the vacations were given a monetary value, the number of employees who chose the higher-paying salary dropped to 50%.

In another study, prospective employees were offered the choice of two jobs — each paying \$100,000. Job A included four benefits, and Job B only three benefits. Not surprisingly, more than 80% of respondents in the control condition chose Job A. Yet when the monetary value of Job B's benefits was presented but of A's was not, 50% of respondents chose Job B — the position with fewer benefits and equal pay! (One caveat: For jobs with low starting salaries, there was no advantage to highlighting the cash value of time benefits, a finding consistent with [other research](#).)

Marketing time as money could be a crucial talent recruitment strategy, as across all these studies the monetized benefits positively shifted perceptions about organizations: Job seekers reported that they thought those employers truly cared about employees and were more considerate of work-life balance. And companies could enjoy an additional upside: increased diversity. Women often see high-powered jobs as [equally attainable but less desirable](#). This simple and costless intervention could draw more women into the applicant pool by making a company seem more family-friendly.

...

It's been nearly 20 years since HBS professor Leslie Perlow popularized the term "[time famine](#)." Since then, we've learned a lot about the psychology of time poverty. Now it is up to each of us to put those lessons into practice. As HBS professor Michael Porter and dean Nitin Nohria wrote in their recent [HBR article](#), "Time is the scarcest resource that leaders have. Where they allocate it matters — a lot." I would argue that one critical determinant of whether we allocate our time optimally is the value we place on it relative to money.

Time is hard to account for — it's easily consumed, squandered, and lost. But it receives far less attention than money does. Few of us carefully budget how we'll spend our next small windfall of time. We worry about wasting money on a cup of coffee every day, and how that adds up, when we should be just as concerned

about all those minutes we frittered away that could have been used to make us happier. And very few of us strategize about how to gain a large chunk of time in the future, perhaps to devote to a rewarding project or to enjoy a family vacation.

This year let's all resolve to be as deliberate about time as we are about money and work. Before spending your next cent, think about whether that purchase will enhance your use of time. Before making your next work-related decision, think about the impact it will have on your time with your family, and how much you will enjoy being with them. Remind yourself that it's not true that there will always be more time later. There won't!

As a manager, think about the signals that performance rewards and incentives send to your people. Ask yourself whether you make it easier for your employees to ask for more time to complete projects, to spend less time stuck in traffic, to waste less time taking cheaper indirect flights, to reduce their stress and improve their productivity. As the data I've collected over many years and across many countries suggests, your happiness and health and the health of your organization could depend on the trade-offs you make (and help your employees make) each day.

While our overarching focus on financial gain has created economic growth, it has had a cost. All of us — employees and managers alike — should consider giving up money to have more and better time. Time is a precious resource. Rethinking how we value it will help us answer the more fundamental question of how to maximize individual and societal well-being — and help all of us escape the stress traps of everyday life. ■

ARTICLE/QUIZ

CAN YOU IDENTIFY THE HIDDEN TIME TRAPS?

Some shortcuts work, and some really don't. Take this test to see if you know the difference.

by Gretchen Gavett and Karen Player

Which gas station should you stop at on your way home? Should you buy a new pair of shoes or use the money for a laundry service?

We make dozens of decisions throughout the day. Some take time and seem consequential, while others are made in a split second. But few of us stop to really think about how our decisions cost us time or money — and how these costs can impact our happiness.

Harvard Business School's [Ashley Whillans](#) studies this topic [in depth](#). As part of her research, she created scenarios to better understand how people behave when given different time-money trade-offs in their lives.

Here are versions of five of these scenarios. What would you do in each situation?

SCENARIO 1

You're on your way home from work, and your gas tank is close to empty. You hear an ad on the radio about cheap gas at a station that's an extra 10 minutes out of your way. A quick calculation indicates that you'll save \$5.

Do you drive the extra 10 minutes to buy the cheaper gas at Station A?

Or do you pay more at Station B, a local pump, to save time?

Station A:
Cheaper gas that's farther away

You gave up time to have more money, but you might actually be sacrificing your happiness. That extra 10 minutes could stretch to 30 if you get stuck in traffic, which could cause stress that lasts long after you arrive home. Remember: Small, seemingly inconsequential decisions can morph into larger negative moments over the course of the day.

Station B:
More expensive gas that's closer

You prioritized time over money. Sure, spending \$5 might only save you 10 minutes, but it's 10 minutes you're not sitting in unpredictable traffic. You'll probably arrive home less stressed, which is likely to leave you better equipped to focus on family or friends. So while \$5 may seem like a lot of money in the moment, parting with it can actually lead to more positive experiences in the future.

SCENARIO 2

You are given \$40 with one stipulation: that you spend it on either a material purchase for yourself or a purchase that saves you time. Material purchases might include a new pair of shoes, a home good, or a personal care product like shampoo or face cream. Time-centric purchases could involve taking a taxi instead of the bus, using a laundry service, or getting your groceries delivered.

Which type of purchase would you make?

A material purchase for myself

While an object will give you some pleasure every time you use it, it won't fundamentally change the way you spend your time. Say, for example, your purchase is a new pair of running shoes. They're utilitarian and maybe even good-looking, but if the rest of your life is busy and stressful, you might skip exercise in favor of other tasks. Your new shoes could wind up collecting dust in your closet.

A purchase that saves me time

Making the initial purchase could take time and effort. But you're likely to get that time back, especially if you make a plan for what you're going to do with the free hours you've added to your day. If you get your groceries delivered, for example, you can use the time you would have spent going to the store doing an activity you enjoy.

SCENARIO 3

You and your partner are deciding what to do for an upcoming date. It's been a busy week, and your apartment is a mess. You have two options: In Option A, you and your partner could go to a dinner at a fancy place that would cost you your entire weekly night-out budget (\$100). In Option B, you and your partner could go to dinner at a less fancy place that would cost you less money (\$60) and would enable you to hire a house cleaner for a couple of hours (\$40).

Which option would you choose for your date night?

Option A:

Fancy dinner and no housecleaning

People tend to feel guilty trying to enjoy something luxurious if they know there are not-so-fun tasks waiting for them when they're done — or if the time leading up to the event is stressful. So in order to reap the most happiness from an expensive meal, make sure you take into account what's happening before and after it. After all, it's hard to enjoy a perfectly cooked steak and a glass of good wine if you know you have to vacuum afterward.

Option B:

Less fancy dinner and housecleaning

Sure, the food isn't the best you've ever had. But because you're not thinking about the things you have to do once dinner is done — or ruminating on the chaotic state of the house you just left — you're probably going to enjoy the experience of spending quality time with your partner more. Plus, you're less likely to get into a fight about who has to vacuum once you get home.

SCENARIO 4

You're visiting a new city and are meeting an old friend for lunch. There's an unfamiliar restaurant across the street, which seems fine from the outside. You also see a small coffee shop with free Wi-Fi; you could duck in to peruse customer reviews of other restaurants in the area.

Will you try out the restaurant or check your phone?

I'll try the restaurant without looking on my phone

Because you're not using up time and energy to try to make the perfect choice, you'll be able to connect with your friend in a more meaningful way. Sometimes, our effort to make the best choice comes at the cost of what you're trying to do in the first place.

I'll check my phone to choose a restaurant

The longer you spend on your phone, the hungrier you're likely to get. Then, once you meet up with your friend, the stress of trying to choose the perfect place (possibly combined with a case of the hangries) may prevent you from truly connecting with your friend in a meaningful way. Sometimes, our effort to make the best choice comes at the cost of what we're trying to do in the first place.

SCENARIO 5

You work at a consulting firm where you develop new marketing strategies for clients. At the end of a project, managers, clients, and team members evaluate your performance and contribution: how well you performed and how much you contributed.

You can choose between two different ways of getting paid: Your peer evaluation can have a huge impact on your pay. You'll receive a big bonus for a good evaluation, on top of your base salary, and the bonus will make up 50% of your total pay for the year.

Alternatively, the peer evaluation can have no impact on your pay. You won't receive a bonus for a good evaluation, but you will receive a fixed salary every month.

Which of the following payment structures would you prefer?

A bonus based on my peer evaluation

It can be motivating to work toward a very specific and definable target. But having a potential bonus hanging over your head will make you hyper-focused on the financial reward.

This mentality can change how you interact with both your colleagues (you're more likely to see them as tools to get ahead) and loved ones (you may spend less time with them as you pursue your bonus). So when you have the option of going after a carrot, consider whether it's worth the risk of treating your friends, family, and coworkers differently.

A fixed salary that isn't dependent on my peer evaluation

At times, you may second-guess your decision to abandon a potentially lucrative bonus. But your choice will pay off in other ways, particularly in your work and home life. Becoming hyper-focused on a financial reward can change how people interact with their colleagues (they're more likely to see them as tools to get ahead) and their loved ones (people spend less time with friends and family when they pursue more money). By choosing a fixed salary over a bonus, you aren't running the same risk of seeing colleagues or family members as obstacles.

About the authors: *Gretchen Gavett* is a Senior Associate Editor at Harvard Business Review. *Karen Player* is Associate Design Director, Multimedia, at Harvard Business Review.



ARTICLE

WHY MONEY MANAGES US

A historical perspective
by Kathleen D. Vohs

We spend a great deal of time thinking about money. We talk about it, worry over it, wonder if we have enough to meet our immediate needs. If we're lucky and have a lot of money, we think about using it to buy a new car, a new house, or a dream vacation. Since the days of our earliest ancestors, money has been [one of our most important tools](#). But different from most other tools, money — even just thinking about it — influences our behavior in negative ways. We become more likely to prioritize our feelings, desires, and goals over getting along with and helping others. Money creates a tension between individualistic and interpersonal motives.

To understand why money has such a hold on us, it's helpful to look back at its predecessor: trade. Early humans and Neanderthals overlapped for

roughly 5,000 years, and, biologically speaking, Neanderthals should have had the advantage. They were on earth first and they had larger bodies and brains. So how did our human ancestors come out ahead? They [traded more than Neanderthals and across longer distances](#), giving them access to more and varied resources, and improving their chances of survival. Anthropologists sometimes call these early humans “homo economicus” to signify the attribute that set them apart.

The creation of money made trade much easier. Consider, for example, what would happen if you had oranges and wanted a cow, but no one who had a cow wanted oranges. Finding someone who has exactly what you want and who wants exactly what you have can be challenging. Now consider the role of time: Is what you have to

trade perishable, as with milk? Is it time-bound in some way, as with cows, which age past their prime? Now add in exchange rates. If you need a cow, and you have oranges, that's not a very equitable trade — but the cow can't be divided up to create a better deal. Money solved these problems by being a store of value, allowing people to save for and thus plan for the long term. With money, we became the humans we are today — for better and for worse, as I have learned.

My research focuses on how we use and think about money. In an experiment, colleagues and I asked one group of people to perform a task that involved money and another group to perform a similar task that didn't. For instance, some people mentally tallied up the value of a stack of cash, whereas others tallied up numbers printed on pieces of paper. [This and similar experiments](#) have found two broad buckets of effects when people are reminded of money. The first is generally positive: They prefer tasks that allow them to go it alone; resist being helped on tough problems; and perform better, longer, and harder. From an organizational and societal

perspective, these are good things. Our second finding reveals a darker side: They share, help, and empathize less than people who have not thought about money. When it comes to the moral fabric of society, these are not ideal behaviors.

We've also found these behaviors in children. In an [experiment](#) with three-to-six-year-olds, we gave them either coins and bank notes or buttons and paper, and then asked them to do helpful things, such as bringing crayons to an adult, or cognitive tasks, such as completing a maze or puzzle. The children who had played with money were less helpful, though they worked smartly and diligently, for instance persisting on challenging puzzles and finding the correct way through a maze.

Since money has some helpful effects, my more recent work looks at whether we can mitigate its harmful ones. Colleagues and I studied groups of people who care deeply for each other. One experiment looked at romantic partners; the other, people in a collectivistic society (India). In both cases [we found](#) similar, familiar effects: After being reminded of money, people were less kind, less helpful, and less generous with each other. When it comes to how money influences us, these results are not the most encouraging.

Which brings us back to the overarching question of why people care so much about money. The answer, in part, is that money is deeply rooted in how we've evolved. It has a direct line to the success of our species, which helps to explain why it takes up so much space in our minds. Money also continues to produce powerful effects on our behavior that go beyond the symbolic governmental backing of a coin or bill's value. As the ways we use and think about money change over time — think credit cards, Venmo, and Bitcoin — we need to keep studying the

ways it affects our relationships with others. Money, while integral to who we've become, may also play a role in driving us apart. ■

About the author: *Kathleen D. Vohs* is the Distinguished McKnight University Professor and Land O'Lakes Chair in Marketing at the University of Minnesota.

AUDIO

DON'T FEEL GUILTY ABOUT WANTING YOUR TIME BACK

An interview with HBS assistant professor Ashley Whillans
by Harvard Business Review Staff

The happiest people [use their money to buy time](#), according to Harvard Business School assistant professor Ashley Whillans. This could mean using a grocery delivery service so you can spend an extra hour with family, or taking a cab to work instead of driving so you can read a good book while you're riding.

But even today, when Americans have [more time for leisure than they did 40 years ago](#), it can be hard to take good advantage of free hours. That's in part because people tend to use any extra

time to try to make more money. "We focus our attention on getting ahead, and so when we have free time, we fill it or even fail to recognize the extra free time that we have," says Whillans. It's also because people feel bad about paying for help — they may feel ashamed about not being able to do it all, or guilty because they're burdening someone else with their chores.

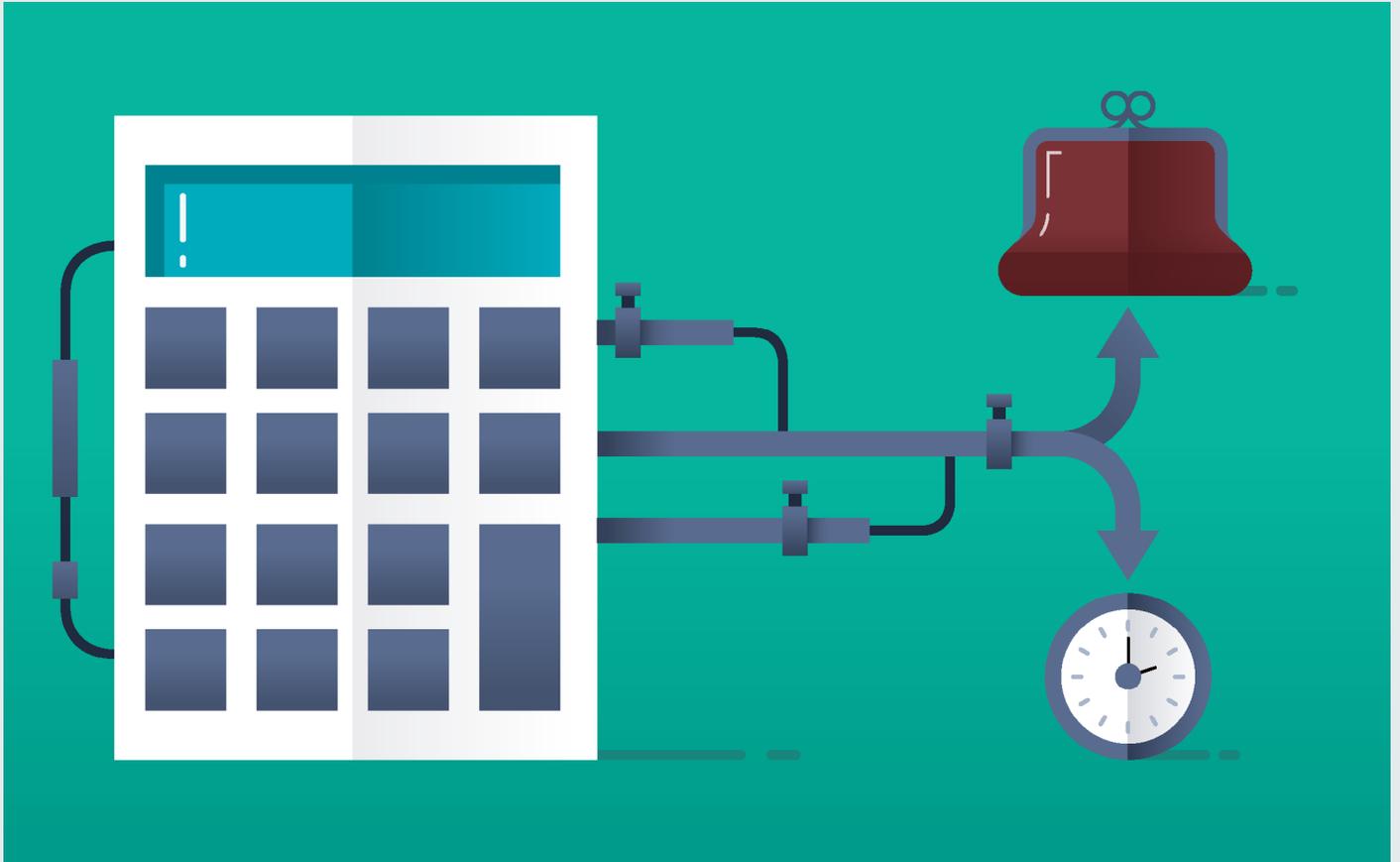
Whillans, in the [IdeaCast](#) below, notes that these feelings are common. And she doesn't support outsourcing everything — in fact, her research finds

that people who outsource *too much* have the *lowest* levels of happiness. Rather, she suggests first looking at the margins, finding simple activities to outsource that don't cost a lot *and* can be done by companies that pay and treat their employees well. And you don't have to be wealthy in order to start; Whillans's work also looks at how the pattern of money-for-time extends across different income brackets. For more, listen below or via [iTunes](#) or [Google Podcasts](#). ■



“A UBIQUITOUS CONNECTION TO THE INTERNET MEANS THAT WE EXPERIENCE ‘TIME CONFETTI.’ NOT ONLY ARE WE TRYING TO FILL OUR TIME WITH MORE WORK AND BEING MORE PRODUCTIVE BUT ALSO OUR TIME IS MORE FRAGMENTED. WE’RE MORE DISTRACTED, AND THAT ALSO CONTRIBUTES TO THESE HIGHER FEELINGS OF TIME STRESS.”

—Ashley Whillans



ARTICLE

ACCOUNTING FOR TIME

Fresh research puts dollar values on how you spend your hours.

by Ashley Whillans and Hanne Collins

The research is unambiguous: People who value time more than money are **happier and more productive**. But actually shifting to a time-first mindset is really hard. Partly, it's because of **how our brains are wired**. Partly, it's because we don't know how to measure what time is worth. A \$10,000 raise is easy to understand; calculating the value of an extra 30 minutes isn't so simple.

But it's getting easier. Some of our research on time and happiness has been devoted to assigning tangible value to time and the happiness it produces. The hope is that when people are faced with a time-or-money decision, they'll more easily see that giving up the money isn't a loss.

Our primary metric is the dollar equivalent of happiness. In other words, a positive use of time produces a happiness boost equivalent to what we would expect from a rise in annual household income.

The process for assigning cash to time and happiness isn't all that straightforward. First, you must round up a representative sample of working adults living in the U.S. and ask them questions about how much money they make, how happy they are, and how they spend their time. (Note: Working adults hate answering survey questions.) Then you must take their answers and run statistical analyses to compare how income affects their happiness and how their time-use decisions do.

The process isn't exact, either. Our data is accurate, but it's not needlessly precise. Saying some activity is worth \$1,139, for example, is a little too specific, so we've rounded numbers. We've also focused on averages, so these numbers won't apply to all people in all circumstances. Finally, the happiness boost will vary based on income. Surprisingly, buying time is most effective when you have less money. For a person who makes up to \$50,000 per year, the value of buying time can reach the equivalent of \$40,000 in additional annual income. For someone who makes more than \$125,000, it's \$16,000 — still substantial. The lesson is that everyone who wants a big gain in happiness should spend money to buy back time.

Here are some early examples of time-value calculations we've made.

Shifting your mindset to value time over money brings a happiness boost equivalent to gaining \$2,200 of annual income. It's important to point out that this boost is from simply changing how you think, even if you do nothing else

differently. The effect is likely due to the reduced stress that comes from not obsessing so much over money or worrying about how to get more of it.

Savoring meals is a happiness-inducing activity. Americans spend much more time choosing what to eat than other cultures, and they don't enjoy mealtime as much or spend as long eating. This is in stark contrast to the French, who savor meals every day and are happier for it. Decreasing the time spent on decisions around meals — what to eat, where to eat, with whom to eat — and spending more time enjoying a meal with others will gain you the happiness equivalent of a \$3,600 bump.

Spending time together in relationships helps in ways material items can't. Couples tend to give each other *stuff* to express their devotion. They'd be better off giving the gift of time by spending money on time-saving things like a housecleaning service, or a driving service so that they can do something else during their commutes. (Maybe even work, which in turn might shorten their workdays.) Those kinds of gifts will create far bigger happiness bumps than material items; our

someone to buy and put away your groceries — something you hate doing — for \$100 per week. That's \$5,200 per year, 11% of your salary. It seems unreasonable at first, but once you know the life-satisfaction boost, it suddenly seems very reasonable.

Annual salary:	\$48,000
Grocery service:	- \$5,200
	<u>\$42,800</u>
Life satisfaction bump:	+ \$18,000
Salary + happiness equivalent:	\$60,800

And remember, if grocery shopping takes two hours a week, over the course of a year you'll gain 104 hours — more than *four full days* — to fill with other activities.

Before investing in outsourcing chores, it's important to identify the specific ones you dislike. Some people may enjoy cooking but hate the prep work. In that case, a meal kit service is a good investment. Others enjoy the feeling they get from cleaning the house, so outsourcing that task wouldn't make sense. A Roomba is not the path to happiness for everyone.

alone, and you'll spend \$20 per week on coffee and pastries. At the other, you'll know the staff and chat with friends, but you'll spend \$60 per week. Which do you choose?

On the face of it, the first one seems like the better option, because you'll get more done and spend far less money. But being more productive doesn't mean you'll be happier. You may get less done at the second shop, but the happiness increase is worth about \$5,800!

Quiet coffee shop:	- \$1,040/year
	+ 0 happiness bump
	<u>- \$1,040 in happiness</u>

Friendly coffee shop:	- \$3,120/year
	+ \$5,800 happiness bump
	<u>+ \$2,680 in happiness</u>

Even if you accomplish only half as much work at the friendly coffee shop, you will be much happier, which in the long run will make you more productive anyway.

Vacation is the most egregious misuse of time. In our survey of working adults in the U.S., we found that 75% of employees who got eight

SHIFTING YOUR MINDSET TO VALUE TIME OVER MONEY BRINGS A HAPPINESS BOOST EQUIVALENT TO GAINING \$2,200 OF ANNUAL INCOME.

calculation puts the happiness increase at \$4,000.

Outsourcing disliked chores seems like an expensive extravagance, but in fact the investment can be worth it. In terms of happiness, the decision is worth an annual income boost of about \$18,000.

Let's play this out. Say you make \$48,000 per year and could hire

Chasing deals usually isn't worth the time it takes. Think of driving out of your way to save a few pennies per gallon on gas, or comparison shopping between stores for an item you may save only a few dollars on.

Or consider this scenario: You want to work from a coffee shop a few days a week, and there are two equally close to your house. At one, you will be left

vacation days a year did not take them all, 40% used fewer than eight days, and 31% took fewer than four days.

If someone put stacks of money on a table and said we could take it, we would not walk away. By not using our vacation time, that's effectively what we're doing. We have been gifted time, and we know time is what will make us happy, and yet we do not use it.

In our sample, the mean number of vacation days used was nine. According to our analysis, taking eight more days a year is equivalent to a \$4,400 increase in annual income. For many people, these days are available! All they have to do is use them — the happiness bump is significant even for someone who makes \$100,000 a year.

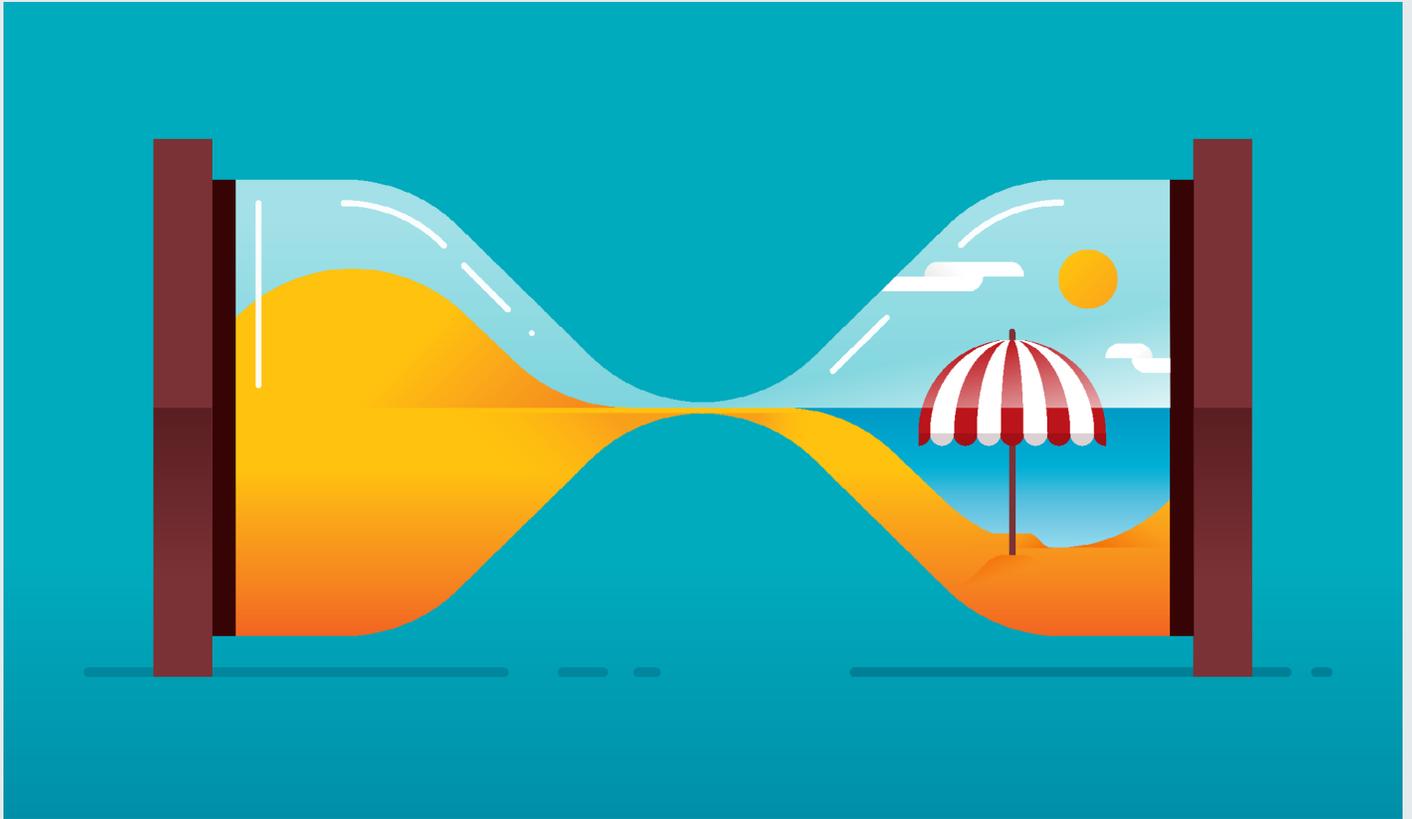
Family and friends are worth a lot in terms of happiness. In an extreme case, shifting from working all the time and never seeing friends and family to spending time daily with them would be worth a \$108,000 boost in annual household income.

This example is a theoretical exercise; most of us spend some time with friends and family, and few of us spend all of our hours working. But the calculation should give you an idea of just how much value your time can have. If you spend most of your time working in the hopes of getting a \$20,000 raise, you may well get the raise. But your happiness increase won't be nearly what it would have been by spending that time with friends and family. And there's no substitute; people don't become happier from spending time with colleagues and clients — they even report enjoying that time less.

There are other happiness bumps we've calculated. Having more leisure time is worth about \$1,000 if it's passive (watching TV) and \$1,800 if it's active (exercise). Being married and living with one's spouse is worth a \$20,700 increase in happiness. But some activities feel like pay cuts because they reduce our happiness. Shopping, for example, is worth -\$1,100 in happiness, as is education (though it has longer-term benefits). And some work activities — even if they're things you do in your spare time, rather than part of the workday — equal about -\$2,900 in happiness.

It can be hard to get your mind around this concept, because we're not used to thinking about time in these terms. But budgeting time carefully — as carefully as you would money — could pay off big for your, and your loved ones', happiness. ■

About the authors: *Ashley Whillans* is an assistant professor at Harvard Business School. *Hanne Collins* is a research associate at Harvard Business School.



ARTICLE

TREAT YOUR WEEKEND LIKE A VACATION

This simple mindset shift can lead to greater happiness.

by Cassie Mogilner Holmes

Take a moment to recall how you felt at work on a recent Monday. Were you happy and satisfied? Or stressed and worried?

Your answer may reveal a lot about the way you approached the prior weekend. According to our research in progress, making one small mindset change — treating your weekend like a vacation — can increase your happiness. And unlike taking a more traditional vacation, this emotional boost doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming.

My colleagues Colin West, Sanford DeVoe, and I came to these conclusions over the course of several studies. First, we looked at the effects of actual vacations on hundreds of thousands of Americans by analyzing the subscription-only 2014–2016 data from

the Gallup U.S. Daily Poll. We found that individuals who prioritize vacation are significantly happier: They exhibit more positive emotion, less negative emotion, and are more satisfied in life.

The problem is that Americans are really bad at taking vacations. [Compared to workers in the European Union, Americans spend more hours in the office each week and take less time off.](#) Part of the reason is that the U.S. is the only industrialized nation without legally mandated vacation — [one out of four employed Americans receive no paid vacation days](#) at all. But Americans don't even use the few vacation days they are allotted: [More than 50% of Americans](#) leave their paid vacation days unused each year.

This got us thinking. While most working Americans take little time off

for vacation, the majority get (and take) two days off from work every week: the weekend. We wanted to see if there's a way to help people leverage the time they already take off from work to enjoy the potential happiness they would get from a vacation.

To do this, we ran an experiment among more than 400 working Americans over the span of a regular weekend in May 2017. The intervention was simple: On the Friday leading into the weekend, we randomly instructed half of the participants to treat the weekend like a vacation. The other half, serving as a control condition, were instructed to treat the weekend like a regular weekend. That was it. How they interpreted the instructions was entirely up to them. Everyone was left to do whatever they wanted during those next two days.

When participants were back at work on Monday, we followed up with a survey measuring their current happiness (that is, their positive emotion, negative emotion, and satisfaction). The results showed that those who had treated their weekend like a vacation were significantly

happier than those who had treated it like a regular weekend. This effect held when we controlled for the amount of money they reported to have spent. Thus, without taking any extra time off from work and without needing to spend any additional money, the simple nudge to treat their time off like a vacation increased their happiness when they were back at work on Monday.

These results seemed too good to be true, so we ran the study again with more than 500 different people on another regular weekend in January 2018. This time, we also measured how happy people were during the weekend, how they spent their time, and the extent to which they were mentally present. The experimental treatment was exactly the same: At random, half were instructed to treat their weekend like a vacation, and the other half were instructed to treat it like a regular weekend. Yet again, the vacationers were statistically happier at work on Monday. They were happier throughout the weekend as well.

How did treating the weekend like a vacation boost happiness? Yes, the “vacationers” behaved somewhat differently: doing less housework and work for their jobs, staying in bed a little longer with their partner, and eating a bit more. These differences in activities, however, weren’t responsible for their increased happiness. Instead, treating the time like a vacation seems to have shifted people’s mindset. Specifically, the vacationers were more mindful of and attentive to the present moment throughout their weekend’s activities.

For example, two women — one in the control group and one instructed to treat her weekend like a vacation — reported making breakfast on Saturday morning. The first woman reported doing so with enjoyment: “Made biscuits and gravy for breakfast. It’s my favorite!”

The second woman took her enjoyment one step further: “I woke everyone up with pancakes this morning. It’s something I like to do when we are on vacation. I found myself enjoying the morning more than usual, maybe it’s because I focused on staying in the moment.” The difference between the women’s experience is subtle, but crucial. Even though their activities and behaviors were largely the same, it was the second woman’s attention to the present moment — her mindset — that produced the subsequent effect on happiness during the rest of the weekend and the following Monday.

Why does this mindset shift have such a powerful effect? [Research shows](#) that slowing down and paying more attention to your surroundings, the activity at hand, and the people who are involved allows you to enjoy the activity more. Without ruminating on the past or getting distracted by anxieties or fantasies about the future, increasing your attention to the present moment makes you more sensitive to the pleasures that are already in the environment. It helps you savor experiences and life a bit more.

Even if you can’t take the entire weekend “off” because of a looming work deadline or household obligations, it is still possible to gain the benefits of a vacation mindset. You can carve out a piece of the weekend (or perhaps even the workweek) to fully enjoy and be in the present, as you would on vacation. Or you can apply a vacation mindset to whatever task is at hand. Slow down, notice, and make it more fun; turn on some upbeat music in the car while running errands, or make yourself a margarita for folding laundry.

One word of caution: Given that the vacation mindset and resulting happiness stems from mentally breaking from routine and the day-to-day grind, *this intervention cannot itself become a routine*. Treating every single

weekend or evening off from work like a vacation might cause a reduction in its cognitive and emotional impact. We recommend saving the mental vacations for when you really need the break.

When used judiciously, however, this simple reframing allows you to enjoy some of the happiness from a vacation without taking additional time off. Our experiments suggest that your mindset is more important than the activities you take part in, or the amount of money you spend, when you’re not at work. So between weekend errands, soccer practices, and birthday parties, try to notice and appreciate the time you do have. Treating this time like a vacation can provide a needed break from the typical grind, allowing you to appropriately savor moments spent at the soccer field or gathered around the dinner table with family and friends. And when you do head back to work, you’re more likely to feel refreshed and ready to tackle your week. ■

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