

CHAPTER THREE

HOW TO FREE UP TIME

"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times."

Bruce Lee

By now, you know that your time is limited.

Each of us has 168 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, and about 75 years in our lives on average. We're all running out of runway.

Because of this, there's only so much we can fit into our day, year, and lives. We must choose intentionally. Yet, we seem to develop a default "yes" response to things that have zero impact, and an automatic "no" to what could make a massive difference.

Saying "yes" to another Netflix show is easy, saying "yes" to reading a whole book is difficult.

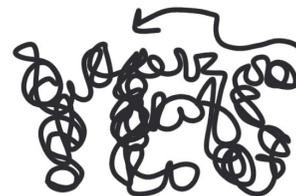
Saying "yes" to a boring but safe client is easy, committing to launching a product is difficult.

Saying "yes" to the same conversation with the same friends is easy, meeting new inspiring people in your town is difficult.

But which could have disproportionate results?

Yet, most of the time our default position is to say yes to loads of things that don't make any difference. Only to hand out a quick no to the things that could create real impact.

Not only are we hard wired to give our time to the unimportant, we also shy away from the important.



NO



Whenever you say yes, you are actually saying no to everything else you could be doing instead.

Whenever you say no, you are just excluding one possible scenario, and guarding your resources and time for something more purposeful.

Yes closes the door to everything else.

No leaves the door open to opportunity.

To be able to say YES to what matters, you have to say no to what doesn't.

When you realise time is the only truly limited resource, you must switch strategies from spreading yourself thin to squeezing as much impact as possible out of every minute.

That's when mastering "no" comes in. You want to override the programming, so that you can commit your very limited resources to the right things. By being selective, you can invest your time, and instantly increase the value of your days.

You will create impact, meaningful results, and lifelong memories.

If you find yourself saying "I don't have time to...", you are saying yes to the wrong things (and likely too many things). The instructions in this chapter will help you understand how to create time for what really matters in your life.

But first, to become a master of selection we must understand why we tend to say "yes" so lightly (only to regret it later).

Yes (it's easy)

When you're used to saying yes all the time, it will feel almost impossible to let go. Not only is it your default answer: we are wired to agree to small commitments lightly.

Working in the background are several cognitive biases: mental models and shortcuts we subconsciously use to make decisions quickly and efficiently, without having to dedicate a ton of time and resources to the most petty conclusion.

To become a master of your time, you must learn to recognise these mental models, so you can use them to your advantage, instead of being a victim of them.

Here's what's happening behind the scenes, making you agree to a ton of useless commitments (and keeping you away from what would make a real impact).

Loss aversion (and missed opportunities)

Loss Aversion is the tendency to prefer avoiding losses over acquiring equal gains: in other words, we cling to what we already have more than to what we want to have. We would rather not lose \$5 than gain \$5. Studies have shown that we value resources lost twice as strongly as we do gains. In money terms, it takes a potential win of \$10 to risk losing \$5.



Saying NO closes a potential opportunity you already had.

It doesn't matter whether it was relevant or impactful, or even if you would have sought out that opportunity in the first place: loss aversion will make it difficult for you to let go and say no. The key is to remember that committing to something means assigning your time to it, and taking it away from any other option.

Letting go of opportunities that are not aligned with your purpose, or just not good enough, is the only way to make space for the important.

Fear of Missing Out

Fear of missing out (or FOMO) is the worry of having made the wrong decisions on how to spend time, and typically manifests in constantly contemplating how things could be different. Whatever you choose, you'll hate your decision.

This brings an inability to commit, and an impatience towards results, always keeping up with other people's (instagram) lifestyle choices.

Decision fatigue

Good decisions have a daily cap. Here's why: many decisions rely on willpower, and our daily willpower is limited. In fact, self-control works like a muscle, weakening with each extra rep, until it's too tired to do another one. At that point, our willpower lets go, and we tend to fall back on our default setting or the easiest option.

As we progress through the day, we are more likely to go back to safer decisions, and be subject to a general inability to decide. It's at this point that a light "yes" often sounds like the safest option.

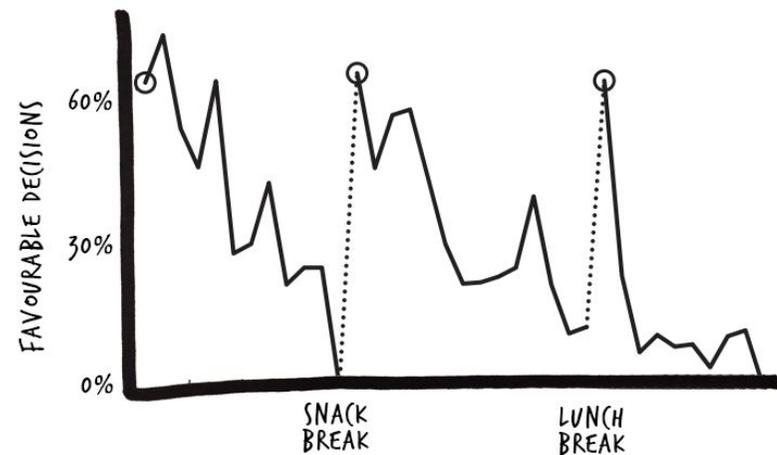
Last time you binge ate in the evening, you probably had just decided you were not going to do it. But yes won.

That's why bad decisions are more frequent in the evening, after a long day at work.

A research study on decision making examined 1,112 parole rulings assigned to 8 judges over a 10-month period. Judges are under a lot of pressure, as they have to hear arguments and take a decision on 14 to 35 parole requests a day with

only two breaks in between to rest: a morning snack and a late lunch.

The impact of this relentless schedule is striking: chances of being granted parole peak at 65% at the start of the day and right after each break, and plunge to practically 0% at the end of each shift, the safer decision.



Just like in the study, your ability to make decisions, especially good ones, diminishes throughout the day. The more demanding your day is, the more rapidly this decline occurs.

That's why many high-performers are known to always wear the same outfit: Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and even former U.S. President Obama are amongst those who intentionally reduce their dressing options to preserve their willpower for bigger choices later in the day.

You don't have to stick to one outfit, but reducing those daily options that have no significant impact on your day will greatly improve your ability to say no.

Here are several things that eat away at your willpower: implementing new behaviours, filtering distractions, making decisions, resisting temptation, suppressing emotion, suppressing impulses, taking tests, trying to impress others, dealing with fear, doing something you don't enjoy, selecting long-term over short-term rewards.

With a plethora of everyday choices, we squander our willpower on things that don't matter, and have none left for really important life decisions.

Psychological distance

Imagine organising your next summer's holiday one year in advance: likely, you will focus on high-level concepts of fun and relaxation. It seems easy.

The closer you get to the holiday though, the more you'll start planning the practical steps: where to stay, what places to visit, how to get to each location, and which restaurants to eat at. In essence, the closer in time you get to an event, the more you will shift your thinking from abstract concepts to more concrete aspects. Sunshine and unicorns will turn into packing and booking.

This phenomenon is called *psychological distance*. Just like events happening in your town seem more actionable and relatable than those happening on a different continent, the same happens through time.

This has consequences on our decision making.

When planning the future, psychological distance makes commitment blurry and abstract, leading to overcommitment, overlapping tasks, or plans that require more time than what is available.

In a [research study](#), college students were asked to plan their week to accommodate their various activities: when planning for the near future, they took into account how each activity would affect time available on another; when planning the distant future however, they tended to plan as though they had unlimited time and resources. The future is blurry.

Distance through time also makes us underestimate the value of events and outcomes happening in the future, and give more value to immediate events and results.

This also means that an impactful commitment with an outcome in the future (like “learning French”) will be discounted, while an immediate small result (such as “watch a film”) will gain perceived value from happening closer in time.

Shiny object syndrome

Shiny object syndrome (SOS) isn't as official and medical as it sounds: it's more of a mindset, but its effects can be paralyzing. SOS is the inability to stick with a long-term decision, starting things only to leave them as soon as a tactic that seems more promising (or easier) comes along.

Shiny object syndrome takes its name from small children getting easily distracted by shiny objects, and wanting to drop everything else in order to chase them.



SOS applies particularly to entrepreneurs: the need to manage risk, and figure out a way towards your goals make business a shiny object minefield.

Instead of sticking to the course and pushing through a difficult patch, sometimes it feels irresistible to switch to a new promising tactic, only to switch again when things get complicated.

Other areas in which SOS manifests regularly are dating, fitness and diets, and any activity that requires consistent action-taking to see any tangible results. SOS is the ultimate yes-trap: you'll be tempted to take a shortcut, only to find out it's actually a detour.

By now, you know how constantly saying “yes” keeps you trapped in a multitude of commitments that don’t take you anywhere: saying yes also books up your time and resources, preventing you from choosing better options that will bring disproportionate results to your life, your business, and the important people around you.

We also looked at why we are wired to splurt out an easy “yes”, so you can catch yourself next time, and change your behaviour through awareness.

Now, let’s look at the power of “no” (and why we hate it so much).

No (it’s difficult)

You can attempt to learn a hundred martial arts at once: chances are, you’ll become mediocre at best. You’ll feel like you put in a lot of effort, and didn’t get anywhere.

You might decide that you want to cultivate 100 friendships: you’ll likely feel overwhelmed, and like you’re still letting most of them down.

You can choose to start 5 businesses at the same time: you’ll probably find yourself with 5x the problems, and 1/5 of the results.

That's because time is the only non-renewable, non-expandable resource we have: you have to choose how to allocate it. Which means, you have to choose what doesn’t make the cut.

That’s why saying yes to everything is a losing strategy: you can’t expand time.

So why is “no” so difficult to say?

Peer pressure (people pleasing)

Your peer group is made up of the people in your life that have similar characteristics to yours: from age and gender, to social status, personal interests, and background. The closer they are to you, the more influential they are.

Peer pressure is a compelling need towards wanting to fit in with the group of individuals you identify with, in order to be accepted by the group. This derives from our ancestral need to be accepted by the tribe, the only guarantee to our individual survival.

Peer pressure makes it difficult to turn down social commitments, but also to distance yourself from expectations and carve your own path.

This gets even worse for **people pleasers**, who feel a compelling need to please everyone in their social circle by saying yes in the hope of everyone's approval (it never works).

Awareness will help you become more comfortable with saying no. However, you can take this a step further and use peer pressure dynamics to your advantage: by surrounding yourself with like minded individuals aligned to your purpose, peer pressure will support your activities, rather than being in competition with them. After all, that's why they say "you're the average of the 5 people you hang out with".

Comfort zone (aversion to change)

We are wired to hate change. Every time an app changes its icon color, I hate it. Only to become terribly fond of it a couple of weeks later.

In one study, a group of participants was shown a painting, and was told it was made in 1905. The second group was shown the same painting, but told it was made in 2005.

The first group found the painting more aesthetically appealing.

Not only do we tend to like things that have been around for a while, brain scans have shown how **we register change like an error**: something is wrong.



Aversion to change keeps you stuck in the comfort zone. Always saying yes to the usual, easy choices that don't take you anywhere, and unable to say no and make space for new adventures. When you realise and accept your tendency for comfort and stability, you can slowly train yourself to accept (and even seek) change. Over time, this will bring massive results to your life (and skyrocket the value of your time).

Spreading your bets

Wanting to spread your bets, in business and life, makes you feel safer.

When you are working on many tactics, or launching many products at the same time, it feels that some will *have* to work out (at some point). By meeting many people, it feels like you will find great friendships or an amazing partner. If you read many books, you will inevitably learn new things. Like playing a numbers game, increasing your activity makes you feel like you are increasing your odds of finally getting a result.



This can lead to taking on too many commitments that you can't really manage, instead of focusing on the few targeted actions that could give you the results that you want. Spreading your bets can sabotage your efforts, and even show a lack of trust that what you are doing will work out. Become a sniper, and say no to anything that will not bring you the results you are looking for.

We are wired to see "no" as a difficult word to say: we don't want to miss out or let other people down, and we hate change. But no makes space for the real, loud yes.

When to say yes

When you say no to the unimportant, you make space for what truly matters.

Imagine if everyone had the same size room: that's your 24 hours. There's only so much you can fit in that room, and if you want to make space for something big and useful (like a bed), you'll have to get rid of all the useless tiny objects lying around.

Now that we've clarified the importance and the power of saying no, it's time to say YES.

Not the easy, reactive yes that clutters your calendar and makes you procrastinate on the important. I'm talking about life-changing, enthusiastic YES.

Quantity vs Quality

Saying yes to new things in quantity gets you exposure to new ideas, new experiences, new challenges, and personal growth. When you are **seeking clarity**, looking for answers, or finding a new strategy to achieve a goal, that's when quantity is your friend.

- Adding a new channel to find clients or customers?
- On the lookout for amazing friends in a new city?
- Starting a business (but not sure which one)?
- Looking for a great person to date?

- Searching for an activity to be passionate about?

Experimenting with many things by saying yes often will give you quick exposure to options, so you can learn fast what works to give you the results you are looking for.

Once you find it, drop what's not working, whether it's people, activities, goals: say no and move on.

The aim is not to accumulate a ton of commitments, but rather taste different options until you find what you're looking for (or an efficient and fun way to get there).



For example, when I started the Time Zillionaire blog, I had no idea how to drive traffic to my posts and find readers for my content. So for a few months, I tried many tactics to see

what could work. Once I found one that produced consistent results (for me, it was writing on Quora), I committed to it and said YES, getting over 2 million views in less than 10 months.

Which brings me to the next point: quality. Once you find what works for you, it's time to **stop trying new things**, and commit with a strong and resounding YES.

Whether it's a diet that boosts your energy, a skill that can change your life, a person that can take you to the next level, or a system that doubles your productivity, commit and drop everything else, until it no longer works or you must change things to get to the next level again.

To be able to choose, you need to be clear on what you are looking for. Exposure will help you figure that out, but in the age of infinite choice, you need to trust your choice and commit. The imperfect decision made with 100% commitment will bring more impact than the perfect decision with 10% commitment. You have to go all in, and make it work.

Once you do that, your life will be filled with meaningful activities, people, and challenges that are aligned with your

purpose, not in competition with it. Instead of stuffing life with things you feel lukewarm about, go all in on what makes you passionate: at that point, saying no to everything else will become easy.

What now

Time to implement saying no in your own life, so you can become super-effective.

The first step is to make a list of current projects you have on: include all the regular and recurring activities in your days, from work (or your different business projects) to socials, learning, and... "wasting" time.

Now look at that list and ask: what's missing?

Add a new column to include the important activities you keep postponing.

Then go through the original list, and delete everything that is unnecessary, ineffective, or... just isn't worth your time.

The second step is to look at what actually happens throughout your days, and track how you spend your time for

a week or two (even better). Make sure you choose a regular week: if you have any disruptive event (like a conference or a friend visiting), you won't get the insights you are looking for. You can track how you spend your time using a spreadsheet, a piece of paper, a document, or your calendar. How you do it really doesn't matter. Set a reminder at least twice a day, so you can look back and record how you spent every one-hour increment.

At the end of the two weeks, look back on your activities, and add up the time spent on each: you'll likely be stunned at how different it is from what you expected.

Guess what? Time to say no and get rid of ballast: eliminate what shouldn't be there.

To make it easier for you to take action, I have created a free worksheet you can download at timezillionaire.com/investmytime. Download it now before you forget.

If you're a yes-spray, and find it difficult to turn down commitments you feel "meh" about, here's how to sharpen your "no":

Start to implement a delay to your commitments: instead of saying yes straight away, explain that you need to check your availability and will confirm later. Whether this is two hours or a whole week, it will give you the time (and the psychological distance) to make a rational decision based on the bigger picture.

Write down the cost of saying yes: take a moment to think about the opportunity cost of constantly saying yes. If you're a people pleaser, you might be letting down the people that actually care about you by spreading yourself thin all the time. If you're a procrastinating entrepreneur, you might be sabotaging your business by switching tactics every week. Clarifying the opportunity cost helps defuse that feeling of missing out, and realise you already are (by spreading yourself so thin).

Finally, take your time to clarify what you want and what you are looking for, so you can say a loud and committed YES to what matters most to you.