

# Healthy Living: Organising Your Time

## **Why organise your time?**

One of the features of schizophrenia that people close to sufferers first notice is the way that they become extremely disorganised in their daily life. Basic tasks such as personal hygiene and laundry either don't get done at all or become an obsession taking up inordinate amounts of the sufferer's time.

During the acute phase of an episode of schizophrenia this is understandable. The onslaught of mad thinking will make it impossible for the sufferer to think of anything else except satisfying the incessant demands of the hallucinations and delusions. However later, when the person's mind begins to clear and they start to regain some normal functioning, they will need to think about organising their life again. This is the natural progression out of psychosis when things like household chores and looking after finances start to become important again.

Residual symptoms will complicate this process but in addition the sufferer's basic life skills will also be a little rusty and will need to be refreshed particularly if the episode has been a prolonged one. This is where time management comes in.

No one is born with good time management, rather it is a skill that can be learnt and people living with schizophrenia can learn it just as well as anybody else. Good time management and learning to organise your life well forms an essential part of a successful recovery strategy.

Most people in management or business will spend an awful lot of time learning about time management skills and the subject can become very involved indeed. But below we talk about some of the basic skills that people living with schizophrenia will benefit from in their daily lives.

## **Getting the basics right**

There are some time management tools which are absolutely key to managing time well. These are:

1. A diary
2. A watch
3. A wall clock (preferably radio controlled).
4. A wall calendar
5. Notebook and supply of pens

Of course nowadays many people use electronic devices in place of the old fashioned paper ones but there is a lot to be said for having a decent calendar up on the wall in the kitchen that will remind you about appointments every time you walk past it or a wrist watch that you can glance at easily without having to take your 'phone out of your pocket.

## **What needs to be done: identifying routines?**

Some tasks have to be done. We may be able to put them off but in the end we have to do them. Chores like cleaning the house or doing the laundry need to be done regularly and often when schizophrenia strikes these regular tasks get neglected.

As part of our time management strategy it is a good idea to make a list of the tasks that need to be done regularly and work out how frequently they need to be done. We can call these sorts of tasks: routines or some people call them maintenance tasks or domestics. For instance:

Laundry: weekly  
Vacuuming and dusting: weekly  
Make up pill box: weekly  
Taking medication: daily  
Watering house plants: daily  
Washing dishes: daily  
Testing smoke alarms: weekly  
Collecting prescription: monthly  
Ironing: weekly  
Changing bed sheets: monthly  
Budget: monthly and weekly

### **Using checklists to remind us to do things**

From this list we can then make up separate checklists for daily, weekly and monthly routines. We can then set aside a space each week or month to complete our routines. So using the example above our weekly checklist might look like this:

Laundry  
Vacuuming and dusting  
Make up pill box  
Test smoke alarms  
Ironing  
Weekly budget

And we could set aside say Saturday morning for completing our weekly routines. After all we know that these chores have to be done. We can only put them off for so long so we might as well allocate a slot in our week for doing them.

And by allocating a specific time of the week for doing our routines we can forget about them for the rest of the week and they won't cause us any low level stress. Often neglecting tasks like these can cause us low levels of stress that only add to the overall problem of stress in our lives. By setting aside time regularly to do the routines we have the confidence of knowing that we are on top of them and this helps to reduce our stress levels and improves our self esteem.

Once you have prepared your checklist it is a good idea to get it typed up so that you have a permanent copy and keep it somewhere prominent like pinned to the wall in the kitchen.

### **How long do things take: using time audits**

Of course, it would also help to know how much time we need to set aside for doing our routines and other tasks and this is where time auditing comes in. Time auditing simply means keeping a record of how long things take to do. This could be applied to our routines or perhaps making an important journey, say to the Jobcentre. Keep a pen and paper in your pocket and make a note of when each task starts and finishes then work out how long each takes.

When keeping a time audit it is important to be realistic. Complete each task at an easy pace, not too energetically and include any stops for natural breaks or refreshments.

### **Prioritising**

Having identified our routines and worked out how long we need to set aside to do them we can now plan

our routines into our week. But there is one aspect missing from this system: that is prioritising. Obviously some of the routine tasks that we have identified are more important than others and we need to know about these because there will be occasions on which we simply will not have time to do our routines or because we are not feeling very well and can only give them a limited amount of effort.

So in order of priority our weekly routines list above might look like this:

- Make up pill box
- Check smoke alarms
- Weekly budget
- Laundry
- Ironing
- Vacuum and dust

This puts the most important items at the top of the list and works through to the least important. Making up your pill box and checking the smoke alarms are obviously really important jobs whereas dusting could easily be left for a week without any harm if you didn't feel up to doing it.

Of course routines are not the only tasks in our life that we should be prioritising. It is also vital to identify important appointments that need to be kept and make every effort to make sure we don't miss them or turn up late for them. These appointments include:

- Doctor's appointments
- Jobcentre appointments
- Court hearings
- Meetings with solicitors, police or probation service
- Job interviews

## **Punctuality**

Punctuality is the knack of turning up on time for appointments and not being late. People living with schizophrenia are notoriously bad at it. I know I was. For some reason it seems to be one of the first skills that you lose when an episode of schizophrenia hits you and one of the last skills you re-learn as you are recovering.

For some arrangements, say at your support group or meeting a friend for coffee, punctuality is not vital but for other types of appointments it is essential to be there on time. Punctuality is not something people are born with or some mysterious art passed down from father to son: it is simply a matter of good planning and can be learnt like any other skill.

Each journey to an appointment must be carefully planned. This can be done by breaking the journey down into its parts and allowing a reasonable amount of time for each part. Then work back from the time of the appointment to calculate the latest time that you need to leave your house. Aim always to arrive at your appointments about ten minutes early and make allowance for any possible delays on the way.

Here is an example of a plan for a journey to an appointment with the Jobcentre.

- Time of appointment 10.30
- But I want to be ten minutes early 10.20
- The walk from the tube station to the Jobcentre is ten minutes 10.10
- The tube journey usually takes about 15 minutes (six stops) 09.55
- Allow ten minutes for delays on the tube 09.45

The walk to the tube station from my flat is about 15 minutes 09.30

Allowing five minutes to collect my things the latest time I need to leave the flat is: 09.25

If you are unsure about how long the journey will take and the appointment is really critical such as a court hearing or job interview then it is a good idea to plan to arrive an hour or so early and then go to Starbucks for a coffee while you are waiting.

Being punctual says a lot about you as a person. It demonstrates to other people that you are well organised and considerate to people. Being chronically late for all your appointments will send a very clear message that you are disorganised and will disrupt other people's schedules.

### **Using Lists**

Making a daily "To Do" list is a really useful way of remembering all the things we need to do during the day. Our memories are not that good that we can simply remember everything that needs to be done and if we don't make a list then things will surely get forgotten. It is a good idea to spend ten minutes each evening making a to do list for the next day. As well as simply stating each task that needs to be done, the list can also be arranged in order of priority giving the most important tasks first or alternatively priority tasks can be highlighted.

### **Multi-tasking: don't do it**

Multi-tasking or doing more than one thing at a time is seen by many people as the way to get more done. Many people think that good time management involves doing lots more stuff in the same amount of time. In fact it needn't be so. Trying to do too much is the enemy of good time management. Ultimately it will lead to jobs being left half done and never finished and jobs being done poorly.

In fact research in the US has shown that multi-tasking ultimately reduces the amount that we get done.<sup>2</sup> This is because it reduces the amount that we concentrate on each task. That is why talking on a mobile whilst driving has been banned. When we try to do two things at the same time we will end up doing both badly. In the end you will get more done if you concentrate on one task at a time.

### **Becoming more efficient: learning by reviewing and reflecting**

A vital part of good time management is to be doing only the things that we really need to do and to do them as well as we can. For this reason it is a good idea to spend some time each day reflecting on how things have gone during the day and how you could do things differently to make it better. This could usefully be done at the same time as you do tomorrow's to do list. Try to get some time on your own in a comfortable space to do this.

Don't use this exercise as an opportunity to beat yourself up either. If things haven't gone well for you during the day try to analyse the causes of the problems and if you do think that you could have done better then use this as an opportunity to learn and improve. Alternatively if things have gone well then make sure that you give yourself a good pat on the back.

### **References**

1. This advice sheet is based on the author's personal experiences.
2. Dodd P and Sundheim D, 2008, The 25 Best Time Management Tools and Techniques, Capstone, p73.