

Rocks in a Jar and...

You've probably seen the "rocks in a jar" presentation about time management. It's great for visualizing the need to prioritize what's important. The problem is that I think there was a lot they left out. Here are eleven things they didn't mention about the concept that can make us even better at managing our time.

Rocks in a Jar

"Rocks in a Jar" is a powerful time management concept that's been around for a while and popularized by Stephen Covey, author of [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). The story goes that a philosophy professor sets a large glass jar on a table in front of his students, then proceeds to fill it with fist-sized rocks.

He asks the class, "Is the jar full?" They agree that it is. Then he produces a bowl of pebbles and pours them into the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks. He repeats his question.

Warier now, the students are less willing to agree the jar is full. The professor then pours sand into the jar, which fills the remaining space among the rocks and pebbles.

The professor concludes by telling his class that the jar represents the time each of us has in a day. The large rocks represent the most important things in life like family, health, and relationships. The pebbles constitute other important but less meaningful things like work and school. The sand represents everything else – unimportant distractions.

If we put the sand and pebbles into the jar first, there won't be enough room to fit the larger, more important things. But if we are smart and put the rocks in first, all the less important things will naturally fall into place around them, and there will be room (and time) for everything.

In application then, scrolling through social media and binging on Netflix should only come after we meet that family commitment, or take the next step on that work project, not before. For a fuller recap of this idea, here is a two-minute **video** version.

It's visually compelling, but like any metaphor, there are aspects to it that are over-simplified or carry deeper significance. Here are eleven things in the rocks in a jar demonstration that they didn't talk about that we should keep in mind when we try to manage our time.

Things They Don't Talk About

1) **We are stuck inside the jar.**

For the demonstration, we're on the outside looking in. The reality is that we live inside the jar. At very close range a pebble can look a lot like a rock, it may be hard to tell when the jar is overflowing, and sand, just like at the beach, has a way of getting all over everything.

To gain perspective, we have to deliberately pause, mentally separate ourselves from the stuff around us, and make an assessment. One way is to track where our time goes in 15-minute increments for a few days (be honest!). Compare the time spent on rocks vs. sand. The results might surprise you.

2) It is our jar.

In its rigidity and fragility, it's an apt vessel to represent our time. We can't expand the jar, and if we try to cram too much in, we risk breaking it. The jar itself deserves care and consideration as the precious resource that it is. There are plenty of people who will happily put rocks in our jar for us, but in the end, it is *our* jar, and we get to choose what goes in.

3) Rocks are heavy.

It's not just about the space the rocks occupy, shape and weight matter, too. Carelessly drop in a sharp, heavy rock and the jar breaks. Just as we should carefully select and place our rock in the bottom of the jar, we should carefully identify and define what that priority item is that we want to devote time to.

What exactly does it mean to "stay fit" or have a "healthy relationship" with my spouse? How do I know when I am achieving that? The better we form and define the rocks in our jar, the more we'll know about how much space they will take and what's left for other things.

4) It cannot be all rocks.

In one version of the demonstration I watched, the facilitator had about fifteen rocks. If we follow the example and have fifteen priorities, we really haven't prioritized at all, and we risk doing what this whole demonstration is supposed to help us avoid. We have to limit the rocks to just a few and focus first on them.

5) Sand is not always sand.

Many of the "rocks in a jar" posts list 'email' as an example of the kind of sand that distracts us, but a sweeping categorization like that is dangerous. Email notes from our spouse, or from the boss might actually be part of a rock, and we'll pay a price for continually shunting those aside. Likewise, something that seems trivial now can blossom (or erupt!) into something much more substantial in the future, depending on how we deal with it now. It can help to consider how each task or action relates to the rocks before we decide how to prioritize it.

6) He had all the rocks.

Like one of those cooking videos where ingredients are pre-measured and waiting in beautiful little bowls, the professor had all his rocks, pebbles, and sand pre-arranged for the demonstration. But that's not how life comes at us. Pebbles come and go; rocks are added and sometimes removed; we are swimming in sand. It is never all going to fit the way it does in the demonstration.

In making our time decisions, it can be helpful to think about what we would prefer to leave on the table when we pick up the jar: sand, or a rock? When a new pebble appears, we have to be ready to scoop out some sand.

7) Watch for the Kryptonite.

If we're not careful, some of the rocks and stones can turn out to be bad for us, the way Kryptonite is to Superman. Allowing them into the jar poisons everything else. Things like unhealthy relationships, toxic work environments, or unethical behaviors sap our strength and absorb time that we could otherwise devote to things that should matter more. Inspect closely before adding anything to the jar: is this a healthy place to invest my time, or does it belong in the jar at all?

8) Our jar is not transparent.

Clear glass works well for the demonstration so students can see what is going on, but our real jar is opaque. People can't look at us and immediately understand our priorities. The only way others will know and can help support us in focusing on our priorities is by what they see us do and what they hear us say. If we want to get outside support, it can help to talk about what we're focused on and ask for help.

9) They do not show all the other jars.

The demonstration is done with one jar representing one person's time, but that's not how life works. It's lots of people with lots of jars, and the stuff inside them interacts, but doesn't always align. What looks like sand in mine (*another email!*) might be connected to a rather large pebble in yours (*major project*). To help with prioritization, it can help to think about the person connected to a task, and not just the task itself.

Rocks in a Jar – The Takeaway

The Rocks in a Jar metaphor is a good way to help us visualize the limited time we have and think about how best to invest it. At the end of the day, we want to be able to look back and feel good about having accomplished something meaningful, not just filling the available time with busyness.

To do that, we have to think intentionally about what rocks to carefully place into our jar, and make sure that they go in first. Then we should be selective about what other pebbles and sand we allow in – not all are the same.

With that, I'll leave you with two other thoughts about this demonstration worth mentioning:

10) The jar is already full.

In this metaphorical exercise we get wrapped up with trying to cram as much as will fit into the jar, but in reality, it's full before we even begin – full of air. The goal is not necessarily to fill the jar with stuff and squeeze all the air out. We need room to breathe, too. Leave room for a quiet walk, some guiltless relaxation, some quality sleep, or a chance to be spontaneous.

11) You can dump out the jar.

However, we choose to fill our jar, that's not the end of the story; more like just one chapter. When life happens, or circumstances change, it's ok to dump out the jar, take some time to reflect, and start again.

In fact, we should probably examine the contents regularly.

What's in your jar?