

The Importance of Being on Time

The life of George Washington was characterized by a scrupulous regard for punctuality.

When he asked a man to bring by some horses, he was interested in buying at five in the morning, and the man arrived fifteen minutes late, he was told by the stable groom that the general had been waiting there at five, but had now moved on to other business, and that he wouldn't be able to examine the horses again until the following week.

When he told Congress that he'd meet with them at noon, he could almost always be found striding into the chamber just as the clock was striking twelve.

Washington's promptness extended to his mealtimes as well. He ate dinner each day at exactly 4 o'clock, and when he invited members of Congress to dine with him, and they arrived late, they were often surprised to find the president halfway done with his meal or even pushing back from the table. To his startled, tardy guest he would say, "We are punctual here. My cook never asks whether the company has arrived, but *whether the hour has come.*"

And when Washington's secretary arrived late to a meeting, and blamed his watch for his tardiness, Washington quietly replied, "Then you must get another watch, or I another secretary."

George Washington's passion for punctuality was born from his youthful study of "The Rules of Civility" – his repeated copying of maxims like "*Undertake not what you cannot Perform but be Careful to keep your Promise.*" For Washington, being on time was a way of showing respect to others, and he expected to be treated with the same level of respect in return.

We may no longer live in an age of knickers and powdered wigs but being punctual is just as important as it ever was. It has been called "a homely, but solid virtue," and it certainly doesn't cause one's breast to swell in the way that pondering courage or resolution does. But related as punctuality is to discipline and self-mastery, to integrity and respect, it is – if not particularly sexy – still an essential component of the character of an upstanding man.

Today we'll explore why this is so, and then on Wednesday we'll cover why some men struggle with being on time despite their best efforts, along with tips on how to overcome the habit of always being late.

Why Is Being Punctual Important?

"The habit of being prompt once formed extends to everything — meeting friends, paying debts, going to church, reaching and leaving place of business, keeping promises, retiring at night and rising in the morning, going to the lecture and town-meeting, and, indeed, to every relation and act, however trivial it may seem to observers." –William Makepeace Thayer, *Tact and Grit*, 1882

The importance of punctuality is not universal and varies from culture to culture. In some places like Latin America and the Pacific Islands, life moves at a different pace and meeting times are meant to be fuzzy. But this does not negate the value of punctuality to a man living in a culture that does

define being on time more strictly, just as the well-rounded man of the West seeks competence in things like shaking hands, wearing a tie, working out with a kettlebell, and holding open doors for women, even if such things are not practiced the world over.

Here's why.

"I have always been a quarter of an hour before my time, and it has made a man of me." -Horatio, Lord Nelson

Why Punctuality is Important

1. **Being punctual strengthens and reveals your integrity.**

If you tell someone that you will meet them at a certain time, you have essentially made them a promise. And if you say you'll be there at 8:00, and yet arrive at 8:15, you have essentially broken that promise. Being on time shows others that *you are a man of your word*.

2. **Being punctual shows, you are dependable.**

Punctuality demonstrates you're reliable. A man can always be found at his post, carrying out the duties needful for that time. People know they can rely on such a man – if he says he will be there, he'll be there. But if a man is not punctual, others cannot depend on him — they do not know where he will be when they need him. His associates will begin to feel he cannot organize his own time, and these doubts will seep into matters beyond the clock, as it naturally raises the question: *"If he is careless about time, what else is he careless about?"*

Benjamin Franklin once said to an employee who was chronically late, but always ready with an excuse: *"I have generally found that the man who is good at an excuse is good for nothing else."*

3. **Being punctual builds your self-confidence.**

Showing up on time not only tells other people you are dependable, it teaches you that you can depend on yourself. The more you keep the promises you make, the more your self-confidence will grow. And the more you gain in self-mastery, the less you will be at the mercy of your compulsions and habits, and the more in control of your life you will feel.

4. **Being punctual assures you're at your best.**

After riding someone's bumper, speeding like a maniac, scanning for cops, and cursing at red lights, it's hard to then turn your focus to making a presentation at a meeting or charming a date – you're shaky and depleted from the adrenaline and stress. But when you show up on time, better yet a little early, you have a few minutes to collect your thoughts, review your materials, and get your game face on.

“Soldiers should be minutemen. Punctuality is one of the most valuable habits a soldier can possess.”
—Christopher Columbus Andrews, *Hints to Company Officers on Their Military Duties*, 1863

5. Being punctual builds and reveals your discipline.

The punctual man shows that he can organize his time, that he pays attention to details, and that he can put aside *this* to do *that* – he can set aside a pleasure to take care of business.

“‘There is great dignity in being waited for,’ said one who was in this habit, and who had not much of which he need be vain, unless it was this want of promptness.” –John Todd, *The Students Manual*, 1854

6. Being punctual shows your humility.

That bumper sticker maxim: “Always late, but worth the wait” shows that tardiness and an overestimation of one’s worth sometimes go hand in hand. People will be glad to see you when you arrive, but they would have been gladder still had you come on time.

7. Being punctual shows your respect for others.

Being chronically late is a selfish act, for it puts your needs above another’s. You want an extra minute to do what you’d like, but in gaining that minute for yourself, you take a minute from another, which is why....

8. Being late is a form of stealing.

That’s a tough truth, but it’s a truth, nonetheless. When you make others wait for you, you rob minutes from them that they’ll never get back. Time they could have turned into money, or simply used for the things important to them. In coming to meet you at the agreed upon hour, they may have made sacrifices – woken up early, cut short their workout, told their kid they couldn’t read a story together – and your lateness negates those sacrifices. If you wouldn’t think of taking ten dollars from another man’s wallet, you shouldn’t think of stealing ten minutes from him either. Being punctual *shows you value time* yourself, and thus wouldn’t think of depriving others of this precious, but limited resource.

“It has been said that time is money. That proverb understates the case. Time is a great deal more than money. If you have time, you can obtain money—usually. But though you have the wealth of a cloak-room attendant at the Carlton Hotel, you cannot buy yourself a minute more time than I have, or the cat by the fire has.” –Arnold Bennett, *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, 1910

9. Being chronically late disturbs the experiences of other people.

Your tardiness not only robs others of their time, but of the fullness of their experiences as well. The student who interrupts a professor in the middle of his lecture; the family which climbs over you to get to their seats at the middle of the row in the theater; the man who opens the creaky door in the middle of a eulogy. When an old man was once asked why he

had been so punctual in arriving at his church on time for decades, he replied, “*I made it my religion not to disturb the religion of others.*”

10. Being late strains your relationships.

When you're late in meeting other people, it makes them feel under-valued, that whatever you couldn't pull yourself away from was more important or that they didn't mean enough to you to warrant allotting sufficient time to arrive on schedule. The guest who flies in to see you feels like a dope standing at the airport alone, your date feels awkward sitting at the restaurant by herself, and your child feels abandoned as she waits with her teacher for you to arrive, all the other children having already been picked up from school.

11. Being late hurts your professional career.

Whether you're an employee or in business for yourself, being late can hinder your professional success. Many companies have strict policies about punctuality — get a few write-ups and you're gone. Of course, if you arrive late to the job interview, you probably won't land the position in the first place. And if you're trying to win over a new client, arriving ten minutes late isn't going to get things off on the right foot, in the same way that promising to get something to him by a certain date and then failing to do so, may have him looking elsewhere for your services.

12. Being late takes a toll on your life.

Always running behind simply hurts you in all areas of your life. It results in lost opportunities: missing a plane, missing a meeting, missing an important part of a lecture, missing a wedding. It creates stress and can lead to car accidents and traffic tickets. It results in embarrassment and forces you to come up with excuses for why you're late, putting a strain on your honesty. Basically, it makes your life more complicated; for men seeking to *simplify* their lives, cultivating punctuality is an essential part of that path.

A Man Is Punctual:

The Reasons You're Late and How to Always Be on Time

Being punctual is a skill any man can master; it doesn't take any special talents or abilities. But even if you feel it's an important trait to develop, you may still struggle with being on time and find the habit of always running late extremely difficult to overcome. Each time you're tardy, you re-commit to becoming more punctual, and yet soon find yourself running behind once again. Why is this?

It's not strictly a matter of one's busyness; the busiest people are often the most punctual, while those with the least to do sometimes struggle the most with being on time. It's also not that late people don't set aside enough time to arrive on schedule; even when they give themselves more time, they simply end up taking more time, and still arrive late. And contrary to the popular

conception of later-comers as lazy slackers who willfully disregard the needs of others, most folks who struggle with being late *do* want to be punctual. But telling themselves to “just do it” isn’t effective, as there are often deeper, unconscious issues and motivations at work.

Those who are consistently late, may tend to:

1. Misperceive the passage of time.

Studies show that people who are consistently late underestimate how much time has passed. So, for example, you need to be somewhere at noon and start getting ready at 11:15, thinking you have plenty of time. You’re dawdling in the bathroom, feeling like about 20 minutes have elapsed, but when you stick your head out the door to look at the clock, you’re surprised to see it’s actually 11:45, and begin running around in a panic, trying to get out the door.

2. Underestimate how long things will take.

Those who are consistently late typically underestimate how long it will take to do something, even when there’s plenty of evidence to the contrary...since they do that thing every single day, and it always takes longer than they think it will. What happens to the man who is not punctual is that they get stuck on the best time they ever did something in, even if it was an anomaly. For example, once when you went into work on a holiday, and there was little traffic, and you caught almost every green light, it took you 12 minutes to get there. So now whenever you think of how long it will take to get to work, 12 minutes is sealed in your mind. And yet day after day your commute takes 17-20 minutes. And thus day after day you’re about five minutes late to work.

3. Engage in “magical thinking.”

When it comes to time, the unpunctual are perennial optimists. They believe they can do a whole bunch of things in a limited amount of time, or that each thing won’t take as long as it really will. This kind of magical thinking is sometimes the product of an indulged childhood, which gave them the idea that all things are possible if you believe they are, and that the natural laws of time and space that restrain others don’t apply to them. They see the world as they want it to be, not as it is. Being punctual involves trade-offs – I’ve got to stop doing *that* and start doing *this*, but magical thinkers want to have it all.

4. Procrastinate in general.

People who struggle with being late, are often prone to procrastination in all areas of their lives. This may be because they are more easily distracted than others, need a deadline to get motivated, and/or enjoy the “rush” of trying to beat the clock.

5. Be easily distracted.

Those who are easily distracted have difficulty being punctual because on the way from point A to point B, they get pulled into point C. You're headed out the door and figure it wouldn't hurt to check your email before you go, and then as you check your email, you decide to check Facebook too, and before you know it, ten minutes have slipped away.

6. Need an external deadline to get motivated.

Some people feel they work best under pressure and can't get going until a deadline is looming. At which point they go into mildly panicked, hyper-drive mode.

7. Enjoy the satisfaction of rushing to beat the clock.

For those who are easily bored, enjoy taking risks, and seek bouts of intense stimulation, the rush to beat the clock can feel like an exciting race. A dump of adrenaline makes you feel alert and purposeful – your focus narrows to solving this one problem: how to get where you're going punctually. It can feel like the overtime period of an important game: it's down to the wire and the stakes are high. When you win, it's terribly thrilling and oh-so-satisfying. But just like a game, you can *lose* too: you forget your homework assignment, give a frazzled presentation at work, or leave your kid waiting at the curb. Those who are late because they enjoy the rush of trying to beat the clock subconsciously set their own fires to then enjoy the thrill of trying to put them out.

8. Feel anxiety.

Studies have shown that folks who struggle with late tend to be more anxious in general than other people. They may use the rush described above as a way to keep themselves from thinking about their nervousness. If you're worried about how things are going to go when you meet someone or have to make a presentation, running late takes your mind off what's to come and focuses it only on trying to make it there punctually.

9. Desire to feel special/unique.

This person may view punctuality as the mark of a conformist, mediocre life. If you don't have the life, you've always wanted, being late can provide a tiny bulwark against feeling like you've settled down too much. It's a small way of feeling like you're different, that you're not one of the crowd and march to your own beat, even if most of the other areas of your life are otherwise very conventional.

10. Engage in passive-aggressive rebellion.

Often raised by strict, controlling parents, this man tends to constantly feel as though people are breathing down his neck, and so haphazardly rebels against any rules, even reasonable ones, even ones he willingly agreed to himself. When he finds himself in a situation he dislikes, he is unable to make his needs known and to openly confront the problem, and thus

feels powerless to change it. He resorts to rebelling in little ways like being late, in order to maintain a sense of being in charge of his life.

11. Desire to feel powerful.

Some men get a kick out of people waiting for them. It stokes their ego and gives them a sense of control, oftentimes when they lack a feeling of power in other areas of their lives.

How to Break Out of the Unpunctual Habit: Tips for Always Arriving on Time

If you struggle with the habit of consistently being late, hopefully you can now see that the cause of your habit may be deeper and more difficult to shake than you realized (and that if you have an unpunctual loved one, you should be patient and charitable with them). With any habit we fall into, our mind does a (typically unconscious) cost/benefit analysis and decides one course of action is more beneficial than another. So, in breaking an old habit, it's crucial to identify and cultivate a benefit of the new behavior. Here are some ways to do that, along with other tips for helping you perceive time more accurately, short-circuit magical thinking about the clock, and always get where you're going on time:

1. Own up to problem.

When someone knows something is right and wants to do it, but fails at doing so, they often resort to rationalizations in order to soothe the dissonance between who they want to be and how they actually act. In the case of the not punctual man, this takes the form of deciding that being punctual isn't very important anyway, or that people who expect punctuality are unreasonably uptight, or in excusing their lateness by blaming certain circumstances...even if they face those same circumstances every single day. So, the first step in overcoming lateness is to quit the rationalizations and take responsibility for the problem.

2. Redefine punctuality as a matter of integrity.

It's easiest to reach a goal when you feel a strong sense of purpose and motivation in doing so. So, stop thinking of being punctual as something your mom or school teacher arbitrarily asked of you, and start viewing it as a matter of integrity — a way of keeping your promises and becoming a man of your word. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes and imagine the inconvenience your lateness will cause them. Once you form an inner conviction about the importance of punctuality, you can move from relying on *external* motivation (deadlines), to *inner* motivation (excellence).

3. Start taking note of the benefits of being punctual.

Remember, you need to replace the benefit you were getting from the old habit of being late (the rush of beating the clock, the feeling of being special, etc.), with a new one for being punctual. So, start taking note of the benefits of being punctual. These can be things like the

satisfaction of self-mastery, increasing your sense of confidence and control of your life, and the respect you get from others for being reliable.

4. Learn to make your needs known and don't rebel against something you freely chose yourself.

If there's something onerous about various situations in your life, then it's up to you to make your needs known and to leave or change the situation, instead of passively rebelling through arriving late. Honestly assess the situation: if you willingly agreed to being punctual for a job or something else, then why are you rebelling? If you don't like the job, then find another, and if you do like it, then keep your promise to arrive on time.

5. See yourself as part of a team.

There are times when you want to be a fully autonomous man, and times when it's helpful to see yourself as having a role in making something great. When you meet your wife on time for a date night dinner, you contribute to making the evening a relaxing and enjoyable one.

6. Work on your powers of concentration.

If you're often late because you have trouble staying on task with what you need to be doing to get somewhere on time, building up your mental discipline and ability to focus can help a great deal. A powerful way to do this is through daily meditation. We'll also have a post in a couple of weeks with some simple concentration exercises you can do to strengthen your attention muscle.

7. Find more constructive ways of getting your adrenaline rush and feeling special.

If you never leave enough time to get somewhere because you love the drama and excitement of trying to "beat the buzzer," you may want to assess the number of thrills in your life. Because while it's very understandable to like that feeling, it's really kind of a sad way to get your jollies, isn't it? Even when you "win," the only reward is...not being late. Instead, look to incorporate other activities into your life that involve risk and get your adrenaline going, but that don't inconvenience other people and torpedo your personal and professional success for no good reason, and may even make you a better man at the same time.

Similarly, always being late in order to avoid feeling "ordinary" or "conformist," is a rather impoverished attempt at feeling like an individual. After all, there's nothing unique about being selfish. Work on creating the life you want and following your passion if you truly want to break away from the crowd.

8. Redefine your concept of "wasted" time.

If you're someone who doesn't like to arrive even a minute early because you feel *waiting* time is *wasted* time – either because it's boring or you could have been doing something else you like

– redefine wasted time as your *guilt-free, luxury time*. In our madcap lives, it's hard to break off from work-related tasks, and just do something totally unnecessary, or something pleasurable and enjoyable that is work-related or tied to backburner goals that you can never seem to find time for. Whenever you're early and waiting for someone, let that be the time to do those things. Read a book or magazine. Play Angry Birds. Jot down some figures. Contemplate an idea. Relax and just think. Waiting time may become something you truly look forward to – the new benefit to replace the old one you got from running late. You may even come to find yourself disappointed when you don't get to wait!

In order for this tactic to work, you should always bring a book, pen, or notebook with you, so you can bust them out during your guilt-free enjoyment time. Of course, your phone does most of these functions too, and you'll probably have it with you most of the time.

9. Always shoot to arrive 15 minutes early.

There's an old expression that if you're on time, you're late. The rule of men like Vince Lombardi and Horatio Nelson was to always aim to arrive 15 minutes early. Half the time, you'll run into unexpected trouble — traffic, difficulty finding the building or a parking space — and end up right on time anyway. And the other half of the time, when you do arrive 15 minutes early, you'll have a quarter of an hour to do something enjoyable or to get extra prepared for the meeting or interview.

Now it's important to note that there are times when you do not want to be early and may even wish to arrive a little late.

For example, when picking up a date, aim to arrive right on time or a minute or two after; your date may plan on using every minute up until you said you'd be there to get ready, and you don't want to make her awkwardly answer the door in her bathrobe. And when it comes to things like dinner parties, people are generally expected to be a tad late; it gives the hostess a little extra time to finish up her preparations. I saw some comments in Monday's post to the effect that you should arrive to a dinner party 15 minutes late, but personally I think that's too much; 5-10 is appropriate. After ten minutes a hostess will begin to wonder where you are, and if the hostess' food was done when the scheduled time arrived, the fact that it has been cooling for 15 minutes will begin to worry her.

Basically, the rule to follow here is that *if arriving early will cause others to feel awkward and/or force them to turn their attention to entertaining you when they have other preparations to make*, arrive on time or a little after.

10. Correct your magical thinking and misperceptions about time.

As we mentioned above, oftentimes those who struggle with being late feel that time moves slower than it does, or that they can get done more in a period of time than they realistically can. If you fall into this category, here are some ways you can train your mind to think more accurately about time:

Make a chart of how long you think many of your daily tasks take you.

Write down things like:

- Get ready in morning: 20 minutes
- Eat breakfast: 15 minutes
- Drive to work: 9 minutes
- Drive from work to gym: 15 minutes
- Workout at gym: 45 minutes

After you make your list, get a timer (or timer watch) and a notebook and carry both around with you during the day. Write down how long each activity actually takes. Do this for a full week – any one day could be an anomaly. At the end of the week, compare your estimations of how long your daily activities take with how long they *actually* took. Average the actual times for each task together, and then, moving forward, allot yourself that amount of time each day to complete the task. Remember, if you end up with extra time, you can use that time to do something enjoyable. You should post a chart of how long your daily activities take in a place where you can see it often. These realistic times will come to replace the inaccurate, idealized times that were stuck in your head.

1. Organize your time with a daily planner.

When your plans for the day are vague and fuzzy, you end up spending too little time on some things and too much on others, and inevitably struggle to catch up and get things done on schedule. Instead, plan out what you're going to do each hour of the day, and how long you plan to spend on each task.

2. Use a timer to stay on track.

Set a countdown timer, with a large display you can read from across the room, with how long you want to spend on each activity; this will help keep you on track. If it has a feature where it gives you a five minute/one minute warning, all the better. If you're often late because you're prone to distraction, look for a timer that beeps at intervals as well; when you hear the beep, take a moment to assess whether you're on track with what you're supposed to be doing or have drifted off.

3. Keep a clock in every room, even in the shower.

A clock will keep you situated with where you are in time. However, I don't recommend the common tactic of setting your clock slightly ahead, on the theory that it will spur you into greater urgency. Your mind will simply begin to accommodate the extra time into its calculations, and you'll be just as late as you were before.

4.Keep things in set places.

When you get home, put your keys on a hook inside the door. Put your cell phone, wallet, and other pocket contents in a dresser valet (ideally with a charger so your phone is ready to go in the morning) or box. That way, when you're going out the door the next day, you won't be late because you had to rush all over the house like a mad man looking for your keys.

5.Leave important items by the door.

If you have special things you need to remember to bring with you — homework, documents, samples, tools, whatever — put them right by the door through which you'll exit in the morning, so you'll practically trip over them on your way out. You can also put them in a plastic grocery bag that you hang from the doorknob.