

TECHNOLOGY

Time Confetti and the Broken Promise of Leisure

By **Ashley Whillans**

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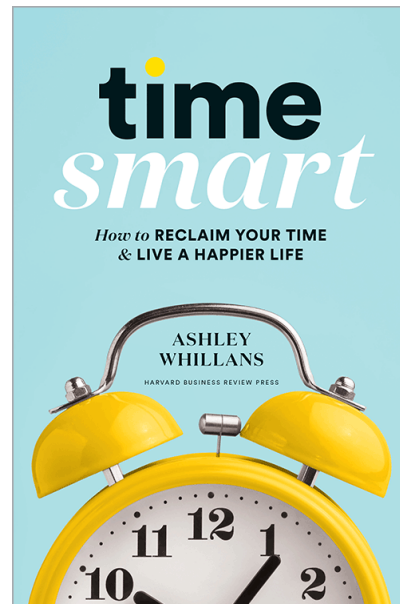
Image Adapted from [Thomas Renaud/Unsplash](#) & [Elena Koycheva/Unsplash](#)

It's true: we have more time for leisure than we did fifty years ago. But leisure has never been less relaxing, mostly because of the disintermediating effects of our screens. Technology saves us time, but it also takes it away. This is known as the autonomy paradox. We adopt mobile technologies to gain autonomy over when and how long we work, yet, ironically, we end up working all the time. Long blocks of free time we used to enjoy are now interrupted constantly by our smart watches, phones, tablets, and laptops.

This situation taxes us cognitively, and fragments our leisure time in a way that makes it hard to use this time for something that will relieve stress or make us happy. I (and other researchers) call this phenomenon *time confetti* (a term coined by [Brigid Schulte](#)), which amounts to little bits of seconds and minutes lost to unproductive multitasking. Each bit alone seems not very bad.

Collectively, though, all that confetti adds up to something more pernicious than you might expect.

To get a sense of how you shred your time, consider this simple calculation. You have one hour of leisure at 7 p.m. During that hour, you receive two emails, check both, and respond to one; four Twitter notifications about useless pontificating or terrible people saying terrible things, and you thumb through the replies for one of them; three Slack notifications from colleagues asking you questions or a favor, of which you answer one and ignore two; one alarm reminding you to call your mother tomorrow on her birthday; and four texts from a friend trying to make plans for next weekend, all four of which you reply to.



Each event in itself is mundane and takes only seconds. But collectively they create two negative effects. The first is the sheer volume of time they take away from your hour, as shown in the table below.

Activity	Seconds used
Check 2 emails	30
Respond to 1 email	30
Check 4 Twitter notifications	45
Check replies to 1 Twitter notification	30
Check 3 Slack notifications	30
Reply to 1 Slack notification	45
Check 1 alarm reminder	10
Check 4 texts	40
Reply to 4 texts	120
Total pieces of time graffiti	Total time used
21	6m20s

A few seemingly harmless interruptions usurp 10 percent of this leisure time. Research shows that our estimates of the number and nature of these interruptions is conservative, so typically it may be worse than this.

The second, more invasive effect of time confetti is the way it fragments the hour of leisure. It's most likely that these interruptions are randomly distributed throughout the hour. To show how, I group these interruptions into five events—email, Twitter, Slack, alarm, and texts—and randomly distribute them throughout the hour.

When we do this, that free hour turns from the image shown in Figure 1-1 into something more like one of the images in Figure 1-2.

FIGURE 1-1

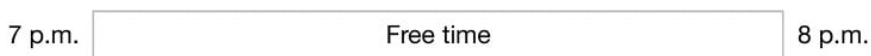
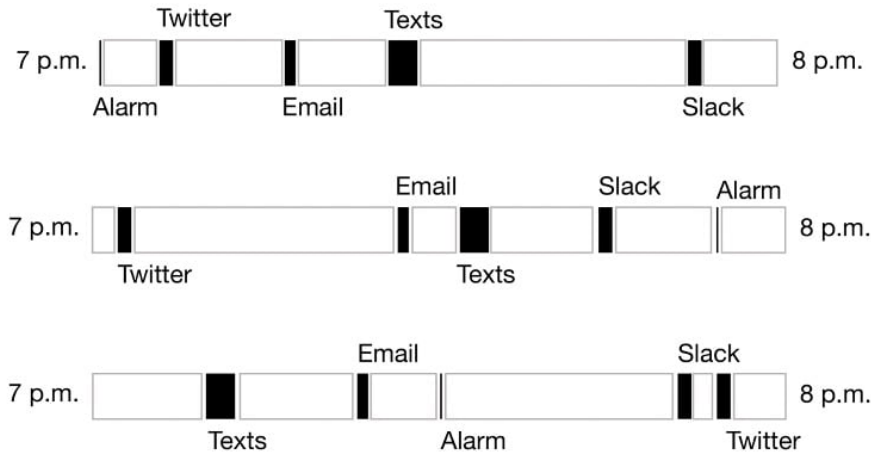


FIGURE 1-2



In each case, the hour of leisure becomes several smaller chunks, sometimes only five or six minutes long. Even if you're disciplined about not responding or not responding very quickly, the interruptions undermine the quality of those smaller, less predictable chunks of leisure time by reminding you of all the activities that you *could* or *should* be doing.

We used to enjoy the gym. Now we one-handedly type out a reply to the boss while trying not to fall off the treadmill. We used to have uninterrupted family dinners. Now we have hushed phone calls over cold meals. We used to have relaxing picnics. Now we have phone meetings in “private” park-side bathroom stalls. We carry the office in our back pockets, making it difficult to disconnect. Many people have admitted to checking work email after 10 p.m., during school plays, weddings, meals, “intimate encounters,” and even while their wives are in labor.

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When we try to enjoy a birthday dinner, notifications about our friends' tropical vacation photos make our pasta taste less delicious. When we try to choose a restaurant for our next date, the endless ocean of reviews and ratings leads us to spend more time choosing our meals than savoring them. When we try to have meaningful time off with friends and family, our alerts from work create guilt and dread over what we're not getting done.

Thinking about work while trying to relax induces panic, because feelings of time poverty are caused by how well activities fit together in our mind. If we are trying to be a committed parent while our work email goes off, we can't help thinking we should be working on our next deadline instead of being present with our child. This conflict makes us feel like a bad parent ("Why am I thinking about work while trying to hang out with my kid?") *and* a bad employee ("Am I hanging out with my kids too much? Will that promotion go to someone else?").

It also takes time to cognitively recover from shifting our minds away from the present to some other stress-inducing activity. People end up enjoying their free time less and, when asked to reflect on it, estimate that they had less free time than they actually did. That's how invasive the technology time trap is: time confetti makes us feel even more time impoverished than we actually are.

Overcoming time traps

We all have the power to overcome the time traps we have fallen victim to. As with efforts to get fit, increasing your time affluence requires taking small, deliberate steps each day to enjoy your free time (and have more of it). And like getting fit, it's not easy at first. Both society and our psychology conspire against us to make the traps extremely appealing.

I am an expert on this topic. I spend most of my days writing, talking about, and researching the importance of having free time—and I am still somewhat time poor. I struggle to protect my free time as much as I should. The one time that I was spotted enjoying myself on vacation my friend posted a photo of me on

social media with the caption, “Proof you sometimes do stuff outside of the office!” This post was my most “liked” last year (groan).

If we are trying to be a committed parent while our work email goes off, we can't help thinking we should be working on our next deadline. This conflict makes us feel like a bad parent *and* a bad employee.

Keeping the exercise metaphor going, just as you shouldn't punish yourself for not being perfect in your workout habits, don't ever beat yourself up about being bad at prioritizing time. Remember, multiple forces are making it difficult. We don't naturally respond to time poverty in a way that controls it. Actually, when we feel busy, studies show that we start taking on *more* tasks. A roommate of mine during final exams in college was so anxious about studying for tests that he decided to take on more shifts at work and obsessively run errands. He cooked and concocted new protein shake recipes, usurping time he could have used to study and reinforcing the cycle. Stress spurs busyness, which creates stress, which spurs busyness.

A friend pointed out that this behavior is the diet equivalent of saying, “Wow, I feel fat—time to have another burger.” In contrast to this example, there's an absurd logic at play here. When we feel time poor, we take on small, easy-to-complete tasks because they help us feel more control over our time. We think, *There! I made a protein shake and finished that errand. I'm getting stuff done!* In this case, it's a false sense of control that doesn't alleviate the root cause of our busyness.

Time poverty feels the same for everyone, but time affluence looks different for everyone. It could mean spending fifteen more minutes strumming the guitar instead of scrolling through your phone, or it could be ten minutes of meditation, or a Saturday morning learning how to invest your savings instead of slacking about work gossip. No matter what time affluence looks like for you, the happiest and most time affluent among us are deliberate with their free time. Working toward time affluence is about recognizing and overcoming the

time traps in our lives and intentionally carving out happier and more meaningful moments each day.

Adapted from [Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life](#) by Ashley Whillans. Published by Harvard Business Review Press September 2020. Copyright © 2020 by Ashley Whillans. All rights reserved.



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Further Reading & Resources

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 - Howe, L. C., Whillans, A., & Menges, J. I. (2020). How to (Actually) Save Time When You're Working Remotely. *Harvard Business Review*. ([Link](#))
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