

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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“I’m always late, I’m always late, and it’s not because I procrastinate.”

– The White Rabbit in
Alice in Wonderland (the play)

Some of us have a pattern of being late for appointments, social events, classes, and project deadlines. No matter how hard we try, no matter how strong our resolve to be on time, it just doesn’t happen. We are always late. Researchers estimate that 15 to 20 percent of the population is afflicted with chronic tardiness. Thankfully, with some self-examination, motivation, and practice, people who suffer from this affliction can deal with it successfully and learn to be on time.

The problem of tardiness affects all portions of the population equally – young and old, male and female, the wealthy and the poor. Research shows that people who are chronically late score lower on tests that measure nurturance, self-esteem, and self-discipline, and score higher on measures of anxiety and distractibility. Another finding from research is that people who are consistently late underestimate the passage of time.

If you are a late-comer to appointments, you are probably familiar with the embarrassment you feel when people, all of whom seem to be able to get there before you, begin to see you as a problem. You know well the jolt of anxiety that comes as you walk into a room late and notice glances between those who have arrived on time, and perhaps the dreaded rolling of eyes. You know the humiliation of being the target for someone’s sarcasm – “Well, we’re glad you could join us.” You know the experience of making up excuses. “The traffic held me up.” “I had to take an important phone call and the other person wouldn’t stop talking.”



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A career U.S. Army officer, retiring as a full colonel, Dr. David commanded units of 800 men and women. He headed the U.S. Army’s Family Support Center Program at 165 locations world-wide and was chief operating officer of a clinical service in a major medical center.

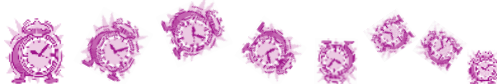
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“I had a family emergency.” “I couldn’t find my keys.” But the excuses only work a few times – and then the raw truth sets in. People learn not to take you seriously because, frankly, they feel that you don’t take them seriously. If you did, you would be there on time. People can see through the excuses, especially if these excuses are part of a repetitive pattern, and they resent being misled. Chronic tardiness affects not only the way others see you, but also the way in which you see yourself. It compromises your integrity.

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Our culture encourages tight schedules and gives time-liness a high priority. Industrialized nations value productivity, discipline, achievement, and the coordination of activities. North Americans, the Japanese, the Swiss, and the Germans all place a high value on being on time. To deviate from these values is to invite resistance from others. These values are not universally found across all cultures, however. Indeed, in some less technologically advanced societies, there is a different concept of time, and their languages don’t provide words for hours, minutes and seconds. Hispanic societies traditionally have a siesta time during the afternoon – a couple of hours to take a nap. And even in England, there was historically a time for a leisurely afternoon cup of tea, although this custom is fading as the British become more highly scheduled. In some societies, being “on time” is defined flexibly. Invite people to your dinner party at 7:00, and expect them to start rolling in at 8:00 or 9:00. This would hardly work, however, in our society, where everything moves like clockwork.

Experts recognize that the problem of tardiness usually has no single or simple cause. Instead, it is a symptom of complex underlying issues that often manifest themselves in other areas of the person’s life as well. Several causes of chronic lateness have been identified, and most people find that two or more of these conditions account for their consistent tardiness. Consider the following causes of tardiness to see if you can come up with a strategy for understanding and dealing with the problem.



RATIONALIZING LATENESS

Many people with a lateness problem rationalize it away – they come up with an explanation for their lack of punctuality every time. The explanations might focus on external circumstances, like the traffic. Or they might blame the other person (“Gee, I was only fifteen minutes late. So why is this person so angry with me? This other person must really have a problem with their anger.”). Or they might engage in denial (“Yes, I know I’m late this time, but I don’t really have a problem.”). They may even minimize the seriousness of the problem (“Sure, I know I was half an hour late for my presentation and people had to wait, but they probably didn’t mind. After all, we need to be flexible.”).

Unfortunately, rationalizing the problem away by finding excuses prevents you from addressing the difficulty and making headway in correcting it. By using rationalization to deal with the anxiety you might otherwise feel when you are late, you blind yourself to the impact your lateness has on other people. And it leads to a distorted definition of yourself – by rationalizing, you will continue to think of yourself as a thoughtful, considerate person, even though your behavior indicates exactly the opposite, especially to other people. Rationalizing prevents us from seeing the reality of a situation.

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TOO MUCH TO DO

Our society places a great premium on staying busy. Busy people are seen as more productive and successful. You may believe that you must be productive at all times and that if you are not busy, you must be wasting time. You try to squeeze as many activities as possible into the time you have available. To arrive early for a meeting or appointment would mean just sitting there, doing nothing, and that would be unacceptable. So you strive to

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arrive exactly on time – but then you find several little jobs to do before you leave the house (taking out the garbage, sweeping the front porch, watering the seedlings). And your plan to get there on time is now gone. You are late again.

People who need to stay busy claim that constant activity makes the day go by faster. They believe that they are living life to the fullest or that they are more successful than other people. Studies of the natural cycles of our bodies, however, our biorhythms, suggest that continuously staying busy simply creates unneeded stress. Nature calls for us to intersperse busy periods with down time in a cyclical pattern throughout the day. Arriving a few minutes early to a meeting, sitting with nothing to do, gives us some time to reflect on the day and to sort things through. It gives us a rest so that we can then focus more clearly on the meeting.

SEEKING STIMULATION

Some of us are unable to get going unless we have a deadline. When we are running late, our anxiety builds, the adrenaline flows, and we feel fully alive. Tardiness is a way of combating the lethargy we experience during the day. An adrenaline rush is exciting, to a point – our thoughts seem to clear and our actions become precise. We imagine that we are functioning at our best. Unfortunately, the reinforcement that comes from this frenzied state perpetuates our problem with lateness. It feels good, as if we are living in the moment, and we want to do it again and again.

Research indicates that stimulation seeking may be a hereditary characteristic. There is a gene linked to the production of brain chemicals associated with the feelings of euphoria and pleasure that are released under conditions of excitement. So, some people seem to need more stimulation than others. Being late, however, is only one way of achieving this stimulation. You can learn other, more constructive ways to enliven your experiences – and they have fewer social consequences than tardiness. A regular exercise program is one way of doing this.

LACK OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

Some of us find it difficult to change whatever we are doing at the time. If we are sleeping, we want to continue to sleep. If we are reading, we don't want to put the book down. If we are working on a project, we hate to put it aside to do something else. Breaking our momentum is stressful. We struggle everyday between doing what we feel like doing and doing what we know we should do. We seem to want both. Ironically, some people who lack the self-discipline to be on time are highly disciplined in other areas of their lives, so it might be hard for them to

accept the fact that they need to work on self-discipline – in other words, accept limitations, consequences and boundaries. There is comfort to be found within a more structured life. The unstructured existence, although it may feel pleasant, can carry a huge price.

Self-discipline in adulthood is often a reflection of how we learned to manage responsibilities in childhood. The expectations learned within our families as we grew up influence the way we structure our activities in adulthood. Did we learn to make up our beds everyday, to pick up after ourselves, to get homework assignments in on time? (Conversely, were these tasks so formidable, or even used as punishment, in childhood, that we gave them up altogether once we left home and felt we could finally take it easy?)

SOME OTHER REASONS FOR LATENESS

There are several additional factors that might be associated with a person's problems with punctuality.

- If you are *distractible*, have difficulty with focusing, or have problems with attention, you might be prone to tardiness. For example, people with attention deficit disorder sometimes have problems with their punctuality.
- *Anxiety* or the fear of having panic attacks may dissuade some people from getting to places on time.
- *Depression* saps our energy, and this may make punctuality difficult.
- Some people play a *power game* with others. If they can make others wait for them by being late, it gives them a false sense of power and control.
- People with *self-esteem issues* may have trouble engaging in positive actions, such as getting to their destination on time.

A consultation with a professional therapist can help to clarify the causes of tardiness – and it is a positive first step in conquering a problem that holds many good people back.

RECOMMENDED READING –

Never Be Late Again, by Diana DeLonzor. Post Madison Publishing, 2003, \$13.95, 177 pages, paperback. ISBN 0-9716499-9-5.

T H E B A C K P A G E

What Can You Do To Become More Punctual?

As we have seen, problems with punctuality can have several different causes. The most effective strategy for dealing with this problem is to work with a professional psychotherapist. In a safe, confidential, and supportive setting, you can explore the various causes of your tardiness and come to understand why it has become a problem. You and your therapist can also devise a strategy for changing this problematic habit. You will know that you are not doing this alone and that an experienced professional is behind you all the way. With a positive attitude, a willingness to change, and some motivation, you should be able to have a successful outcome.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW GENERAL GUIDELINES THAT MIGHT BE ADOPTED FOR DEALING WITH PUNCTUALITY PROBLEMS –

- **MONITOR YOUR TARDINESS.** Keep a journal of times you were late and by how many minutes. Keep track of the excuses you used.
- **TALK TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY** about your problem. See what they have to say.
- **UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHER PEOPLE** who had to wait for you. How do you think they felt?
- **CARRY A TIMER** to see how long it actually takes to get where you want to go.
- **PLAN TO ARRIVE EARLY** – not right on time and certainly not late. Use that time before a meeting to relax and review how you feel.
- **SUBSTITUTE OTHER WAYS OF ACHIEVING EXCITEMENT** if you enjoy the adrenaline rush of being under a deadline.
- **IMPROVE YOUR SELF-DISCIPLINE** by giving up some of your comforts (e.g., making the bed everyday, giving up that second cup of coffee before leaving the house, etc.). Learn that you operate more effectively in the world by using a structured approach where you meet challenges head-on.
- **STICK TO A SET DAILY SCHEDULE** in order to add structure to your life. And organize your home, your office – and your life.

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