

## 19. THE REAL PRICE OF DELAY

WHEN YOU'RE AT DECISION TIME and suspect you're about to procrastinate on an unpleasant A-1, taking a moment to contemplate the consequences of delay can often get you back on the track. Let me tell you about a woman who hated to write thank-you notes.

Anne Davis receives a birthday gift from out of town. She tells herself that she must take a few minutes right away and drop Aunt Mary a note. A few lines will do: "I got the sweater. It looks beautiful and is just my size. Thank you so very much."

But Ms. Davis, being something of a perfectionist, really doesn't want to settle for such an insipid note—she'd like to write something with more verve. After all, she doesn't want Aunt Mary to think that her four years of college were a total waste! She doesn't feel up to being eloquent at the moment (and, of course, she has a hundred other things to do), so she puts off thanking Aunt Mary for now.

Two weeks pass before she faces up to the fact that she still has not written to Aunt Mary. By this time, she figures, Aunt Mary is getting somewhat impatient. Well, she'll make up for the delay by sending off a charming two-page letter telling her all about how often she wears the sweater, how well it goes with several of her skirts, how comfortable it is, and how many compliments she has received from friends. She doesn't have time to write such a long letter now . . . but she tells herself she'll be sure to get around to it very soon.

Two more weeks go by, and now Ms. Davis is feeling very angry with herself. She is so ashamed, and so afraid of what Aunt Mary must think of her. Surely she'll tell everyone in the family what a lazy, ungrateful niece she has! Ms. Davis will have to think up some pretty good excuses. "Everytime I sit down to write you, the phone rings," or "This has been the busiest month of my life" will perhaps do the trick.

Hopefully, if she fills her letter with enough personal anecdotes about her hectic life, Aunt Mary will forgive her.

### How the Problem Escalates

At this point, writing the thank-you note has become *very* important and *very* unpleasant. It's not surprising that Ms. Davis hates writing thank-you notes! She starts worrying about the letter whenever she has an odd moment. She constructs the note in her head while taking a shower and while taking out the garbage, but this doesn't bring her any closer to getting the letter *written*.

Ms. Davis starts feeling terribly guilty—so guilty, in fact, the thought of the letter makes her sick. In order to avoid this, she now blocks out of her mind any thought of the un-written note.

Finally one day the unwritten note comes back to haunt her, and Ms. Davis acknowledges to herself that it is *Decision Time*. Should she: (1) write a ten-page letter bringing Aunt Mary up-to-date on life with the Davis family for the last two years, and off-handedly sneak in a thank-you for the sweater? (2) wait another nine months and if Aunt Mary sends another birthday present (hopefully she won't!) thank her for both presents at the same time? (3) pretend she never received the sweater? (4) wait until she goes back home for a visit, and then impress Aunt Mary with how she remembered the sweater after all these years and was waiting to thank her in person? (5) telephone Aunt Mary long-distance and after a half an hour of chit-chat (at considerable cost) to soften her up, thank her? or (6) give up any hope of ever being able to face Aunt Mary again because how can she ever explain why she couldn't find five minutes to write a quick note the week the sweater arrived?

### What Is the Price of Delay?

Ms. Davis's delay in thanking Aunt Mary cost her many minutes of anguish. She would have suffered less had she slowed down and made a deliberate effort to recall the consequences of her past delays: Her Aunt had felt slighted before

and her own mother had written an admonishing letter about it. She knew from prior experience how each week of procrastination in writing a thank-you note escalated both the size of the task and the discomfort level. How much better to write the note now than to endure such suffering again.

Before you consider delaying in such situations, slow down. Take a minute or two to consider the consequences that will follow.

Acknowledge that if past experience and present resolve are any indication, this is not something that will go away. You *are* going to do this task eventually. The question is not "Will I do it?" but "When?" Ask yourself, "Since I am going to do it eventually, do I really want to pay the price of delay?"

What is this price you'll have to pay? While it's different in various situations, the following guidelines are generally true.

For one thing, if a task is not something that will go away, the actual work required may increase as time passes (as with the thank-you note). Also, it will keep haunting you until you do it. Here are some other situations where procrastination creates trouble and extra work. You can:

- put off filing your paperwork so long that every time you need a piece of paper you have to hunt through a huge "to be filed" stack,

- delay changing your car's motor oil until you need a \$375 engine repair two months after the manufacturer's guarantee expires,

- put off sweeping crumbs from the back of the pantry so that you come home one day to find your crumbs gone and thousands of ants in their place,

- delay action of replacing the unreliable widget section until suddenly you are swamped with customer complaints and must spend more time answering complaints than fixing the widget section would ever have taken—and you still have to fix the widget section.

Even when the task seems to remain identical whether you do it now or later, its impact on you can be substantially different.

Suppose you feel so tense and nervous about asking your boss for a raise that you put it off until tomorrow. Tomorrow, when you think about it again, you feel every bit as anxious, if not more so. And every time you think about it,

you not only remind yourself what a nasty scene you may provoke by your request, but you summon up all the emotions associated with this nastiness. In other words, every time you think about the task and put it off, you suffer some of the same pain as if you had actually done it.

You still don't know whether you'll get a raise, so you'll have to think about it further and again suffer pain. Moreover, there is a tendency for your anxiety to increase each time you think about it. Does it make sense to put off doing something because you feel tense and nervous about it—and then feel tense and nervous anyway?

Next time you're tempted to procrastinate on an unpleasant A-1, slow down. Why suffer all the pain associated with thinking about it and get none of the benefits? You've survived every nasty situation you've faced. Sometimes—be honest now—didn't you worry unnecessarily? Didn't some of those experiences turn out to be tolerable and even occasionally pleasant? And even when there was real discomfort, didn't it often stop quicker than you had imagined?

### Consider the Risks

Can you really afford to risk delaying a large, important project until the last minute? Suppose you aren't feeling well when the last minute comes? Or you face an unexpectedly large number of unavoidable interruptions? Or another crisis comes up that must be dealt with immediately? Or the project turns out to require more hours than you had originally estimated? When you delay a project until close to the deadline there is always the risk that you'll run short of time and have to submit inadequate work or miss the deadline.

The college student who assesses the risk of delay has to decide whether his term paper is an A, B, or C priority. The student who is more interested in dates, sports, politics or recreational reading might well give the term paper a C-priority until the last minute, but he pays the price when his professor gives the paper only a C-grade.

Many people say, "I deliberately put things off until the last minute because I know I work best under pressure. If I wait until the deadline is really close, I'm more effective. I

waste less time, I get better ideas. I don't lose by delay; I gain!"

If you've made a clear-headed assessment of your work habits and are convinced that such is the case, I say, fine! Many people *do* work best under pressure. For others, too much pressure can be devastating. Whether you're a college student putting off a term paper until the last minute, a homemaker putting off packing valuable china and stemware for the move to the new house, or an executive putting off preparing your fall sales campaign, you must assess your own work habits and determine how you function best.

Do you really work *well* under pressure? Consider the college student with his term-paper problem. There are a number of reasons why the quality of his work is not as likely to be as high as if he had more time. Valuable reference material or interviews may be left out because of time pressures. Ideas that require investigation cannot be explored when there's no time to investigate. A last-minute effort means that accuracy may have to be dispensed with. No rewriting is possible and so the prose style will suffer.

Ask yourself if you perhaps spend *more* time by delaying until the last minute? Working overtime on a crash program leads to physical and mental fatigue. Thinking becomes fuzzy. Hours may be lost solving a problem that a clear mind could penetrate in minutes.

Emotions may eat up extra time, too. It takes time to worry about whether you're ever going to start the project; whether your work is going to be good enough; whether you're going to make the deadline. Do you feel anger at yourself for putting yourself in such a position? Regret at not being able to go to a show tonight? Disappointment that you're really not giving yourself a chance to show your ability to do good work under more favorable circumstances?

### The Drawbacks of Pressure

The need to expedite routine parts of a project when every minute counts often forces you to do work yourself which could have been done by others had you budgeted your time better. You'll have to do the typing, photocopying, collating,

stapling, and other clerical work, because there's no secretary at 3 A.M. to help you.

Besides, do you *like* working well under pressure? Or do you feel a slave to deadlines? Do you experience last-minute panic about whether or not you will finish an important project on time? Do you wonder if there isn't some other way—a relaxed, in-control-of-the-situation approach?

Do you find that you behave badly toward other people when you're under pressure? Do you make other people miserable by your demands for priority of your work over theirs? Remember, people may not think *your* project is the most important.

If your backlog and new demands continually create pressure without letup and you don't like it, perhaps you're in the wrong job. But if the pressure is self-inflicted by your own perpetual procrastination, then maybe you can do something about it.

Do you work well *only* under pressure? Maybe you thrive on the feeling of exhilaration that comes from the total involvement demanded in meeting a last-minute deadline. But what happens when the pressure is off? Do you find the time between deadlines woefully flat and stale? Puttering around, shuffling papers, doing trivia and giving the pressure a chance to build up isn't much fun. True, you can use the time between deadlines to goof off, recover from the last crisis, prepare yourself for the next crisis—which is all to the good. But if you feel you're fully alive only when under great pressure, and feel let down in the in-between periods, then you may want to try some changes. Ideally, you want to be flexible enough to make good use of your time whatever the situation.

Here's a suggestion to help you avoid deadline mania: Don't wait quite so long before plunging in. Give yourself a little more lead time before the deadline. Try to start a little sooner, even though the pressure is not full-blown. As you learn to decrease the amount of pressure you need to work well, I think you'll find that you're increasing your willpower. You'll find you've gained a new sense of freedom and self-confidence. You'll feel more relaxed and in control of your time (and your life).

## **20. LEARN TO STRESS THE BENEFITS**

I'M NOW GOING to describe a technique called "Stress the Benefits" to help you muster enthusiasm at Decision Time for any unappetizing A-1.

Consider Mr. O'Henry, who had an idea that he thought would save his organization several thousand dollars a year. Normally he would have submitted his idea immediately to his company's suggestion system. But this time he delayed submitting his proposal, because he knew that, if adopted, it might mean cutting back on the work assigned to one of his co-workers.

The improvement Mr. O'Henry envisioned was tricky. There was a certain amount of risk involved. His supervisor had already given his opinion on the suggestion: "We tried that nine years ago. It didn't work then and it won't work now."

The risk of failure, the possible resentment of his co-worker, and the hassle with his supervisor had kept him from formally presenting his suggestion until now. Still, Mr. O'Henry was convinced that, everything considered, submitting his proposal was the A-1.

He managed finally to sell himself on submitting the proposal by listing all the benefits he could expect. The benefits were of two types: (1) pluses that would start when the A-1 was done and (2) minuses that would stop when the A-1 was done.

The pluses included the following: a cash bonus of 20 percent of the first year's savings (at least \$1,250), self-satisfaction for a well done, and recognition from the management (leading to promotion, more interesting and enjoyable work, and a higher salary).

The minuses that would stop when the A-1 was done included: worrying every night about whether to submit the suggestion form (worry could lead to ulcers, spending time in

hospital, using savings to pay hospital bills, etc.), avoiding his co-worker because of ambivalent feelings toward him, hating his supervisor for blocking his progress in the company.

Once he started to Stress the Benefits, the A-1 began to look so attractive that he was able to put possible drawbacks out of his mind, and go eagerly on with the suggestion form.

## How to Reward Yourself

It's particularly valuable to Stress the Benefits as you plow through a long or complex job. Sometimes it's even necessary to exaggerate (balloon) the benefits in the middle of a hard A-1.

If you've already considered all the benefits you'll reap from the A-1 and still find yourself having a hard time accomplishing it, then you may have to try adding outside benefits. The new benefits are like a rider to a Congressional bill that contains "sweeteners" to induce wavering Congressmen to vote for the bill.

Suppose you have to go on a business trip. It's particularly unappealing to you. You may be able to make it more palatable by tacking a few days on the end of your trip to take your wife to that ski resort you've been thinking of visiting. You've gone beyond stressing the normal benefits (more money, possible promotion, etc.). You've added a "rider" to inspire you to do your A-1—take that very important business trip.

You can give yourself a reward for working on a task as a way to coax yourself along. Plan to work until eleven o'clock and then take a break to read the news magazine you've been waiting to look at—or sleep late the next morning.

Give yourself a reward when you reach various milestones along the way of a larger project: when all the data for a survey comes; after you've interviewed six people to replace your assistant; after you've got a first draft of the plans for the new plant. If you work on the annual report today, you're entitled to go out for a drink after work. These are all ways of rewarding yourself.

Rewards on final completion are important too. After I finish writing this book I'll take a vacation.

It also helps to relate an immediate reward to your Life-

time Goals. You can say, "Well, now, if I do this I'm going to keep my job, and I'm going to get promoted." Then you can build up the reward in your mind. If you have a good set of Lifetime Goals you can probably think of many more connections between doing this A-1 and achieving some Lifetime Goals. Again, you're Stressing the Benefits.

Another way of keeping the value of the task in front of you is to give yourself a little taste in advance of what will happen if you do keep working on the A-1. Remember that vacation I have promised myself for when I finish my book? Well, long before I actually finish I'll go down to our travel agent and make the airline, hotel, and car-rental reservations. Then I'll go back and keep on writing. I get further along on my A-1 by Stressing the Benefits.

Another way to get yourself to do unpleasant A-1's is to turn the whole task into a game. Let's say painting your living room took you and your wife ten hours four years ago. Have you improved with age? See if you can shave some time off that ten hours. If you're a secretary with a particular report to be done every so often, see if you can type it flawlessly this time. Keep a little piece of paper noting how many errors you made last time and see if you can beat that score.

If it's a rather routine job, see how much of it you can knock off in fifteen minutes, or how nonchalant you can be while doing it. Anything that will help you get the task done is valuable. It helps you complete the task by varying the incentive, and even artificial incentives can help. Stress the Benefits and move closer to getting the A-1 done.

## **21. HOW TO GET BACK AFTER YOU'VE ESCAPED**

IN all my discussion of procrastination I've assumed that, once you've done a good job of planning, you're clear in your own mind about what your A-1 is. You may go right ahead and do it or you may not. My clients have found that the techniques I've explained in the last several chapters will significantly increase the will to "do it now" and throttle down procrastination.

But still, everyone procrastinates on occasion. So now I'd like to show you what is really happening when you *don't* do the A-1, when you deliberately or not-so-deliberately decide to put off the really important activity.

If you're not doing the A-1, you're doing something else instead. This "something else," whatever its intrinsic value (which may be very high), is in part appealing because it is an Escape from doing or thinking about the A-1.

Everyone has favorite Escapes. Escapes can be A's, B's, C's, or watching the girls go by. If you're at work, an Escape generally needs to be something that gives others the impression that you're busy and productive. In a private office or at home you have somewhat more leeway. You can even take a nap.

### **Seven Common Mistakes**

Here is a run-down of some of the most common Escapes. As you read through them, ask yourself how many of these escape routes you use when running away from the A-1.

*Indulging yourself.* Doing something you really enjoy. Buying a new hat or tie or book. Taking the rest of the day off to play golf. Getting a suntan. Going to the movies. Sleeping. Taking a bath or shower and leisurely grooming yourself.

*Socializing.* Visiting with others. Lingering on the telephone. Renewing an acquaintance with an old friend. Making small talk every chance you get.

*Reading.* Catching up on the backlog of unread periodicals stacked on the side table. Skimming through material previously relegated to a bottom drawer as not really worth reading. Spending two hours on *The Wall Street Journal*, or trying to make a dent in your pile of unread copies of the Sunday *New York Times* or Book-of-the-Month Club selections.

*Doing it yourself.* Baking your own bread. Spending an hour taking notes on a reference book rather than photocopying the three essential pages. Adding a long string of numbers by hand rather than walking over to the adding machine. Doing something that could be delegated. Spending your time solving other people's problems. Delving into aspects of the job that don't really concern you.

*Overdoing it.* Supervising employees so closely that they can't get their work done. Keeping every visitor an extra fifteen minutes while you talk about your mimosa, butterfly collection, arthritis, or lack of time. Being so diligent in giving your boss progress reports that you have little time to make progress. Rearranging your desk, inside and out, to be the very model of neatness and efficiency.

*Running away.* If you're in headquarters, organizing a field trip. If in the field, going to headquarters. Expediting something that doesn't need it: hand-carrying a memo to another branch office; paying your telephone bill in person. Taking a long coffee break; extending your lunch hour; taking time for a cocktail or shopping.

*Daydreaming.* Planning how you're going to spend your weekend. Worrying about all the things left undone at work. Wondering how you're going to spend the extra money from your hoped-for promotion. Recalling what a witty remark you made at a party yesterday.

No doubt you can add to this list some of your own special favorites. Please remember, I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with indulging yourself, reading, socializing, daydreaming. Quite the contrary; much of the fun in life comes from such things. Indeed, that is precisely why they are so

appealing. The problem is you're trained to these escapes when you should be doing the A-1.

Other Escapes are more subtle and less readily recognized as such. Perhaps you dabble around the periphery of the A-1, spending too much time on irrelevant details rather than going to the heart of the matter. Or as Ms. Gill did with her needlepoint project, you spend so much time getting ready to begin the A-1 that you have no time left to do it.

Finally, there are what might be called the Emotional Escapes: feeling guilty, getting angry, worrying. Indulging in such feelings is a very common way of escaping from the A-1. To ask yourself whether perhaps you took the wrong job, married the wrong spouse, or bought the wrong house may well be useful. But if you *wallow* in such thoughts, it's time to ask Lakein's Question.

### **Admit When You're Wasting Time**

Some Escapes are undoubtedly worth doing and are excellent uses of time: getting organized, making lists, improving morale, socializing, taking the day off, doing the A-2 or A-3, catching up on reading. Therefore, it is easy to tell yourself you're really making good use of your time, even though you are not doing the A-1. And perhaps you are. But you're not making the *best* use of your time.

The *best* use of your time—as you've already decided—is to do the A-1. Anything else is a comparative waste of time.

Consider one of my clients, a research scientist. He kept procrastinating on a difficult research study that had a very high priority. Despite his efforts to get involved and to convince himself how important it was, he kept stalling. At my suggestion, he began to take a careful look at each Decision Time when he chose to avoid the A-1 and turned to something else.

At first, he felt like a helpless observer. It seemed as if the procrastination process was operating in spite of anything he could do. Rather than be discouraged at this point, he consoled himself with the knowledge that he was trying to understand the dynamics of the process, which is the first step toward controlling it.

After several days of closely watching his actions at Deci-

sion Time, he found certain patterns emerging. The thought of doing the A-1 was always followed immediately by feelings of inadequacy and tension. Most of the time he then quickly turned to making improvements on an old and familiar research problem. He would talk to someone about some aspect of this other study, or rethink and rewrite portions that needed polishing. He felt completely on top of the situation. He was not doing the A-1, but he was doing something important and productive.

In the back of his mind, however, was the nagging thought that he was rationalizing. He was not perfecting the old report because it was essential (it *was* worth doing, but not now). He was doing it because it provided an easy Escape from the A-1.

On my recommendation, every time he found himself working on the old project he repeated silently over and over to himself, "I'm wasting my time." During the next week or so he admitted to himself dozens of times "I'm wasting my time."

At first, saying this didn't stop him from turning to an Escape. Then the words began to make a difference. He acknowledged that he really *was* wasting his time. The benefits he before associated with doing the Escape tasks had now lost much of their appeal.

As he realized more and more that he was wasting his own time, the tide began to change. Instead of letting the procrastination process run him, he told himself that he didn't *have* to waste his time. Just as he had chosen to do Escapes, he could choose to do the A-1. It really was a black and white choice—Escape vs. the A-1. As he became able to see his problem in these terms he began to reject Escape and zeroed in on the A-1 with increasing frequency.

The real payoff came when, several months later, a new and even more difficult research study was offered to him. Having learned how his Escape mechanism worked, he was able to stop procrastinating and get involved in the new project almost immediately.

I've found that saying over and over "I'm wasting my time" works very well for women who choose ever-present routine household chores over some challenging project they have included in their Lifetime Goals Statement. If a woman really wants to play the piano, every time she dusts the piano

she should admit to herself, "I am wasting my time." If you use the "I'm wasting my time" warning signal, you will find it increasingly difficult to rationalize detours. Above all, you'll accept that it's *you* who is in control and makes the choices.

Even when you achieve a high level of control, so that your chances of choosing the A-1 at Decision Time are good, you won't always succeed. But if you can recognize when you are wasting your time, you'll definitely increase your chances further.

### How to Cut Off Your Escape Routes

Another way to make sure you'll choose the A-1 at Decision Time is to cut off all your Escape routes. The principle is simple and is often used by people who are trying to lose weight or stop smoking. If you keep all candy or cigarettes out of the house, you make it that much harder to give in to the craving for them. Every time you crave candy or a cigarette after dinner, you have to make a special trip to the store. Your reluctance to bundle up to go out in the cold may exceed your longing for candy or a cigarette.

Should you perhaps cancel the subscription to the mediocre magazine you always turn to as an Escape from the A-1? If you can't bring yourself to that, how about hiding it in a drawer? At least then it won't have as much chance of distracting you as when it's sitting on your desk.

If you're a housewife and your mornings are full of A's that never seem to get done, then tactfully avoid your coffee-mate across the court. Sure, it's great fun talking to her but this delightful Escape prevents you from accomplishing the A-1.

Perhaps your downfall is the two-martini lunch that renders you useless for the balance of the afternoon. If the most important thing you can do is have lunch and a few drinks while you regale an important client then by all means do it; it's your A-1. But if it's really an Escape from something important you have to do this afternoon, then it might be a good idea to think twice. As a compromise, why not go to lunch with a teetotaler? That way you can still enjoy lunch. You'll probably moderate your alcoholic intake, allowing you to go after that A-1 this afternoon.

If your Escape is going to the supermarket three times a week, make it a rule that you'll go only once. To make sure that you really won't need to go, do something concrete about those meal-planning, stocking and freezing ideas you've been contemplating for years. If you forget something or run out, try to make do.

The Great Escape for nearly everybody is television. Liberate yourself! Give your set away and then stalk your A-1!

One final suggestion along these lines: You might want to give your secretary a list of your favorite Escapes. Just the fact that you know she has the list may prevent you from utilizing these dodges except in the most severe cases.

### You Can Procrastinate Positively

It's just possible that you've tried all the suggestions I've made about how to stop procrastinating—without success. O.K. If you have to procrastinate, I'm going to show you how to do it positively.

Sit in a chair and do nothing. That's right—nothing. Don't read a book, don't shuffle papers, don't tackle your knitting, don't watch TV—just sit completely still.

If you sit doing nothing for fifteen or twenty minutes (don't cheat—you must do absolutely nothing), you should become very uneasy. That A-1 is staring you right in the face. And you're doing nothing. Precious minutes that you can use accomplishing a lifetime goal are slipping by. And you're sitting in a chair—doing nothing. Whenever I find myself procrastinating, this is the technique I use. Believe me, after ten minutes I'm off and running on my A-1.

## 22. HOW TO DO BETTER NEXT TIME

To get the most out of the suggestions and techniques I've described, a good deal of stick-to-itiveness or will-power is called for. You'll need willpower to:

- (1) plan when you're feeling harried and overwhelmed;
- (2) keep yourself involved in a project even though some of the instant tasks you try lead to a dead end;
- (3) avoid your favorite Escapes when you have an important but unpleasant A-1 to do;
- (4) maintain a positive attitude in spite of previous "failures";
- (5) do something every day on your Lifetime Goals;
- (6) overcome fears, real or imagined;
- (7) resist doing a very easy (but unimportant) task that is right in front of you.

Everyone knows that "Where there's a will, there's a way." And everyone has some willpower. But how do you develop all the willpower you really need? I'll now show you how to take the willpower you already have and build on it so that it will be available to you when you need it most.

You probably did many things today even though you didn't want to do them: got up out of bed, caught the 7:51 to work, dictated that awkward letter, ordered the Diet Special at lunch, smiled cheerfully at Mrs. McPlump, who tried to tell you about her backache again, restrained your anger when your son came home with a rip in his best jacket, went to the PTA meeting when you really wanted to stay home out of the rain, held that yoga position an extra minute even though your foot cramped.

## Try These Willpower-Building Exercises

We'll begin by doing some willpower-building exercises. At first we'll make them easy. The mistake most people make when they try to develop willpower is that they push too hard. When you go on a weight-lifting program, you don't start by lifting two-hundred-pound weights. If you'll set yourself easy tasks, you'll accomplish them. You wouldn't try to ride a bucking bronco if you didn't know how to ride a horse. Yet, you're making the same mistake if you try to gather enough willpower to lose thirty pounds off the bat. How about starting with three?

Good teachers know that children learn best when their work is at the proper level so they can make steady growth. Studies show that learning a new skill in industry is greatly facilitated if early efforts meet with success. The Royal Canadian Air Force exercises build gradually from day to day so that the exerciser is hardly aware of the increased effort required to do the next day's exercise; yet the cumulative effect over several months is significant.

Therefore, I suggest that if you want to increase your willpower you begin by practicing in easy situations before applying the willpower you're building to do more and more difficult tasks.

Normally, the only time when people consciously test their willpower is when they need it. But if you apply it only when the task is difficult and you need all the help you can get, it will not be surprising if you fail fairly often.

The will is like a wild horse. If you want to train a wild horse to do productive work, you obviously can't tame it by running away. You have to keep in contact with the horse. There's really only one way to succeed: To get on that horse and stay on. Try to ride it. You may have to pick yourself off the ground several times, but stick with it. The idea is to stay with it even if the horse is going in the wrong direction.

Suppose the horse is heading for its favorite spot far out in the pasture. It's on a course that will take it between two trees. You're not able to get it to do an about-face, but you may be able to alter its course. If you continue this process patiently, you'll eventually be able to get the horse to go

where you want it to go. You now have it "under control." Having reached this stage, you can begin to turn its energy toward productive work.

Increasing your willpower is like taming a wild horse. The key is to move forward in gradual stages, as I shall explain. It's an easy procedure. Indeed, it may seem too easy. Don't discount its potency because it doesn't demand much of you at first. Try it, you'll like it! And what's more, you'll find it extremely valuable. Here how it works.

A person generally feels the need for willpower when he has rationally decided to do one thing, yet is strongly pushed or pulled by the desire to do something else instead. You plan to get up early and take an invigorating hike, but stay in bed instead. Or you decide to spend the evening writing letters instead of watching TV, but find yourself drawn away from the letters toward an interesting program. In the face of some desire to the contrary, sticking with your initial decision can be very difficult.

The next time you find yourself giving in to such a desire rather than persisting with your rational decision, make a clear mental note of it. Admit that you're the one who decided to stay in bed or to watch TV. Take credit for the "unwanted" decision.

Granted, the decision may not have been one over which you had much control—you may have been acting as much from compulsion as from choice. Still, you *did* make a decision of sorts, and it *did* lead you directly to some action.

### How to Wean Yourself Away from TV

At this point you've changed nothing about your actions. You're still doing something contrary to what you want to do, and you can't stop yourself. Claim credit for the decision. Go ahead, don't be afraid. Recognize that your will was involved when you stayed in bed late or turned from your letters to the TV.

The first step is to train yourself to become less compulsive about "reflex" actions like watching television. But it's important to start small and selectively. Is there at least some part of the evening's entertainment you could give up?

You could decide that you'll turn down the sound during

all the deodorant, toothpaste, and aspirin commercials. It isn't long before the first toothpaste ad appears. True to your plan, you get up and turn the sound down. Then you get up again when the commercial is over and turn the sound up. You do this twice more and decide you're tired of bouncing up and down. You say to yourself, "I think this was a neat plan, but I *will not* turn the sound off any more tonight." After all, enough is enough. When the next commercial comes along, you just sit there and congratulate yourself on not getting up again.

The next day you begin again with the same plan, and this time you get up six times before pooping out. Again you refuse to turn the sound down after that. However, during a particularly obnoxious commercial about midnight you find yourself starting to get up again. Now *you cannot lose!* If you get up and turn it off, congratulate yourself on your willpower in going back to your original plan. If you do not turn it off, congratulate yourself on your willpower in resisting the desire to turn it off and sticking to your revised decision not to get up again.

Interpret whatever you do as exactly what you wanted to do. This shows you're truly in control of your actions.

The next night, try a different strategy. This time turn off every alternate bathroom products commercial. If you miss one, don't be the least concerned. Simply tell yourself, "I reserve the right to change my mind and I've decided that I'll make an exception in this case." Your making an exception also helps to demonstrate that you're not an inflexible machine but a thinking, feeling, spontaneous person. Be proud of it! Interpret all your actions as positive, as exactly what you want to do.

After a couple of weeks, turn the sound up and down on other kinds of commercials (margarine, coffee, automobile). You're beginning to become more aware of how many different kinds of commercials there are and how annoying they can be. You're also starting to suspect that there must be a lot of things around that are more fun than watching TV commercials. You can confirm this if you experiment by listening carefully to every word of every commercial the next night without exception. Notice how much willpower you've built up to be able to listen closely to something that you are now really beginning to dislike.

One of my clients was particularly ingenious in developing his willpower while watching TV. In his first experiments he deliberately waited a few seconds until after the commercial was over and he did not turn the sound back up until after the program had actually resumed. He gradually extended this soundless time from two seconds to five and then to fifteen. Next he experimented with turning the whole set off when a bathroom product commercial came on, and read a magazine while it was off. Sometimes he decided to finish reading the page before returning to a program that was not one of his favorites. He continued experimenting and enlarging his area of freedom and the muscle of his willpower. He started turning the set on later and later in the evening. Within six weeks he was able to turn the set off during half-hour segments which he knew from past experience would only be disappointing programs. And all this time his ability to acquire increased control over his time-wasting urges made him feel better about himself.

When you attempt to develop your willpower remember: don't try to push yourself too far, between extending your capabilities gradually and stretching yourself so far that you break. Don't push yourself beyond your limits of endurance. Think in terms of extending your capabilities gradually, rather than stretching yourself to the breaking point.

### A Couple of Extra Minutes Help

After you demonstrate your willpower in little ways, on little tasks, on easy things, turn gradually to more difficult ones. If you must confront a very difficult task, don't be concerned with conquering it. Be satisfied if you put up a little better fight than you might have six months ago. When you develop willpower, time is on your side if you improve just a little every day.

Gradually you are developing the internal self-discipline, the internal desire to make good use of your time. This is more important than the desire to do a particular Escape or to avoid a particular A-1. Little by little you are getting more control over your time and over your life.

The better your willpower, the less trouble you'll experience when you want to get involved in a project. You'll have

developed the habit of being committed to doing the best you can on *whatever* is in front of you. You'll be a do-it-now person on whatever the A-1 turns out to be.

Although you recognize the limits on your endurance, try to go another sixty seconds before quitting your jogging. Although you can't yet resist seconds on Mom's apple pie, you can ask her to make the second piece a bit smaller than usual. Although you don't like raking the leaves, you realize you're stuck with it and try not to make yourself quite as unhappy as usual. What's the use of complaining to yourself everytime the rake misses a leaf and you have to go back again?

Try to spend a couple of extra minutes on an unpleasant A before calling it a day. Cut back a couple of minutes on the C, even if it's your pet project. Don't turn to the TV for escape from an unpleasant A. Remember: a little more will can eventually build up to a lot more willpower.

## **23. DO YOUR BEST AND CONSIDER IT A SUCCESS**

ARE YOU WILLING TO SPEND every evening this week to make a start on attaining a lifetime goal even though success is not assured? If you don't try, you guarantee failure. If you do try you have the chance to succeed, but failure is still a possibility. What to do?

Most people spend their lives minimizing losses rather than maximizing gains. For example, take reading the Sunday paper. Do you read every page because you're afraid you will miss something? The more you move away from the front page, and those sections that you know interest you, the less news you will find. The result: You waste time reading much that doesn't really interest you, when you could have played with the kids, read a book or worked in your darkroom.

Some people use up valuable time by endlessly weighing pros and cons for fear of taking a wrong step. Making "mistakes" can be a great time-saver. You find out what works by trying. You get rid of unrealistic goals by having tried and failed to accomplish them. For the rest of your life you might have continued to cherish the dream of writing poetry. But now that you've spent several evenings working steadily at it, you can assure yourself that given your personality, poetry is impossible—at least for the present. Forget it and find a more realistic goal instead. What may seem defeating at first is really constructive: You're building bridges that will eventually take you closer to where you really want to be.

Studies have shown that people who hoped (and strived) for success were happier and accomplished more than those who feared (and expected) failure. If you're willing to accept the initial failures on your way to success, you'll find the energy you need to keep digging until you hit pay dirt. Don't be discouraged by "mistakes." Trial and error is part of being human. Think that each "mistake" is bringing you a little closer to eventual success.

I like to call this process "trial and success." I recall a particularly difficult period in my life when things just weren't going well. I kept telling myself that there were only a limited number of "mistakes" possible on my project and that each "mistake" I made brought me closer to what ultimately would work. The important thing was not to make the same "mistake" too often. Sure enough, I finally saw the light—long after I had hoped to be done with my job and after much more effort than I ever imagined at the beginning. From then on, things went better and better. With that experience behind me, I continually look for new areas to make do. It was trial and success.

When you do something you've never done before, no matter how poorly it turns out, you're on your way to doing it better the next time. Whatever happens, you're further along than if you had never done it at all. If it seems hard to accept failure at first, remind yourself of that comforting saying: "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly!"

### The Value of Trial and Success

A dance company was practicing for a new ballet and the leading man held the ballerina incorrectly. The effort looked very ungraceful. The director asked the man whether he wished to repeat the movement. The dancer replied, "No. It's not necessary. Now I know what to do." The failure made the rehearsal a success. The dancer now knew what he had to do. It was trial and success.

In scientific research multiple "failures" commonly lead to success. The combined unsuccessful experiments of Marie Curie, Alexander Fleming, and Louis Pasteur run into the thousands. It would have been easy for any one of them to give up after the first hundred failures or so, but today we might have no radium, no penicillin, and no pasteurized milk.

Or take the following extraordinary personal history of failure:

Lost job, 1832; defeated for legislature, 1832; failed in business, 1833; elected to legislature, 1834; sweetheart died, 1835; had nervous breakdown, 1836; defeated for Speaker, 1838; defeated for nomination for Congress, 1843; elected to Congress, 1846; lost renomination, 1848; rejected for land

officer, 1849; defeated for Senate, 1854; defeated for nomination for Vice-President, 1856; again defeated for Senate, 1858; but in 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States.

Life can only be led on a "best efforts" basis. To look back and say "I could have done better" is not realistic. O.K., so you might have wished to do better. And you can imagine having done better. But the fact that you *didn't* means that, under the circumstances, you *couldn't*.

So don't let failure stop you from trying. Don't waste time worrying about what went "wrong." You can learn something from every experience. Remember: You're older and wiser than the last time you dealt with a similar situation, even if it was only fifteen minutes ago.

The habits of a lifetime cannot be changed in a few days. It takes time—sometimes a year or two. There is no "Open Sesame" to getting control of your time and your life. But you can make much progress toward realizing your everyday and life goals in even a short time. I encourage you to begin as soon as you finish this page. I've seen remarkable results when people apply the techniques I've recommended.

You too can get more enjoyment from every minute, be more successful in your career and personal life, and accomplish more with less effort. Today can mark a real turning point for you. You can get more time out of your life.

So what is the best use of your time right now?

## **APPENDIX**

### **How I Save Time**

1. I count all my time as "On-Time" and try to get satisfaction (not necessarily accomplishment) out of every minute.
2. I try to enjoy whatever I am doing.
3. I'm a perennial optimist.
4. I build on successes.
5. I don't waste time regretting my failures.
6. I don't waste my time feeling guilty about what I don't do.
7. I remind myself: "There is always enough time for the important things." If it's important I'll make the time to do it.
8. I try to find a new technique each day that I can use to help gain time.
9. I get up at 5 a.m. during the week (and go to bed early).
10. I have a light lunch so I don't get sleepy in the afternoon.
11. I don't read newspapers or magazines (except occasionally). I do glance at the headlines at the newsstands to keep up on the world.
12. I skim books quickly looking for ideas.
13. I don't own a television set. (My family and I went to a motel to watch the moon walks and we rented a set for the political conventions.)
14. I have my office close enough to my home to be able to walk to work. But when I'm lazy or in a hurry I drive.
15. I examine old habits for possible elimination or streamlining.
16. I've given up forever all "waiting time." If I have to

- wait I consider it a "gift of time" to relax, plan or do something I would not otherwise have done.
17. I keep my watch 3 minutes fast, to get a head start on the day.
  18. I carry blank 3x5 index cards in my pocket to jot down notes and ideas.
  19. I revise my lifetime goals list once a month.
  20. I review my lifetime goals list every day and identify activities to do each day to further my goals.
  21. I put signs in my office reminding me of my goals.
  22. I keep my long-term goals in mind even while doing the smallest task.
  23. I always plan first thing in the morning and set priorities for the day.
  24. I keep a list of specific items to be done each day, arrange them in priority order, and then do my best to get the important ones done as soon as possible.
  25. I schedule my time months in advance in such a way that each month offers variety and balance as well as "open time" reserved for "hot" projects.
  26. I give myself time off and special rewards when I've done the important things.
  27. I do first things first.
  28. I work smarter rather than harder.
  29. I try to do only A's, never B's and C's.
  30. I have confidence in my judgment of priorities and stick to them in spite of difficulties.
  31. I ask myself, "Would anything terrible happen if I didn't do this priority item?" If the answer is no, I don't do it.
  32. If I seem to procrastinate I ask myself: "What am I avoiding?"—and then I try to confront that thing head-on.
  33. I always use the 80/20 rule.
  34. I start with the most profitable parts of large projects and often find it is not necessary to do the rest.
  35. I cut off nonproductive activities as quickly as possible.
  36. I give myself enough time to concentrate on high priority items.
  37. I have developed the ability to concentrate well for long stretches of time (sometimes with the aid of coffee).
  38. I concentrate on one thing at a time.

39. I focus my efforts on items that will have the best long-term benefits.
40. I keep pushing and am persistent when I sense I have a winner.
41. I have trained myself to go down my To Do List without skipping over the difficult items.
42. I do much of my thinking on paper.
43. I work alone creatively in the morning and use the afternoons for meetings, if necessary.
44. I set deadlines for myself and others.
45. I try to listen actively in every discussion.
46. I try not to waste other people's time (unless it's something that really matters to me).
47. I delegate everything I possibly can to others.
48. I make use of specialists to help me with special problems.
49. I have someone screen my mail and phone calls and handle all routine matters.
50. I generate as little paperwork as possible and throw away anything I possibly can.
51. I handle each piece of paper only once.
52. I write replies to most letters right on the piece of paper.
53. I keep my desk top cleared for action, and put the most important thing in the center of my desk.
54. I have a place for everything (so I waste as little time as possible looking for things).
55. I save up all trivia for a three-hour session once a month.
56. I try not to think of work on weekends.
57. I relax and "do nothing" rather frequently.
58. I recognize that inevitably some of my time will be spent on activities outside my control and don't fret about it.
59. I keep small talk to a minimum during work hours.
60. I look for action steps to be taken now to further my goals.
61. I'm continually asking myself: "What is the best use of my time right now?"