

## The trouble with tunnel vision

By: Shawn Healy ◉ August 29, 2019



One of the most common issues I hear from law students, lawyers and judges has to do with time, and I recently had the opportunity to listen to a podcast episode that shed new light on the problem.

Like many, I often hear about interesting podcasts and think, “Oh, that sounds really interesting. Hopefully I’ll get to listen to that one day when I have some free time.” More often than not, that

“free time” does not appear, and I add the podcast to the ever-expanding list of “things I would like to do if I ever had unlimited and uninterrupted time.” It’s a very long list.

The NPR podcast “Hidden Brain” episode named “You 2.0: Tunnel Vision” focused on the idea that when we experience a deficit in an important area of our lives, we experience the psychological phenomenon of scarcity.

A scarcity mindset occurs when we become overly focused on the thing we desperately feel we are lacking, and this in turn affects how we think and the decisions we make.

Host Shankar Vedantam summarized the theory of professors who study scarcity: “When you feel that something important is missing in your life, your brain starts to focus on that missing thing. When you’re really desperate for something, you can focus on it so obsessively, there’s no room for anything else.”

When we feel like we are seriously lacking in the time we need to address all of the pressing demands on our plate, we can feel desperate for more time, and we can start to make poor decisions in the interest of short-term gains in time, which ultimately lead to negative long-term consequences to our mind, body and overall well-being.



*The decisions we make while feeling a scarcity of time are very different from the decisions we typically make when we are not feeling that desperation.*



Whether the issue is time management in general, high levels of stress to meet billable-hour requirements, or a never-ending flow of work demands in a busy courtroom, a common thought to solve these problems is: “If only I had a few more hours in the day, then I could ... .”

This time pressure often causes busy people to cut back on sleep and other priorities. Logically, we know that getting sleep is important, yet we can see it as a nuisance, as opposed to a basic need that recharges all our abilities.

We look at the clock and make an evaluation of what we think the best use of our time would be. Should I stop working and go to bed in order to get a full night’s sleep so I will be recharged and fully functional tomorrow? Or

should I sacrifice several hours of sleep to finish a project, or to get a jump on the tsunami of work I'm feeling crushed by?

If you are feeling desperation associated with a scarcity of time, you are much more likely to sacrifice your sleep in order to gain time. This will produce a short-term effect of feeling less pressure. Most often this is coupled with the justification that it is a special circumstance, an exception to the rule during a particularly stressful time period. We wouldn't recommend anyone we care about mimic what we're doing, but it is just temporary.

Truth be told, this exception to the rule starts to become the rule. This is a scarcity mindset.

The decisions we make while feeling a scarcity of time are very different from the decisions we typically make when we are not feeling that desperation. At times in our lives when we do not feel that same scarcity, we are much more likely to prioritize sleep, to recognize the importance of quality sleep, and to be more intentional about scheduling our time to both set aside time for the sleep we need as well as reserve time for our other interests (i.e., time with family and friends, hobbies, educational pursuits, etc.).

With a scarcity mindset, you develop tunnel vision. You are in survival mode, which makes it very difficult to step outside of that scarcity mindset to see it objectively and make changes. Here are a few recommendations for how to recognize and address the scarcity mindset:

- Talk to others (family and friends who do not work with you) about your routines and techniques for handling time pressures (because co-workers might validate your scarcity perspective if they are feeling the same). If one of your loved ones gives you a worried look or remarks about his or her concern for you, take that as a sign that things need to change.
- Prioritize healthy sleep, each and every night. Develop a good sleep routine and treat it like a legal contract you have signed with yourself. If you feel like you need exceptions within that contract, write in a limited number of exceptions and keep track of when you use them up.
- Fight isolation by telling a trusted friend or loved one about your sleep contract so that you benefit from another person's encouragement and accountability.
- Use technology that can help organize your time, cut down on wasted time/energy, and help set your priorities for each day.
- Practice time management techniques to decrease procrastination, reduce distractions, and increase productivity.
- Reject perfectionism and practice accepting the fact that no work product will be perfect. Remind yourself that you can survive less-than-perfect work (after all, you have done so all your life and will continue to do so).

Most often what would help the most in these situations is the opposite of what desperation tells you to do.

Don't be afraid to ask for help from others or to accept the support that others offer. After all, the only reason I was able to listen to that podcast episode was because my wife is more creative than I am, and she thought to play a podcast while we were folding laundry after our kids were asleep. My tunnel vision on getting chores done was pleasantly interrupted.

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