



EPISODE 78 Eat that frog and 6 other time management tips

With guest Dr. Andrew Wilner

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AW: “If you don't have to do it and you don't really want to do it, then you got to start thinking, should it be on the list? Can I give it to somebody else to do? Or maybe it just never has to get done, like remodeling the patio.”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello, hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You're listening to episode number 78. Today we're diving into something that many of us wrestle with every day in both our personal and professional lives. And if you're practicing medicine, the struggle only seems to be getting worse. We're going to be talking about time management.

Although one could argue, we don't really manage time, time is what it is, and we can't make more of it. I've yet to experience a 30-hour day, except maybe being on call. But I'm still going to use the phrase time management for convenience.

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In truth, what we are really managing is ourselves and our relationship to time. On the podcast, we're exploring seven time management tips and how they can help you be more effective and satisfied in how you use your precious minutes, hours, days, years, and life.

My guest is Dr. Andrew Wilner, internist, neurologist, medical journalist, author, podcaster, husband and father of an adorable and energetic young boy named Jack. I was inspired to invite Dr. Wilner to be a guest for this episode because when we were collaborating together on a few projects, including the podcast he did with me on locum tenens, episode 24, he was incredibly efficient and effective at getting things done.

Given all that Dr. Wilner has going on in his life and now he manages to work full-time, to be a husband and a dad, as well as an entrepreneur, writer and podcaster, I knew he would've some excellent time management tips to share. I'm very pleased and honored to welcome Dr. Andrew Wilner back to the podcast. Hey Andrew, how are you?

AW: Heather, it's wonderful to speak with you again. Thanks for inviting me.

HF: Oh, it's a pleasure, Andrew. I had a lot of fun with you on that locum tenens episode and I'll make sure to link to it in the podcast.

AW: Great, great. I am a little humbled because I do not consider myself an expert on time management. I freely admit that I'm learning every day, but I'm happy to share any tips that I've developed along the way.

HF: Well, I think we're all aspiring time management gurus in a way. This is a lifelong process and it's good to know that we can always improve. There's always room. So, would you like to start us with tip number one?

AW: Sure. "Why?" I think tip number one is "why." I start every day, I make a list of things I need to do, usually the day before so that in the morning I can look and say, "Okay, these are the things I have to do." And I never finish the list. The list never gets done. If I'm at the hospital, that list it's pretty easy. I just do what I have to do. And I don't have to think about it too much.

But my personal list, I look at things and sometimes I ask myself, "Well, why am I doing this?" And it's really important to answer that question, because if you are doing it, you want to enjoy doing it. You don't want to resent doing it. And sometimes I do things, you're doing something and it's like, "Oh, I really shouldn't be doing this. So, why am I doing it?"

Sometimes, like my podcast, you just do it for fun. I want to have fun. I'm going to do that podcast because I really enjoy it. I want to talk to that guest. They have a lot to offer. It's fun. I like playing with all my gadgets. It's just fun. Sometimes it's, "Well, do I have to do it?" Like the trash, the trash just got to get out. It's not going to go out by itself. It's like, "Well that's part of life, I'll do it." Be invested.

And then if you don't have to do it and you don't really want to do it, then you got to start thinking, "Should it be on the list? Can I give it to somebody else to do?" Or maybe it just never has to get done, like remodeling the patio. The patio is just fine. I don't really want to do it. I don't have to do it. It could be better. But for the next 20 years, that patio is just going to be fine, take it off the list.

Know your "why", that's a slogan they have at the hospital. Why are you doing that? And if you're doing it to save somebody's life, to increase your income, to make yourself happy, all of a sudden that task has a little more meaning and may not get done any faster, but at least I think you enjoy it more.

HF: This is such a fantastic question to start with. It's "Why am I doing these different things?" It makes me think of Simon Sinek's TED talk, where he talked about finding your "why." And it's great to ask about things such as "Why am I redoing the patio?" as well as "Why am I in this job?"

AW: Right. Yeah. I think the more that life becomes potentially overwhelming with tasks, the more knowing your "why" becomes very useful to sort of navigate your day.

HF: Thank you so much for that. Great tip for number one. Number two is "Have a system for doing things." And this is something that I really got out of reading James Clear's book "Atomic Habits", which is a fantastic read. And he says we don't rise to the level of our goals. We fall to the level of our systems.

Basically, if you have goals without a system, it's more wishful thinking because you may not really have a good method for attaining those goals. It's something I want to describe, to illustrate the difference of having goals without a strong system versus having one. And this is my going to the gym experience.

I have these different goals and one is fitness. And then I also want to be a better dancer doing Country Western and swing dancing. I want to be better at being present and being mindful in meditation. And I also have spiritual practice. So, I have these spiritual goals.

Well, I incorporated a system that I use at the gym to work on all of these goals at the same time. Before I really had this system of going to the gym it looked like "I go to the gym. I kind of look around. I see a piece of equipment I want to use. I do a little legs and then I might go jog a bit and maybe then some abs." But it didn't have a good plan. I was maintaining fitness, but I wasn't really improving it. And then I did these other things for meditation and spirituality, but it was kind of "Catch as catch can."

Well, now when I go to the gym, I got a trainer for six sessions. Now I have a program that I use. And when I'm listening to music, I am counting the eight beats because that is something I really need to learn how to do better for dancing. I'm listening and counting, which is really helpful for me. And then it's also helping me with being present and being more mindful because when I'm thinking about what I need to do later today, or the conversation that I had, I can't count. I'm not present and I'm not focusing on my workout.

Then for this spirituality in the morning, I do a little bit of spiritual reading from a book. And then I take the idea into my day. For example, the reading this morning was really about seeing people with love rather than judgment. When I went into the gym, I looked around, I tried to see everybody that way and it helped me really appreciate that they're here at the gym working out. Because if nobody was at the gym, I wouldn't want to stay very long. It would be a completely different experience.

That mindset of coming with this loving heart made me see people differently. And I felt more connected being at the gym. That's my example of creating a system to work on these different goals that are important to me and my "why."

AW: Wow. I think I'd like to comment on that, trying to unpack all that. But you're doing a lot. Number one, you have a list in your head of things to accomplish. You are goal oriented, you're motivated, you know what your motivations are. You have very clear objectives. Dancing better, fitness, spirituality. You know what they are.

And I think it's a rare example of multitasking. I'm not a big fan of multitasking. I think when you multitask, you are just jumping around in your head from one thing to another. But here within the gym environment, you're actually simultaneously addressing goals that are very important to you. And also, you've established a system which is your routine. I think that's very important.

I think the closest I can come to that is, I don't like to exercise. I'll just get that right out there. But I do exercise regularly, because I think it's important. And I do feel a little bit better, like when it's done. And one of the ways that I've been able to trick myself into exercising more regularly, frankly, is listening to podcasts when I go jogging.

I usually do about two to four miles and that actually will take as long as your usual podcast, but then I'm kind of multitasking. I don't feel like I'm just wasting my time. Because running is really boring unless I see something. Sometimes I see some deer or a hawk or a turtle in the woods. It's great. But most of the time it's pretty dull. But if I'm listening to something as I jog along, the time goes by better and I learn something and I feel like I'm making better use of those 24 hours. I don't know why I only got 24 hours when I've got a lot more things to do that are 24 hours' worth. I do have a system. I make sure my little headset is charged. I even got a little watch, so I don't have to drag my phone and I can listen kind of painlessly. And I think the other part of all that is planning. I'm certainly a planner and it seems like you're a planner too.

HF: Yeah. All those things are important. And I think we have to decide when we want to multitask, does it work for us? Does it not? And sometimes we may just want to be fully present and do one thing. And so, this brings us to tip number three, which is, and I think you're going to take us there, "Do it and complete it right away or delegate it."

AW: Yeah. Well, I think that's a great segue. "Do one thing, and just do one thing once." I go through my emails, it's like delete, delete, delete, respond. Yes, no, later, delete, delete, delete. And it's very rare that I skip one, unless it's complicated or some long thing. Just get rid of those things and just get the task done. There was an old saying "Only touch the piece of paper, the envelope once." Well, now that we're in the digital world, just deal with it once. I think people that don't do that just waste a lot of time. Don't save those emails. They're not important. Get rid of them.



HF: That is one of my favorite tips. And I remember hearing that a while back too. “Never touch a piece of paper more than once.” You bring the mail in, don't put it on the kitchen table. Figure out what you're going to do with it. And it's so important about emails, like you said, because you can read them and then they're in your mind, but if you don't answer them, then you come back to some, you do others.

I think if someone is able to follow that advice, it really helps close the loop, help with efficiency. And like on the dating apps, you have to swipe left or swipe right. You just got to make that decision. I love that tip, Andrew.

Number four is another one of my favorites. “Eat that frog.” I don't know if you're familiar with the book by Brian Tracy, but I have a little story behind this. When I first heard this idea of eating that frog, which is about doing your hardest thing first, I was riding around in the car with my little brother, Dave or Davy or David, and he was listening to this cassette tape. So, it was a while back.

And this guy was talking about eating that frog. And I'm like, “What is this, Dave?” And he said, “Oh, I've been procrastinating. I want to learn how to invest in real estate and have these rentals. But I've just been procrastinating on learning about it.” I said, “Wait a minute, Dave. You are the last person in the world who needs to listen to this tape.” Because I saw him growing up, whatever he decided to do, he was incredibly persistent and he mastered it. I watched him teach himself how to ride a unicycle, then juggle, then juggle on the unicycle and take apart bikes, and build bikes. And he's a physicist. He just conquers all these mountains.

And so, when he was listening to eat this frog thing, I thought, “Well, if he needs it, I know I need it.” I try to eat frogs in the morning for breakfast, which is really to do my hardest things for the day. It's whatever you're pushing off. And for me it's often the things that take a lot of creative thinking, like writing and planning podcasts and things like that.



Because what happens is as I'm pushing them away and for later and doing other things that seem simpler, I used to have this little bit of dread that I have to do it. And my energy goes down. I almost feel tired, and then I'm not doing them, and I'm not getting them done and they're getting delayed. So, these frogs just get bigger and bigger.

If I can actually eat that frog, it sounds kind of gross, but it gives me energy. It gives me energy and I'm sort of leaping around like a frog for the rest of the day because I got the hardest stuff done.

AW: Oh, there can be great satisfaction. I agree with getting that frog taken care of. And I think as people, as you sort of develop and try to be efficient, it's different for different people, but a little introspection usually will tell you what's your most productive part of the day. For a lot of people, it's early in the morning. Some people are better between midnight and 2:00 AM in terms of being creative.

But it's worth figuring that out, because that's not the time to respond to emails. That's the time to do a musical composition or write a novel or prepare your presentation for the Nobel Prize Committee. That's when you really want to have all those neurons kind of optimized. And you need to strategize so that time doesn't get sucked up waiting in line at the DMV. You don't want to be doing errands during your best productive time of the day.

HF: Wow. That's such a good point. And it might be that I should eat frogs later in the day because I do have trouble in the morning. And that is bringing us in a way to tip number five, which you're going to talk to us about, which is focusing. Part of that is really finding the time when you can really deeply focus.

AW: Oh yeah. I found that's really important to me because I do a lot of things as you mentioned in the intro, and I do get tired. And frankly, tasks that are not difficult when I



start working in the morning, at 04:00 in the afternoon just seem, “Oh, there's just no way I could ever do that.” You put that off till the next day.

And in terms of focusing, distractions, they got to be eliminated. Turn off the phone, close the door, get rid of the dog, the cat, make sure there's no workman coming, your electrician's coming. All that stuff has got to be out of your mind so you can really do what's important. And sometimes that means you got to start work at 5:00 AM.

I was just reading Will Smith is in the news and I've been reading about it. And it turns out he's a pretty interesting guy and he wrote an autobiography that I haven't read. But one of his strategies, which kind of took me by surprise, is he gets up at 4:00 AM every day and meditates and plans his day until 06:00. Here's somebody who you wouldn't think is the most introspective guy in the world. He's a performer. And yet he wakes up at 04:00, between 04:00 and 06:00 kind of works out his day. And probably because that's the only time of his day that people aren't haranguing him for one thing or another.

Clearing your desk, there's even software. I know there's writing software where it just blots out your whole screen so that all you see is your Word document. I haven't found that to be necessary. It's more the potential interrupts that are in the back of your mind that this is going to get in the way or interrupt you because once you kind of get in the zone which is a lot of work to get in the zone, the last thing you want is somebody knocking on the door so you can sign for a FedEx. That's just awful.

And when you're talking about this, it's making me think of Cal Newport's book “Deep Work”. He talks about some different strategies that you can use for achieving deep work. And there's a monk, sort of go off in your cave or try to incorporate it like in the early mornings or at the end of the day. But I love that book because he goes through different ways to figure out how based on your schedule and your life, how you can find times for deep work in your schedule.

AW: Yeah. I think it's really tough particularly if you have a family and children.

HF: Oh yeah.

AW: And people who have their own lives, that intersect in many ways with your own and they have their own schedules and a lot of unpredictable events like "Gee, I'm working."

Yesterday there was a big storm here in Memphis, Tennessee. Huge tornadoes, I've never seen anything like it. But they closed my son's school at noon. It's like, "Got to come get him." It's like, "Whoa, he's not supposed to come up till 04:00. It's only 12:00." It's like "We got stuff to do." But obviously we didn't leave him at the door. We went and got him. But you have to kind of plan around life so that if you do have a personal or a professional mission, you got to get it done. You got to prioritize it.

HF: Right. And it always helps to set deadlines. I know I really could benefit from a boss that gave me deadlines to get things done. Thank you for that. That was really excellent, Andrew.

Tip number six is "Get curious about procrastination." I have my own theory here because I'll hear from doctors, my clients telling me, "Oh, I'm lazy. I procrastinate." And when I talk to them about what's actually going on, they're not lazy. Well, if you're a doctor, you could never have really gotten to where you are being lazy and doing too much procrastination.

But what I've found is that there's conflict underneath procrastination. There's a part of you who wants something and a part of you that's resistant to it. And if you don't judge it, but get curious about it, you can understand where the push pull is coming from, because if they're balancing out, then nothing's happening, you're procrastinating. So, we have to find what's going on with the brake pedal, what's going on with the gas and how it actually untangles whatever's causing the procrastination.

For example, in your career, if you want to make some changes, but you feel like time just goes by and even years go by, nothing is really changing. There's usually some conflict about, "Well, I want to do something different. I need to make some changes, but then these fears come up. Is my income going to go down? Am I going to lose the approval of others, disappoint people? Will I affect the security of my family?"

All these things come up so that the desire for change is counterbalanced by these fears. And the "what if" thinking, so then you end up with the emergency brake on "You're not really going anywhere."

AW: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I'm going to segue right away into number seven because for me, there's a close link, which is perfectionism. And for me, one of the reasons I procrastinate is because I want to do it perfectly. For example, I like to write fiction and somehow, I can find a million other things to do so that I run out of time before I write fiction.

And when I've thought about this, as you suggest, I think the reason is because I want my fiction writing to be perfect. And if it's not perfect, then I'm going to be very disappointed. And so, one way to avoid that disappointment is not to start in the first place. I think I procrastinate when I have a project that is so important to me that somehow failing at it or at least failing in my own eyes at it, is so disastrous that not starting is sort of a better solution than failing.

And then sometimes wanting to be perfect is very, very inhibiting. I had to put up some shelves in the garage for my wife. I have no idea how to do that. So, I procrastinate because I was afraid of making such a mess in the garage and then I'd have to hire someone to redo the drywall after I messed it up. So, I read about it and I stalled and I YouTube'd it and then finally I did it and then it wasn't quite perfect.

But then I decided, “Well, it's good enough.” I think there was an expression. I heard it first in the operating room from a surgeon when I was a medical student, which is “Better is the enemy of good.” In other words, sometimes you've tied a suture and it's not the best, but nothing's bleeding. And trying to redo it and make it perfect, the next thing it's bleeding all over the place and something else goes wrong. And now you've created this entire catastrophe when everything wasn't perfect, but it was just fine. Just like the rack that I put up in my garage, if I had tried to redo it, then there would be holes that you could see. And instead, it's off a few degrees from horizontal.

HF: It's a garage, right? Who's looking? It's a garage.

AW: It's a garage. Nobody will ever notice. I know it. It's bothering me because I know it's not straight. But I think better is the enemy of good. And in your day-to-day life, for example, your medical charts. A lot of doctors are spending a lot of time charting after every patient. It's like, “Well, how good does your note have to be? Do the words have to be spelled right? Does it have to have perfect grammar?” It's like, no, no. It just has to have your plan and whatever detail so that whatever you're billing for is substantiated by your note. But it doesn't have to win a literary contest.

Sometimes being perfect can really get in the way. It can keep you from starting, like with fiction, and it can keep you from getting home on time. I think it is important sometimes just to think about “Is perfection necessary for this task?”

HF: I know we could spend a whole podcast on perfectionism because it has so many layers to it. One thing that I've found helpful is to think about being 1% less compulsive. Like say with perfectionism. Don't try to just do a good enough job with your notes when you're used to closing up spaces and making sure the punctuation is proper because you're not going to be able to make that big change. But just to say tomorrow, can I be one less perfectionistic with my notes or whatever it is. And I find that it often relaxes my clients. “Oh yeah, I can do that.” And then the next time it's maybe 3% less



perfectionistic. To sort of figure out that you can let go of whatever this compulsion is and the world is not going to fall apart.

AW: The world doesn't fall apart. It keeps going. We had a doctor who is no longer with us, but she could never finish her notes and then they would be delinquent and then she'd have to have a meeting with the powers that be, and they were going to withhold her salary. And it's like, "Just finish the note. Just get it done. It doesn't have to be perfect." And so, not getting things done sometimes really causes problems, even if they're not perfect. Just get them done.

HF: Yeah. Yeah. And I know it's a challenge for a lot of physicians and there's fear underneath a lot of that. And so, sometimes it needs to be addressed at some deeper levels, but there are definitely lots of ways to help just get started. I think that's a great point you made of just get started, don't think about things too much and then it's easier to get moving. I want to take just a quick break and then we'll come back and wrap up with the seven tips. I'll just review them. All right. We'll be right back.

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All right. I'm back here with our wonderful guest, Dr. Andrew Wilner, and I am going to review the seven tips that we went over. Number one is, start with your "why." Number two, have a system for doing things. Number three, do it and complete it right away or



delegate it. In other words, just touch that piece of paper once or email. Four, eat that frog, do the hardest thing first. Five, focus. Give yourself time and space to do that deep work and without interruptions. Six, get curious about procrastination. And seven, address perfectionism and just get started.

Andrew, it's been lovely to have you here. I'd love it if you could tell the listeners a little bit about how they can get in touch with you and what you'd like them to know about you.

AW: Sure. To get in touch and I do appreciate questions and emails, my website is just my name, andrewwilner.com. And the project that I'm having the most fun with right now is my podcast, "The Art of Medicine with Dr. Andrew Wilner." I interview people who are just interesting to me. A lot of authors who've written books, a lot of physicians who've written books and then locum tenens people, spiritual leaders, anybody who intersects with the world of medicine. And we always have excellent discussions. That's a lot of fun. That comes out every two weeks.

And then for even more fun, and you can do this, this doesn't have to be done at your best part of the day. You can do this when you're all done with your work. I have a YouTube channel called "Underwater with Dr. Andrew." And it's all about what lives underwater mostly in Southeast Asia and I do little narration.

HF: Oh, interesting.

AW: Kind of like the Blue Planet on a smaller scale. In fact, I'll be away doing some diving and now that we can travel again. And so, I'm hoping to post some more videos very soon from exotic destinations.

HF: Oh, wonderful. I'll make sure to link to those ways for people to find you and these resources in the podcast show notes. And also, I want to let you know that there's going to be a download for this episode, which will have the books that we've mentioned



about time management, as well as some different ones. And then some other resources like apps that block your email and calendars that you can make your schedule with. So that will be at www.doctorscrossing.com/timemanagement where you can download these books and resources.

Thank you so much. I wish you all the best with your life and having all the things that you want to do and the time for it and your loved ones. Don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see in the next episode. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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