At a Glance

Mission

Dramatically and sustainably increase the [slack](#)[1] of all group members.

Background

In my sophomore year of college, I was a mess. I often wouldn't fall asleep until 2AM, barely got my work in on time, and operated under a ton of stress. Eventually, I had had enough, and I seriously devoted myself to figuring out how to do things better while also feeling better. I tried lots of things, and most didn't work. Nonetheless, over the next two years, I started learning how to speak the language of sustained achievement. Bit by bit, I got my sleep schedule under control, ate better, established a routine, learned informational hygiene, and started getting days (and then weeks) ahead of my coursework. The fall semester of my senior year, I was on fire - I finished my coursework and exam prep two weeks early, finished my graduate school applications a month ahead of time, had time to work on personal projects, and most importantly - I was **happy**.

Regression to the mean is a real thing; that semester was, in part, an outlier. Nonetheless, it has remained significantly easier for me to do very well than it was during that fateful sophomore year. Realizing that social expectation (in the form of "I'll see you at the gym at 5, man!") can be leveraged to great effect, a friend and I founded the Young Professionals that spring. We had a handful of consistent members, many of whom benefited greatly. One remarked to me that the Young Pros changed his life.

In this guide, I've tried to focus on what works most of the time for most people. Any problem can be broken up and solved. There's a lot of spurious pop psychology out there; be willing to question everything, including this document. If you have a better way of doing things, please share it!

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[1] Slack basically means "the freedom provided by having spare resources". It's an intuitive concept, but one without a word - until now. *LesserWrong* is a great site full of intelligent discussion and is an important "good idea farm", but it also has a learning curve imposed by a fairly specific vocabulary.

How It Works

- Each week at a set time, meet in a cozy environment where everyone can listen to each other. Each person added to a group will increase meeting length by about five minutes, so I'd imagine that a size of six is best.
- Each person should take two minutes to share how they did the last week, what they would do differently if they could do it again, and then proceed to this week's goals.
- Each person should set **two** goals: one small-medium habit with a large over-time payoff (making it easier for future you to get ahead), and one short-term performance goal (getting ahead now).
    - Broadly, the habit goal should be the change with the best slack / effort[2] ratio. What can they do that will save them the most time / money / health for the least effort? Someone addicted to Reddit could try the Freedom application and take back hours per week, every week, for the relatively small cost[3] (compared to hours a week) of the service.
    - The performance goal should be *at least* faster, better, or sooner than they would have done without the group. The difference should consist not of trying harder to impress the group, but finding cleaner, easier ways to approach short-term problems. This may also involve behavioral and/or trigger-based changes (explained later), but should be something that will have more immediate payoff. For example, someone has a big project that they're too nervous to start on - we could suggest they start a success spiral by not only dividing the problem into subtasks, but ensuring that the earlier subtasks start out trivially easy and slowly ramp up:
        - Go to the lab
        - Prep the staging area
        - Examine X under a microscope and record what I see
        - …
        - Write the conclusion of the report

    This is a short-term task. From a necessary-subdivision-for-getting-things-done standpoint, the first few items are way too detailed - why not just write "Do experiment"? The answer is that humans aren't rational. Starting a success spiral gives a tremendous psychological boost to performance.[4]

    In the moment and especially at first, you may not be able to come up with a good response for every situation, and that's totally fine. Just by coming to the

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[2] Habits generally must be executed faithfully for one to three weeks before they become ingrained and stop requiring additional willpower.

[3] All else equal, free services should be recommended over their paid counterparts. To avoid conflicts of interest, we should never use the group to get any kind of referral bonuses.

[4] Depending on the cause of the procrastination. Further reading on this topic is helpful and provided later on, but things shouldn't be too complicated for new group leaders. Just focus on the fundamentals and on learning how to better lead over time.

group and talking out what they need to do and what might go wrong, the participant has already gained value from the meeting. Do your best.
- For three minutes, everyone can discuss new approaches or refinements to what was tried.

Notes

- Bring fresh fruit / other *tasty*, healthful food to the meeting and advertise that you're bringing it.
- Introductions are obviously important. Furthermore, it should be made clear that while we should strive to come to the meeting with something great to share, failing to meet a goal can offer even more opportunities to grow and do better.
- Group members should be aware of the format and strive to not go too much over their time allocation (this should be a natural and casual expectation - the group should eventually feel like a warm collection of friends, not a perfectly-timed business meeting).
- Especially in early meetings, the group leader should share something somewhat vulnerable and humanizing (but not awkward); this will help others open up more easily.
- Especially in early meetings, the group leader will do more of the heavy lifting in suggesting new approaches for others.
- After the early meetings, better feedback can be obtained by having people write down their thoughts briefly before sharing their suggestions - this reduces the chance of people getting stuck on agreeing with the first suggestion shared.
- New group members should be given easier, slightly less effective solutions rather than their complicated counterparts - it's important that they see some results early so they can start their success spiral and feel good about the group.
- Extended personal discussions are heavily encouraged, but not *during* the meeting - after the meeting is better.
- If someone is talking forever, it is the group leader's responsibility to gently interrupt and offer to talk with them more afterwards. If not, people may get fidgety and focus less on the habits.
- Particularly proficient and enthusiastic members are ideal candidates for leadership of other groups. Alternatively, a better format may eventually be suggested so that one capable leader can lead more people without taking much more time.

Reference

This is where we share probably-effective techniques, tricks, and best practices. Habits should be acquired slowly and steadily (except for easy wins like f.lux). Sleep habits should generally be worked on first - sleeping right is a force multiplier in that it allows more time and energy for everything else. Hard-line goals ("I won't drink any more pop") can sometimes be easier than soft-line goals as they avoid slippery slopes.

None of these items are guaranteed to work for *everyone*, but if something doesn't seem effective, we should probably discuss it to decide whether to fix or remove. Good habits make

us feel more free overall; suffocating habits are neither sustainable nor enjoyable. You can be a good leader without knowing everything here. Summaries are meant to supplement and confirm understanding gained from the links, not to replace it. New items should be added at the end of each list.

Essential

Tricks with considerable upside that have zero downside (like f.lux) or effortful items that have incredible return-on-investment (like Anki).

- f.lux: blue light stops you from sleeping; f.lux stops blue light from stopping you from sleeping (Night Shift system feature (iOS); Twilight app (Android)).
- Anki: this spaced repetition system allows you to learn new things daily for a fixed amount of effort per day. This program is free to download for desktop computers but is paid on mobile app stores. The most important learning aid out there - especially for language learners.
- Beating procrastination: shield, sword. Procrastination seems to be fueled by four main factors, all of which we can control / mitigate. The two articles introduce the factors and present actionable ways to deal with them.
- Trigger Action Plans: how to make new habits stick. The Plan consists of finding a behavioral Trigger, deciding what the new Action will be, and executing.
  - Doubly important for emotional states. What you want when you're mad, sad, or aroused is totally different from your clear-headed goals. For now, just try to recognize and adjust for this (I'm currently testing a promising workaround, but it's too soon to say whether it really works).
- Gratitude journals have been repeatedly demonstrated to make people fundamentally happier and more satisfied with their lives. Seriously, take a few minutes every week to think about what you're grateful for (make sure to *feel* the gratitude - don't just write something down!).
- Good sleep: the average adult needs 8h21m of sleep per night. Any less, and you are liable to accrue sleep debt, which doesn't go away until it's slept away. Everyone must understand that they most likely *do* have time to make this happen (at least on weeknights).
  - Sleep habits are doubly important to be consistent with at first, as they also involve physiological processes which become acclimated to routines. Giving yourself three weeks of strict compliance with a new routine may mean turning down fun nights out. It's worth it. After you're comfortably acclimated, you can safely stay out one or two nights a week without throwing off your circadian.
  - Night people should become morning people, or miss out on massive health benefits.
  - Make sure there isn't ambient light or noise in your sleep environment; reduced sleep quality reduces well-being. Buying earplugs and a face mask may be a good investment.

- ○ Don't exercise within a few hours of bedtime; exercise earlier in the day, however, contributes to being able to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- **Bookend your days**: you can't control everything during the day, but you control the ends - make sure your routine sets you up for success. Note that this is useful even if your sleep schedule is not yet where you want it to be. My morning routine (notice the lack of email):
  - ○ Wake up early (6AM)
  - ○ Shower, brush, floss
  - ○ Stretch and dress
  - ○ Cook and eat a healthy breakfast
  - ○ Spend a quiet hour reading a book
  - ○ Start working on my number one priority for the day
- **Planning fallacy**: projects will generally cost slightly more time/money/effort than your worst-case estimate, *not* how much you intuitively expect. Avoid by using the outside view: how long did similar projects take in the past? Ignore features specific to your project that you're *sure* explain why you'll be done sooner.
  - ○ Avoiding the planning fallacy while *also* not succumbing to Parkinson's law (work expands to fill the time allotted) can be difficult. Rule of thumb: in broad terms, give yourself enough time to avoid the planning fallacy, but set very ambitious daily goals (and simply do your best to meet them without feeling bad if you don't). Sounds tough, but improves with practice and time.
- Eleven hours (total) of meditation strengthens your brain's self-control powers to the extent that *we can image the difference*.
- **Daily flossing increases life expectancy by about a year.**
- **Power poses**: by changing your posture, you can reduce your cortisol (stress marker!) by up to 33% and increase testosterone (assertiveness) by up to 25% (which, in this case, is still a good outcome for women).
- Precommitting to things-we-won't-want-to-do-later:
  - ○ Don't buy food you shouldn't eat and you won't eat it.
  - ○ Charge your phone across the house to stop yourself from using it in bed (buy another alarm if needed). Likewise, setting your alarm far from your bed can counteract the snooze syndrome.
  - ○ **Freedom** can stop you from going to sites you define during routines you define. Paid (I chose ~$60 for lifetime access), but has already saved me well over 60 hours of time that I would have spent on Reddit in the few months I've been using it. **Free alternatives exist**, but are much less effective - they don't cover all of your devices and are thus easy to circumvent.
  - ○ **Computers can be configured to routinely shut down at a given time**.
- Impulse quarantine:
  - ○ Cheat days are the classic example of this. Unfortunately, they can get out of hand and leave you feeling bloated and bad. I recommend sticking to a rule for all but one *food item* each week. At first, the food item should be consumed at a given time and day (to prevent waffling), but once you trust yourself a bit more,

you can do it any time a week, once a week. Nothing bigger than a donut; eventually, a Hershey's Kiss should fill that sugar craving / check the mental box. After the habit is strong, exceptions can also be made where there is a large social cost to not eating something - if your crush buys you a chocolate, you probably shouldn't just toss it in the trash. This is not a justification for caving whenever your friends offer you something, however.

○ The concept of cheat days can be extended to Freedom - I programmed myself a few hours every Sunday to browse Reddit to my heart's desire. During the week, I can resist the urge to cheat via postponement: "I'll just look at that on Sunday". The upside over not cheating at all is that instead of gradually wanting to stop my routine over time, I can "let the pressure off" each week.

Useful

Everything else good.

- Nutrition is the cornerstone of maintaining high energy and feeling good:
  - Best single thing to change about a diet is usually swapping out soda for water. Next best thing is using impulse quarantine on eating artificial sugars. Eventually, you'll lose whatever sweet tooth you may have and find yourself dizzy after just consuming a moderate amount of sugar.
  - I don't have personal experience with stopping smoking or drinking coffee, but I've seen the neuroscience research - it's important.
- Information hygiene reduces stress and saves time:
  - Everything you need to be at should go in a (physical or digital) calendar.
  - Likewise for to-do lists. Track, track, track - no longer will you have the nagging feeling of having forgotten something important!
  - To prevent task pileup, if something will only take a few minutes, do it as soon as you learn about it.
  - Be informed, but not inundated - I strongly recommend against checking the news more than once a week. Take a few hours to do good research before voting, of course. Spending hours each day checking news aggregators is just stressful entertainment.
  - A goldmine of good principles can be found in the Elimination and Time Wasters sections of [this summary](#) of Four-Hour Workweek. In particular, limiting email checking and push notifications to the bare minimum.
- Mnemonic devices and other ways to learn more effectively:
  - People needing to remember sets of things or *Chinese characters in particular* should learn how to build memory palaces (a good guide can be found [here](#) - skip to "How you SHOULD learn the Kanji" for info on memory palaces). I can personally attest that this works; along with Anki, I used memory palaces to learn to read 2,200 Chinese characters in three months.
  - Foreign language acquisition:

- - - ■ Similar-sounding words should not be learned at the same time; this can cause long-term confusion when trying to recall and produce the words.
      - ■ Set your phone language to be your target language.
      - ■ Full-sentence translation cards are better than single vocab words, as they provide context.
      - ■ After reaching intermediate level in a language, make an Anki card for any sentence you can't translate as you're going through your day.
  - Drink a ton of water immediately after your getting out of bed to wake yourself up right away.[5]
  - Low-maintenance habits which have medium-to-large benefits:
    - Keep a clean room and a clean working environment.
    - Every time you spend money, record your purchase (Wally is a great app for this). Drastically reduces impulse buys for a low time and effort commitment.
  - Schelling fences: certain things are easier to commit to doing at certain times than others. This is one of those things where you read it once and benefit forever just by *knowing* about it. Helpful for averting nights otherwise lost to binge-watching TV.
  - Depressed students should get professional help, but those with mild depressive tendencies or symptoms would do well to use a sunlight visor (freely available from CAPS at Snell Hall) for a few minutes daily.
  - Text editors and eBook readers should be set to a smooth font, with the text black and the background white; this significantly decreases eye strain.

Further Reading

- 80,000 Hours: How to Be Successful
- *The Willpower Instinct*
- *Thinking, Fast and Slow*
- *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*
- The Science of Winning (the first of a highly-informative, somewhat technical sequence of articles)

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[5] Is this just me? I've found this incredibly helpful, but I can't find replicational studies; it may just be placebo.