

## **TIME-SHIFTING** by Stephan Rechtschaffen

Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D., cofounder and director of the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, warns that our emotions are taking a back seat to the rapid pace of our lives. With our past devoid of experience, our future filled with anxiety, the only place to go? Into the present.

There are cultures on this planet that have no word for minute or hour; where a moment can last a whole morning. We don't live in one of them. Rather, we live in a culture where the efficient and productive use of time has become high art--a culture where, if you can balance three spinning plates on three thin sticks, you are rewarded with a fourth plate. Then a fifth.

The belief that time is a resource that must be monitored closely and managed carefully is one of the basic laws of our time-crunched world, as is the imperative to do more and do it quicker. Is it any wonder our culture favors the young and energetic? Who else can accomplish the hundreds of tasks each of us must master in a typical day, as well as process the thousand bits of information rushing at us every hour?

In my workshops at Omega and around the country on time-shifting--learning how to toggle between hyperproductivity and an awareness of the world around you--the first question I pose is "Do you feel that you have enough time in your daily lives?" Invariably, more than 90 percent declare an overwhelming sense of "time-poverty"--part of an epidemic of anxiety and pressure in our society.

Ironically, in response, methods to improve our management of time have gained in popularity, along with new, speedier technology that helps us develop greater efficiency. Yet while these initially seem to help, they ultimately serve only to increase the speed of our lives. We learn to

go faster and get more done--only to take on more work and responsibility.

A curious thing happens as the pace of our lives grows faster and faster--our definition of a "moment" grows shorter and shorter, moving our awareness of time into ever-tinier increments. By cramming each moment so full of events, we leave ourselves no time to actually experience them in any meaningful way.

As a result, the future arrives that much quicker, and it begins to predominate. The "now" becomes a prelude to the "next." We do this so we can get to that. We work for the weekend, rush through lunch to get back to our desks, worry about next month's deadline before this month is completed. We divide our attention and awareness between the task at hand that we're rushing to complete and the next item on our day-planner.

## **"MIND TIME" VS. "EMOTIONAL TIME"**

As well as not living in the present, the vast majority of us spend our time not being present in our lives. Slowly, our perceptions of the world and our existence in it are being curtailed. We are so focused on what's ahead that we just can't come alive in the here and now. Instead of shortening each moment of time, instead of breaking them down into progressively smaller units, we need to learn how to expand them, how to open ourselves more comfortably to our senses and bring attention into the without having our mind race back and forth with other distracting thoughts.

The pace of our lives has created a chasm between our emotions and our thoughts, which operate at different speeds. Thoughts, which are processed electrically, communicate faster than our hormonal and chemical emotions. The demands of the modern world have required us to function more quickly, so we use what I call "mind time" to mentally engage to our fullest in order to juggle upcoming events. There is no time to deal with or process our slower

feelings--utilizing what I call "emotional time"--so we repress them or stuff them down.

Despite this avoidance, however, our emotions don't disappear, nor do they stay down for long. The moment we begin to slow down, they come flooding back in and we begin to feel again. Unfortunately, many people report that when they try to relax, what comes up are uncomfortable emotions--anxiety or anger over unresolved encounters, guilt over inactivity. So we get busy again, and repress once more those feelings that allow us to fully experience our lives.

Confronting this reservoir of unprocessed emotion is one of the major challenges that face us as we continue to age. Growing older involves a lifetime shift in the way we perceive time as well as the way we use it. If our experience of slowing down is always pain or discomfort, no wonder we can't sit still, no wonder we busy ourselves and continue to feel in a rush to accomplish.

## **LINEAR VS. CIRCULAR TIME**

Each of us is born into and raised in a particular "time world"--an environment with its own rhythm to which we entrain ourselves. Certain cultures have related to time as a circular phenomenon, in which there is no pressure or future anxiety. The whole of existence goes around: the cycle of the seasons, of planting and harvesting, the daily return of the sun, of birth and death.

In circular time there is no pressing need to achieve and create newness, or to insatiably produce more than is needed to simply survive. Additionally, there is no fear of death. Such societies have successfully integrated the past and future into a peaceful sense of the present. They also honored the wisdom of elders who held the knowledge of the past--upon which the future was clearly linked.

By contrast, linear time--which is concerned primarily with the future directly in front of us and unconnected with the past--ignores this wisdom, instead concerning itself with the factual and technical information needed to fulfill impending demands. Here, the process of aging is considered akin to becoming "has-beens," past the age of productivity and without a clear role in a population of producers. In a fast-forward society such as ours, which may be seen as "info-bound" rather than "wisdom-bound," those not capable of rushing forward are seen as disposable.

## **GETTING OLDER**

Starting somewhere around our mid-twenties, our physical and mental capabilities begin to slow down somewhat. Of course, at the same time, the pace of life around us is ever-increasing. And the resulting gap is disorienting; it creates anxiety, which only worsens our situation and pushes us to move faster.

In addition, we tend to focus more on the past as we get older--old television shows, music, photographs, and even relationships take on new significance with each passing year, acting as remnants of a simpler time, a time when we didn't feel so rushed and unfulfilled.

Yet if our past is empty--filled only with the work that we've done and the status we've achieved--it can be very disconcerting. The past, after all, is a reflection of how well we've lived in the present, how much of life's emotions and experiences we've incorporated into who we are today. If, for instance, we've lived in an empty manner--constantly looking to the future with anxiety and fear for all that needs to be accomplished; repressing our emotions because there isn't enough time to experience them; trying to speed our way through activities while simultaneously performing other tasks--then the past is, in effect, absent from our lives.

We experience this loss as a draining of our residual, or reserve, capacity to experience life--that is, it is continual throughout our adulthood, although we don't actually notice the depletion until later. Then, when we need to have a well from which to draw, we discover that our memory banks are empty; there are no experiences from which we can draw comfort and wisdom and a better sense of who we are as we age and continue to change.

Likewise, there is a lack of emotions that might enhance our lives, because we had no time to experience them. We find at age 30 that our 20s have been wasted in pursuit of corporate success, for instance, or at age 40 that we've missed out on our children's upbringing or a significant portion of our marriage, and so on.

So, if the past is nonexistent and the future equals anxiety, what is needed is to come into the present moment. Instead of rushing, take your time, let your rhythm slow down. You can rush later if you need to, but for now, simply perform the task that is in front of you, whether it's washing the dishes or commuting to work.

We spend our lives waiting for the important events to take place, rushing through these "in-between" moments. Yet the reality is that these interims actually make up a significant portion of our lives. Allowing ourselves to be present in them and experience them fully is what makes us alive--and helps to keep us young.

This involves developing a sense of mindfulness, a way of being that puts you fully in the moment without pressure or anxiety about staying on schedule. It is a quality that each of us needs to learn how to cultivate more in our lives, awakening all of our senses and being comfortable in the present--to feel rooted, with nowhere to go and no need to rush, without feeling bored or anxious. We're aging, but that's okay. our senses don't work as well as they used to, but that's okay, too.