



# Living at your own pace

3,056 words

“How are you?” “Oh, busy as ever.”

Millions of conversations begin with this kind of exchange every day. Our lives may well be very busy, but why should we choose this specific word to summarise the state of our lives to people we've not seen recently? Is it because we spend most of our time living life at a frenetic pace and trying to juggle various activities and responsibilities? Or is it because we have got used to using it as a phrase – as a basic description of our lives as we see them? Or do we sometimes use it falsely because we feel it is rather shameful not to be busy? This article will consider why we live in such a fast, rushed and busy culture, and some of the disadvantages of living in this way.

## **The pace of modern life**

In the West, our lives are more rushed than they have ever been, and many people do not enjoy a reasonable work/life balance. Despite the fact that over the last 150 years annual working time in the industrialised countries has fallen steadily, from around 3,000 hours to between 1,400 and 1,800 hours, there was a point in the 1980s at which this decline stopped. The average working week in the UK is now 43.2 hours, which is among the highest in Europe.

Just over 22% of UK men who work full-time work over 48 hours a week (classed by the Working Time Regulations as 'long hours') – this is the highest in Europe, and compares with an average of 11% across the other EU member states. Beyond Europe it is even worse – a quarter of men in the US work over 48 hours a week, as do around one third of men in Australia and 36% of men in Japan.

Some employers and governments have begun to take the issue of work/life balance seriously, although it could be argued that they have focused on increasing the 'flexibility' of working hours rather than reducing them.

The number of working hours is not the only indicator of how rushed work makes us feel however, as there is also the question of the intensity of our work. This seems to have increased in recent years as, with the help of technologies, it becomes possible to perform many tasks simultaneously. Technology enables us to perform tasks with greater speed and intensity, and the competitive nature of the economy demands that we pass these gains on to the marketplace, making our roles increasingly pressurised.

Most of us have to work, and for many people having an appropriate job is an important part of their sense of identity and fulfilment in life. But work is just one of many aspects of our lives, and for many people it plays far too dominant a role, with their work circumstances controlling other areas of their lives, such as family time and social life.

It is not only the time spent at work that takes time away from other priorities in our lives. The average worker in the UK spends 139 hours a year travelling to and from work – time which could potentially be spent on other things.

Our work/life balance is not the only problem. Even when we have some control over our work time, many people are constantly hopping from one activity to another outside work, trying to balance a range of commitments and interests in their leisure time – from family life to shopping through to socialising. Not only are we often time-pressured, but even when we're not we seem to want to cram as much as possible into our lives, making them a sprint through a series of activities rather than a walk in which we enjoy the view and allow life to unfold in front of us.

Leisure, as well as work, has become more intensive. One of the factors shaping the way we approach our lives is the importance of 'speed' within our Western culture – fast food, speed dating, 24 hour news – life 'in the fast lane' seems to be something to aspire to. Labour-saving devices continue to be invented in order to save us time. But why do we see time as something that has to be saved, or something into which we need to cram as much activity as possible? Behind this thinking seems to lie a particular view of what life is about, and in the next section we will consider what this view might be for many people.

A concept linked to the notions of 'rushing' and 'being busy' is that of 'doing'. Just as we like to feel we are busy, many of us also like to show others that we have been doing lots of different activities. A conversation to catch up with someone you've not spoken to for a while can become a list of exciting things that each of you has done recently – rather like ticking off a range of items on a list. If you happen to have adopted a way of life that is not filled with a constant range of new activities, then conversations like this can be more difficult. "So, what have you been up to?" "Oh, I've read some good books, seen some friends, potted in the garden."

### **Why are we so rushed?**

Influences on our current attitudes towards time can be traced back to early Christianity, which not only warned against laziness but also developed a regimented, disciplined attitude towards time – for example, within the codes for monastic living set down within the Rule of Saint Benedict, which was influential in the Church in the Middle Ages. As the power and influence of the Church spread, so did its values.

Perhaps the most obvious influence on our modern attitude towards time was the Industrial Revolution and the advent of industrial capitalism. At this point, industrialists began to see a worker's time in the workplace as a resource to be managed – efficient use of this resource resulted in increased productivity and therefore larger profits. Benjamin Franklin's dictum – 'time is money' – became a driving philosophy.

The growth and dominance of the capitalist system since the Industrial Revolution has meant that its philosophy of time has continued to dominate western society to the present day. Time has become "a currency that we can spend or save, a resource, an economic variable". This philosophy of time has seeped into our attitudes and values in various ways – not simply with the idea that 'time is money', but also in our obsession with speed and efficiency, the idea that non-economically productive work like childcare is less valuable than economically productive work, and the idea that laziness is bad and being busy is good. Capitalism seems to have exacerbated the puritanical view of time we inherited from Christianity.

Advances in technology and communications during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have enabled us to achieve ever faster responses to the demands of capitalism, but at the same time have pushed our obsession with speed and efficiency to ever greater heights.

Our concept of time has therefore changed over the years according to our social, cultural and economic circumstances – our view of time comes down to what is valued in a society at a particular point. Our modern view of time seems to have become embedded in our culture to such an extent that we do not realise that it carries particular values with it.

Before the imposition of our strict, mechanised and morally loaded view of time, things were very different. We had not ascribed any arbitrary, puritanical values to our use of time, and our relationship with it was tied to nature. Tom Hodgkinson, editor of *The Idler* magazine, describes it thus:

*“Joyful chaos, working in tune with the seasons, telling the time by the sun, variety, change, self-direction; all this was replaced with a brutal, standardised work culture, the effects of which we are still suffering from today.”*

Our adoption of the idea of time as a currency is not just confined to the workplace. It has extended into the way we view time generally. We see it as something that needs to be ‘spent wisely’, and we put pressure on ourselves to do this. A good example of this is in our desire to cram as much as possible into our daily lives. Being busy is seen as an admirable trait and a sign of social status, as one is being a ‘productive’ person. So not only do we spend our working lives in a pressurised relationship with time trying to be ‘productive’ for our employers, but we also seem to pressurise ourselves to maximise our ‘productivity’ in our social lives!

A glance at the history of our attitude towards time also seems to suggest a reason for the modern tendency to see social life as a range of activities to be ticked off a list. Perhaps we have come to regard social activities as ‘commodities’ that we ‘consume’, and we feel the need to consume more of them, just as we do with the latest products and services. The idea of persevering with an existing activity seems to run contrary to our modern desire for novelty.

## **What’s wrong with being rushed?**

### **Being rushed can damage our health**

Attempting to keep up an intensive pace of life can take its toll on both our physical and mental health. We can feel pressurised and stressed, and not take time to care for ourselves properly – for example, if we often grab a snack to eat ‘on the run’ or buy convenience food, instead of following a healthy diet. The experience of trying to cram too much into our lives may not be the only thing that can have a negative effect on our health. The prioritisation of speed and ‘busy-ness’ can also create a form of status anxiety – the feeling that if we aren’t frantically busy then we aren’t valued members of society.

### **Rushing is unsustainable**

Our current obsession with speed is damaging our prospects of having a good quality of life (not to mention survival) in the future, partially because “the faster we live, the faster we consume the planet’s finite resources and trash the natural systems on which we depend,” and also because our obsession with speed leads us to focus on the short-term, rather than on adopting the long-term vision and self-regulation that will be necessary to secure a sustainable future.

### **We're not in control of our lives when we're rushed**

Once we get onto the treadmill of rushing, we can be in danger of relinquishing control of our lives, as we are swept away by the overwhelming, endless flow of demands that we and society place on ourselves. To quote James Goodman and Britt Jorgensen in *About Time*:

*"Much of the stress that we feel in our everyday lives stems from a feeling that our time is not really our time. We have no control over it and, despite our best efforts, have become slaves to the unrelenting onward march."*

Living at high speed can also become habitual, leading us to feel that something is missing if we are not rushing all the time.

### **Overwork can prevent us from giving enough time to other priorities**

We may be missing out on other priorities in life because of overwork. In a 2007 report, the National Centre for Social Research found that, among people working full-time, 84% of women and 82% of men would like to spend more time with their family. Most people have priorities in life other than just paid work, for what is the point of life if we are not able to give time to the things that we care about?

### **We might not want our lives to be this way**

This culture of speed has spread from our working lives into our private lives. We can be caught in a vicious circle: we have little time to stand back and reflect on what we really want in life – to step off the treadmill, relax and consider our real priorities and goals. If we don't do this, we may not even realise that we are not living the kind of lives we really want. We also need time to be able to think creatively about what inspires and interests us, and develop new interests.

We also have little opportunity to consider how much time we should give to different areas of our lives in order to get the most out of them. And this leads us to another key point – the importance of enjoying our time. We may be so rushed, and juggling so many activities, that we aren't fully engaged in, or enjoying, the activity we are currently doing because we are thinking about the next one. This highlights a faulty assumption at the heart of the culture of speed – the assumption that life is just a series of activities that are purchased with a currency called time, and that we should try to maximise the number of these activities. This is a one-dimensional view of time, and indeed life. There is also a dimension of quality as well as quantity to life – of appreciating the experience at a given moment. To be able to do this, we need to concentrate on the present moment, without cluttering up our minds with worries, plans and thoughts for the future.

Additionally, we might each have different views about what makes for a good quality of life, and different views about how we should balance the dimensions of quantity and quality in our lives. For example, some of us may feel that we don't have to do specific activities – or anything in particular – in order to enjoy our lives. Appreciating and enjoying the profound experience of being alive can be one of the great pleasures of life. The famous lines from 'Leisure' by W. H. Davies are pertinent:

*"What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare."*

We should be wary of any doctrine (whether capitalism, religion or environmentalism) that tells us that we should adopt a particular balance between quality and quantity, because such a recommendation will invariably be built on arbitrary assumptions about what is important in life. Following anything other than our own preferences is likely to be damaging to us, as we will not be living the lives we really want. Being endlessly busy may simply not be the way of life that we really want.

## **We don't have a choice about being rushed**

There is nothing wrong with being busy *per se*. Work can be an important source of identity, purpose and fulfilment, and a busy social life outside work can be fun. A quiet life may not be to everyone's taste.

We should, however, be able to make a conscious choice about the kind of lives we want to lead, and the pace at which we want to lead them. The dominance of our speed-focused culture makes it hard for most people to see that such a choice is available to them, as the only speed available in modern mainstream society seems to be 'fast'. This has a number of effects on us besides those we have already discussed:

- Firstly, it can be difficult not to be influenced by the norms of society. The dominance of the culture of speed may affect us in a negative way without us realising it. It may lead us to believe that this is the only way to live, and that if we aren't thriving in this environment, then there must be something wrong with us. It becomes difficult to see that we actually have a choice about the pace, quality and type of lives we want.
- Secondly, even if we do get to the point of wanting to get off the treadmill, it can be difficult to actually do so, because the alternatives to this lifestyle can not only be difficult to identify but can also represent too much of a sacrifice and change. In this situation, the path of least resistance seems to be to carry on as we are.

One reason why getting off the treadmill seems to be such a sacrifice is that most of our life plans in the West follow a particular model of how to live. In this model, our life plans are built around the idea that we will need to be as productive as possible with our time until we retire, when we can enjoy some rest (and then gently expire, having worked ourselves into the ground for most of our lives). This has been the traditional life plan of a worker in a capitalist society for decades and is the model that accompanies our culture of speed and 'busy-ness'.

Most people under the age of 65 are therefore busily trying to build up and pay off a range of major financial commitments (including mortgages and other loans) they have made in order to stand themselves in good shape for their old age, whilst also trying to maintain a consumerist lifestyle in the meantime. The prospect of making changes in the short term such as 'downsizing' our level of working, our range of commitments or even the speed of our lives might seem to be difficult in the face of these other long-term priorities in our lives.

But why should we delay living until we are old? And do we really need to consume as much as we currently do in order to be happy? Do we really need to earn as much, and therefore work as much, as we do?

Moving towards a different life plan that allows us to live the life we want, throughout our whole life, may not be as difficult as it seems. We just need to be honest with ourselves about the relationship we want with time, and take control of it. Sometimes we may want life in the fast lane, and sometimes we may not. The important thing is to live on our own terms and not be made to feel guilty or pressured by external influences that are pushing a particular philosophy of how to use time. If we can learn to do this, it can change our lives for the better.

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