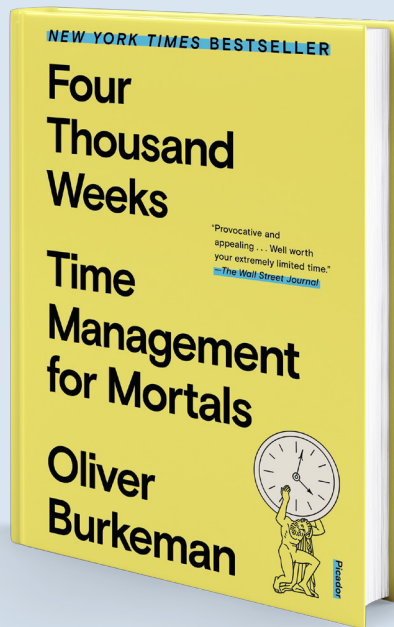


# Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



## Four Thousand Weeks Time Management for Mortals

By Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman is a feature writer for The Guardian. He is a winner of the Foreign Press Association's Young Journalist of the Year Award and has been short-listed for the Orwell Prize. He wrote a popular weekly column on psychology, "This Column Will Change Your Life," and has reported from New York, London, and Washington, D.C. His books include *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* and *The Antidote: Happiness for People who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*.

A Book Review by Soundview

## Tools for Constructing a Meaningful Life

In his introduction to *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, Oliver Burkeman states, "Arguably, time management - like its hipper cousin, productivity - is a depressingly narrow-minded affair, focused on how to crank through as many work tasks as possible..." The average human being has 4,000 weeks in which to accomplish all that is to be accomplished because that is the length of the average human lifespan. While most other time management books attempt to lay out productivity principles in order to help the reader gain mastery over their time, Burkeman takes a different approach. He believes that control over one's time is not something that human beings can strive for because it is largely out of one's reach. The more tasks a person attempts to fit into their day, the more tasks will arise. Accomplishing more tasks will never allow one to experience the sense of calm and control most people try to achieve because there will always be more to do. Therefore, in his book, Burkeman attempts to rehabilitate his readers' view of time and to help them form a new perspective that will allow for greater peace. Whereas most time management books rely on tips and tactics, Burkeman largely focuses on philosophy and psychology to help his readers gain a sense of peace in relation to time.

### Choosing to Choose

In his first section, Burkeman explains that "the real problem isn't our limited time. The real problem... is that we've unwittingly inherited, and feel pressures to live by, a troublesome set of ideas about how to use our limited time." He goes on to explain how people in medieval England saw time differently. They did not see time as an entity. This mindset is hard for modern people to understand, Burkeman explains, because it is so foreign to how we see the world and time. Farming peasants in the past did not have pressure to get everything out of the way because farmers would always have more things to do. There is no end point to milking a cow because it will always need to be milked again the next day. These farmers' lives are task oriented lives where "the rhythms of life emerge organically from the tasks themselves."

While there are benefits to this type of life, Burkeman goes on to say that this mode of living keeps people from accomplishing more than what a small-scale farmer can accomplish because if a person wants to coordinate with other people, then time must be measured in a different way. He explains that a need for this coordination is what led to the creation of clocks, but this visibility of time changed how people related to it: it became abstract, separated from “the specific activities on which one might spend it.” When time is viewed in this manner, it becomes a resource, and people feel the need to make better use of it. People also begin to start thinking and planning for the future and attempt to consistently use their time in service of the future. He says, “the trouble with attempting to master your time, it turns out, is that time ends up mastering you.” What people need to do, he maintains, is to accept their limitations and learn to see that in a lifetime with limited hours, choices must be made. Every time a person chooses to do one activity, they are by necessity, choosing to forgo any number of other ways they could be spending their time. He believes there is freedom in this acknowledgment because people can choose to spend their time on activities that matter most to them.

Burkeman maintains that if we cannot get everything we need to do done in the specified time period, that we simply cannot get them done no matter how efficient we become. Instead of acknowledging this, however, he maintains that most people just dig their heels in deeper and try to work harder to get more done. But he maintains that “there’s no reason to believe you’ll ever feel ‘on top of things’ or make time for everything that matters, simply by getting more done.” Part of the reason for this is that the more a person accomplishes, the more their goalposts change: more things will start to feel important and meaningful. Another problem with simply getting more tasks done is that it does not necessarily mean a person is spending more time on what is important or meaningful.

He maintains that most people do not have full control over their time and simply must accomplish certain tasks. He is not advocating for the renouncement of responsibilities. Rather, he wants his reader to understand that becoming more productive and getting more done in a day will not result in more peace of mind or take away a person’s feeling of uncomfortable busyness. He encourages his reader to become okay with not getting everything done. This requires a person to focus on what is most important.

## Facing Mortality

Burkeman discusses the different relationship with time people have when they realize that their time on Earth is temporary. He describes this difference in relation to a ski trip he regularly takes with his family. If he had an unlimited amount of years on the planet and a corresponding unlimited amount of time, this ski trip would not have the same emotional intensity that it does. This is because part of the value in the trip is in knowing that the trips will not last forever and that his relationships with his family will not last forever because they are all mortal, and their time on Earth will come to an end. He does not believe that people can realistically spend all of their time with this acute awareness

of their own mortality, but he believes that coming to terms with one’s mortality, even in brief moments, can make life more meaningful. This is because when a person truly understands the limited number of years they have, they can choose to use those years in ways that are meaningful. While some people might approach their mortality with disappointment, wishing they had more time, he thinks about it all as possibility, knowing that he might never have existed at all. Instead of seeing mortality as a lack of an infinite number of years, he sees it as the addition of years that he need not ever have had at all.

What all of this leads to is the inevitability of procrastination. At any given moment, a person is procrastinating all of the things they could be doing but are not. He does not believe that the problem most people face is that they are not adequately focusing their time on the things that matter the most. Instead, the problem is that they have too many things that matter the most. People frequently try to allot time to their most important activities by taking care of the smaller or less important activities first to get them out of the way. This usually does not work, so Burkeman implores his reader to instead pay themselves first when it comes to time by making sure to devote at least some time each day to those things that mean most. He also encourages his reader to limit the number of projects they have going at any one time. When a person has too many projects, they can flip from one to the other when things get tough. What this ends up doing, however, is ensuring that very little actually gets completed. Finally, he encourages his reader to get rid of mid-level priorities, instead choosing to focus on what is most important.

All of the above recommendations refer to a type of procrastination that Burkeman calls good procrastination. There is another type of procrastination that is better avoided, and this stems from perfectionism. He believes that people tend to procrastinate on tasks they ought to do or want to do because they are paralyzed by their own limitations and perceived inability to achieve perfection. To these people, Burkeman reminds them that perfection is impossible. He says, “If you’re procrastinating on something because you’re worried you won’t do a good enough job, you can relax - because judged by the flawless standards of your imagination, you definitely won’t do a good enough job. So you might as well make a start.” He also addresses those who avoid committing to a person or decision because they fear something better may come along. He says, however, that people are happier when they have made a commitment than when they are continuing to pursue other opportunities.

## Distraction and Attention

People have been concerned with distraction all the way back to the time of the ancient Greeks. Distraction is an important concern because “what you pay attention to will define, for you, what reality is.” Attention, according to Burkeman, is life because a person’s life is defined by what they pay attention to. Distractions can be things that keep people from the tasks they are meant to do, but even careers themselves can be distractions if they are keeping people from what it is they really believe they should be doing. A person cannot commandeer their attention completely. This would not even be ideal because in order



*... the person who devotes all of his or her time to living in the present moment is trying to control time just as much as the person who is always using it for future gain.”*

to survive, people need to be able to pay attention to dangers outside of their immediate task that need their attention. Social media and other digital commodities are designed and focused to draw a person's attention and to keep it on the app or website in question. Since these apps have so much of our attention, they can influence our reality by feeding us information that conforms with a worldview. He maintains that the technology industry is not wholly responsible for our distractions, however, because we willingly devote much of our time to these apps.

## Beyond Control

Burkeman moves on to discuss attempts to control time, and he does so by maintaining that any act a person participates in will take more time than they plan. Allotting more time to a task does not help, however, because people will still go over time. He believes that people who obsessively plan do so in order to claim control over the future. Because the future cannot be known, this obsessive planning and future focus creates the very anxiety the planning was meant to get rid of. There is another problem with inordinate planning. That is that there will always be more to plan. When one task has come to fruition, more will arise. Therefore, if a person is forestalling peace until all the planning is done, they will never find peace. All of this does not mean that Burkeman believes that planning is futile. He agrees that appropriate planning for the future is beneficial. The problem “is the need that we feel, from our vantage point here in the present moment, to be able to know that those efforts will prove successful.” As an antidote to this, Burkeman urges his reader to realize that a person can never be certain about the future and that “the struggle for certainty is an intrinsically hopeless one - which means you have permission to stop engaging it.” He believes it is precisely because time cannot be controlled that many spiritual traditions urge their followers to focus on the present moment

## Instrumental Time and Leisure

Burkeman then turns his attention to the instrumental use of time, that is using time as a means to another end. To illustrate the use of instrumental time, he relays author Steve Taylor's observation of people viewing the Rosetta Stone. Taylor noted that many of the people were spending their time taking photos and videos of the Stone. They were using their time with the Rosetta Stone to prepare for its future benefit of providing them with a photo they can revisit. This is an example of people using time for future rather than present benefit.

He describes people who consistently believe they will be happy when some particular task or moment is over, and he believes they will never actually be happy because they are constantly

seeing the value of their present moment only in terms of how it can be used to influence the future. He then goes on to describe this concept in terms of child rearing. He discusses those who make parenting decisions based on how it will help their children in adulthood rather than making parenting decisions for the child that is in front of them now. In short, these parents see childhood as a training ground for future adults rather than as a valid state of life in itself.

Just as people choose to cooperate with the tech giants who want their time, people also choose to use our time solely as a means to an end. He believes people make this choice because it allots for a feeling of empowerment over time. He says, “therefore you had better stop postponing the ‘real meaning’ of your existence into the future, and throw yourself into life now.” Still, he cautions that the person who devotes all of his or her time to living in the present moment is trying to control time just as much as the person who is always using it for future gain. He implores his reader to instead realize that they are always living in the present moment because that is all anybody ever really has. He ends his chapter by saying, “Living more fully in the present may be simply a matter of finally realizing that you never had any other option but to be here now.”

Burkeman then moves on to discuss leisure, and he states that people in ancient Greece and Rome used to see work as being undignified. In the modern day, however, people often see leisure activities as not being worth their time, and people often feel guilty for engaging in leisure activities. Industrialization helped usher in this mindset because people were expected to make the most use of the time they devoted to their employers, and any time not spent on work activities was viewed as theft from the employer. The problem was intensified when people began to see leisure as an activity to make them more productive at work. It has gotten to the point where many people feel uncomfortable resting, and it becomes an unpleasant experience. Since people are not guaranteed a future, it becomes imperative for people to learn to enjoy the time they have. A person uncomfortable with rest can become accustomed to it if they avoid believing it must be pleasurable at first. Burkeman believes that this discomfort is proof that relaxation is necessary.

## Impatience and Patience

Another problem Burkeman confronts is impatience. People have become accustomed to things moving at a rapid pace, and this is true both at an individual level as well as at a societal level. People feel uncomfortable with slowing things down and tend to deal with that anxiety by hiding from it through productivity. He compares the mechanisms behind speed addiction to

that of alcohol addiction and maintains that both can be dealt with according to similar principles. Both addicts must surrender. He believes that when a person finally comes to a realization that they have very little control over how long tasks take, they can release some of their anxiety about time.

Burkeman believes that in today's society, patience and the acknowledgment of a lack of power it denotes can become a power in and of itself. The type of patience he advocates for takes strength to resist the urge to hurry. In order to live in this patience he advocates for three principles: "develop a taste for having problems," "embrace radical incrementalism" by allowing oneself to make slow progress on tasks and to stop at a predetermined time, and acknowledge that "originality lies on the far side of unoriginality," in other words that oftentimes people have to follow in other's footsteps before they can embrace true originality.

Many people believe that the true marker of control over time is being able to spend it however one wants to. Burkeman maintains, however, that people do not need complete control over their time as much as they need "greater outside pressure to use their time in particular ways." This means aligning oneself with a community. He believes "there's the profound sense of meaning that comes from being willing to fall in with the rhythms of the rest of the world." He believes that much modern productivity writing is focused on helping people avoid having others influence their usage of time when in reality social control of time can be beneficial to people. He believes people can try to achieve these benefits of community by focusing on activities in the physical rather than the digital world and by allowing the rhythms of community life to sometimes take precedence over a person's desire to master their own time.

Burkeman moves on to say that in the grand scheme of the world, individual lives matter very little. He believes that acknowledging the insignificance of life can lead people to freedom. He concludes by saying that when people are finally willing to admit that they cannot do everything, they will finally be able to focus on what really matters the most. Burkeman acknowledges that he comes from a family of planners. Throughout his research into time management techniques, however, he has come to believe that they will inevitably fail to lead people to peace because the very prospect of maximizing one's time in the hope of future peace is futile. There will always be more to do and tough choices will always need to be made. It is in submitting to these realities that Burkeman believes true peace and satisfaction can come. In his book, he walks his reader through philosophical and psychological insights that can ultimately lead them to true peace.