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GET STUFF DONE

**A Guide to Managing Your
Time and Being Productive**

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Why Is It Tough to Get Stuff Done?

Seventeen-year-old Autumn is a senior in high school. She manages a busy schedule that includes tennis, an after-school board game club, and a part-time job at a local horse farm. She also attends to her schoolwork and household chores. She learned the hard way that to get it all done, she had to learn to manage her time. “A couple of years ago I had some big projects due, and I waited until the last minute,” she recalls. “I had to cram it all into one night.”⁴

The stress that comes when rushing to finish a project at the last minute is probably familiar to you. At one point or another, virtually everyone feels like there is just too much to do and too little time to do it. Deadlines for homework can sneak up on you, assignments can pile up, and a college or scholarship application that isn’t due for months can easily be put off until the last minute. There’s a lot going on, and it’s tough to figure out how to juggle school, homework activities, and other responsibilities and still have time to just relax.

Brain Battle: Impulsive Pleasure Versus Long-Term Gain

The challenge of getting stuff done is rooted in human biology. Time management problems don’t start with a mountain of homework or a packed schedule, but with the brain. The part of the

“A couple of years ago I had some big projects due, and I waited until the last minute. I had to cram it all into one night.”⁴

—High school senior Autumn

brain that craves immediate rewards is often at war with the part that is looking out for our long-term good.

The limbic system is the emotional and impulsive part of our brain that entices us to do what feels good in the moment. It loves immediate sensations and lives for the now.

The brain’s prefrontal cortex is more patient. It is where thoughtful decisions and plans are made and the importance of future goals is understood. It’s the part of the brain that focuses on the abstract and the big picture.

Although all people have similar brain structure, these parts of the brain develop at different rates. The limbic system develops more quickly, whereas the prefrontal cortex takes much longer. In teens, the prefrontal cortex is still growing, and it doesn’t finish developing until they’re in their twenties. Because of this, the teen brain can find it difficult to prioritize working on something with a distant deadline over something that provides immediate pleasure. The stress and anxiety that come with working on something at the last minute is remote, but the gratification of having fun with your friends is here right now.

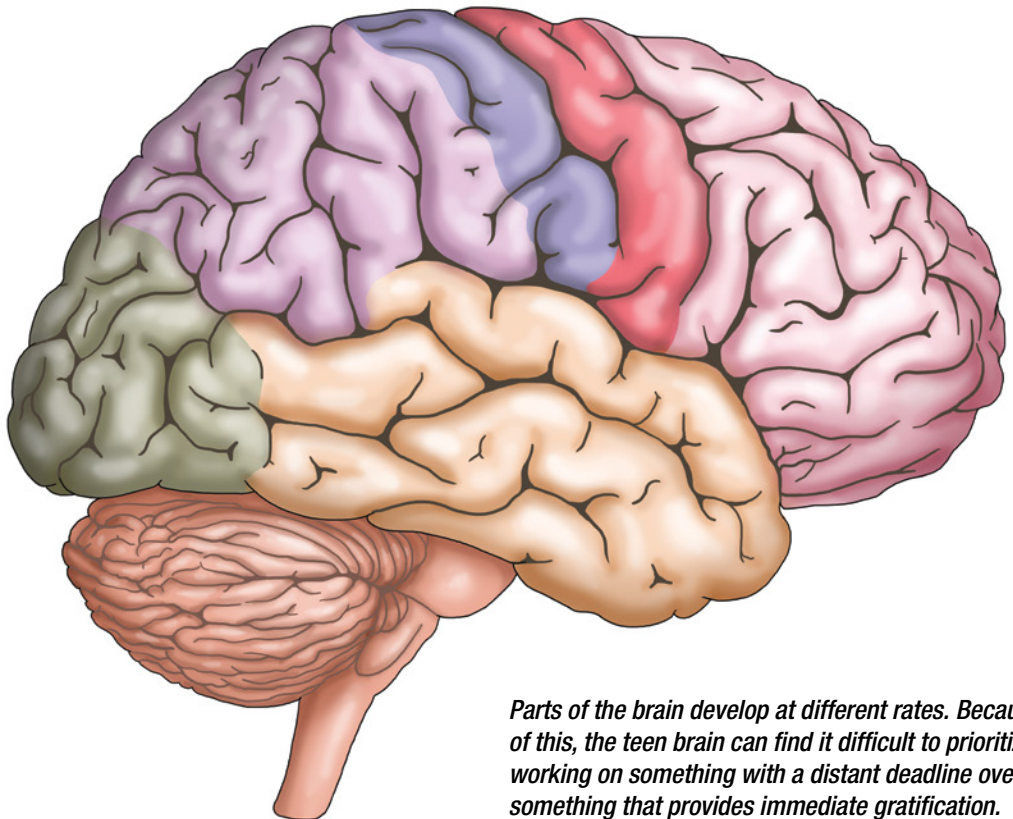
The Impact of Sleep

Sleep, or the lack of it, can also play a role in the impulsivity of the brain. When the brain’s prefrontal cortex is tired, it’s more difficult to resist the temptation of an immediate reward. Just as your muscles get tired when you repeatedly lift weights, the prefrontal cortex gets tired of saying no. When it’s well rested, it has the strength to help you understand the consequences of an impulsive choice, like picking up your phone rather than doing homework, and make better long-term decisions.

It’s not easy for teens to get enough sleep, however. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends teens get eight to ten hours of sleep each night, but only about a third of teens get this amount. One reason it’s tough for teens to get

enough sleep is that their natural sleep/wake schedule doesn't match their school schedule. During the teen years, the body's sleep drive builds more slowly, and teens don't start to feel tired until late in the evening. In addition, in teens, the hormone melatonin isn't produced until late at night. This is the hormone that helps promote sleep. "Teens have the unique challenge of a biological shift in their circadian clock, causing them to struggle to fall asleep before 11 p.m.," explains Dr. Caroline Okorie, a sleep specialist. "Many teens will stay up late but still have to wake up early the next morning for school."⁵

Electronic devices also play a role in teen sleep deprivation. After doing four or five hours of homework at night, many teens turn to their phones as a way to wind down. "It's nice to stay up and talk to your friends or watch a funny YouTube video," one teen comments. "There are plenty of online distractions."⁶ Electronic devices can be detrimental for sleep, however, as they stimulate



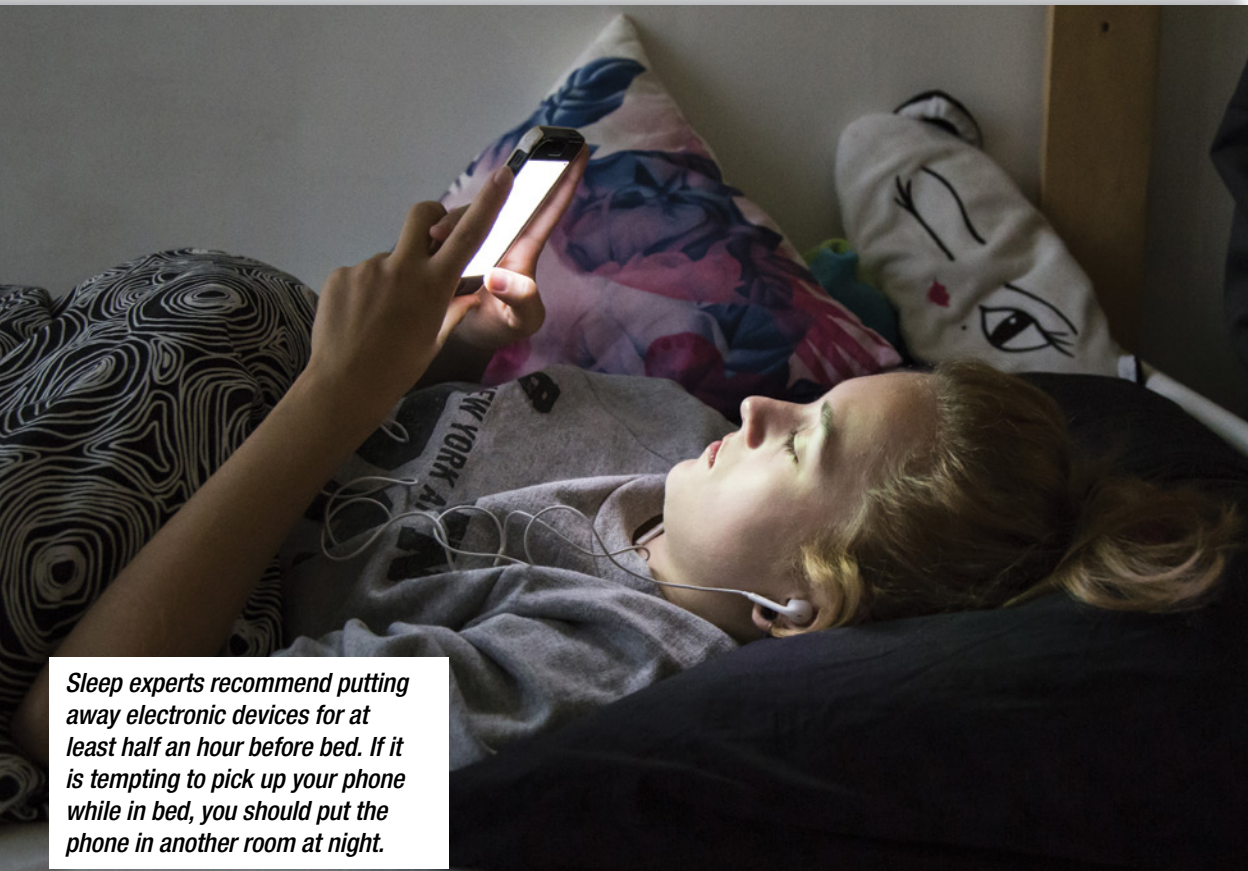
Parts of the brain develop at different rates. Because of this, the teen brain can find it difficult to prioritize working on something with a distant deadline over something that provides immediate gratification.

the body to stay awake. The light from a screen can cause problems with the production of melatonin, and notifications, texts, and calls can disrupt sleep.

This affects your productivity. A lack of sleep affects your ability to pay attention, makes you irritable, and more likely to be anxious and depressed. Getting enough rest, on the other hand, helps memory and your ability to analyze information. In addition, it helps you think more creatively.

Sweet Dreams

The Sleep Foundation recommends putting away electronic devices for at least half an hour before bed and silencing them so you don't check them during the night. If it's tempting to pick up your phone when it's next to your bed, you could put the phone in another room at night and use an alarm clock rather than your phone's alarm to wake you up.



Sleep experts recommend putting away electronic devices for at least half an hour before bed. If it is tempting to pick up your phone while in bed, you should put the phone in another room at night.

Letting Go

Sometimes there are simply too many things vying for your time. When that happens, you need to make a thoughtful, yet tough, decision.

Autumn, a high school senior, faced a tough choice when she couldn't make time for tennis, a part-time job at a horse farm, and a youth group. "I used to be very involved in church youth group, but between work, school, and tennis in the fall I didn't have time to be part of the youth group, so I took a step back and sacrificed that for some of the other things," she explains. "It is really hard, but I weigh the positives and negatives of each."

When making her choice, she reasoned that the horse farm was understaffed, whereas the youth group had more people who were willing to volunteer. In addition, after the fall tennis season ended, she could return to the youth group.

Autumn, interview with the author, March 5, 2023.

In addition, to sleep well, avoid caffeine in the afternoon and evening and follow a relaxing nighttime routine. You can wind down with a few stretches or relaxing music. Simple things, like putting on your pajamas and brushing your teeth, can signal your body that it's time to rest. In addition, try to go to bed and get up at roughly the same time each day, and keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet.

For optimal rest, budget at least eight hours of sleep into your daily schedule. Emerson has dinner and does homework before swim team practice, which lasts from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. "When I get home, I take a shower and go right to bed,"⁷ she says. This way, she can get a decent night of sleep and make it to school by the 8 a.m. start time.

Eating Right

Your diet also affects your ability to be engaged with your work, get organized, and concentrate on what you need to do. Food is fuel, and when you're not giving your body the right fuel, it's tough to have the energy to do your best work. A study published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology* looked at how eating fruit,

SOURCE NOTES

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3. Quoted in Kim Mills, “Why Our Attention Spans Are Shrinking, with Gloria Mark, PhD,” *Speaking of Psychology* (podcast), Episode 225, American Psychological Association, February 2023. www.apa.org.

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4. Autumn, interview with the author, March 5, 2023.
5. Quoted in Amy Brooks, “70% of High Schoolers Aren’t Getting Enough Sleep,” *Healthier, Happy Lives Blog*, Stanford Medicine, August 21, 2019. <https://healthier.stanfordchildrens.org>.
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8. Kamogelo, “Toxic Productivity,” *Voices of Youth* (blog), January 1, 2020. www.voicesofyouth.org.
9. Kamogelo, “Toxic Productivity.”
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16. Emma Elizabeth, interview with the author, March 27, 2023.
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FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Chris Bailey, *How to Calm Your Mind*. New York: Viking, 2022.

Lara Honos-Webb, *6 Super Skills for Executive Functioning: Tools to Help Teens Improve Focus, Stay Organized & Reach Their Goals*. Oakland, CA: Instant Help, 2020.

Barbara Oakley, Terrence Sejnowski, and Alistair McConville, *Learning How to Learn: How to Succeed in School Without Spending All Your Time Studying*. New York: TarcherPerigee, 2018.

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Rose Leadem, "17 Tricks to Get More Done During the Work Day," *Entrepreneur*, September 28, 2016. www.entrepreneur.com.

Alissa J. Mrazek et al., "Teenagers' Smartphone Use During Homework: An Analysis of Beliefs and Behaviors Around Digital Multitasking," *Education Sciences*, 2021. <https://eric.ed.gov>.

Britney Nguyen, "What Is 'Monk Mode': How the Viral Productivity Hack Works—and How CEOs and Entrepreneurs Use It," *Insider*, February 8, 2023. www.businessinsider.com.

Dana G. Smith, "How to Focus Like It's 1990," *New York Times*, January 9, 2023. www.nytimes.com.

Websites

American Institute of Stress

www.stress.org

The institute advances the understanding of the role stress plays in health and illness. Information about the effects of stress and stress management is available on the organization's website.

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org

This organization promotes the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge. Its website contains articles about how psychology applies to daily life.

James Clear

<https://jamesclear.com>

James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, features self-improvement tips and information about building better habits on his website.

Psychology Today

www.psychologytoday.com/us

News and articles about how psychology relates to everyday life are featured on this website. Topics include mindfulness, perfectionism, and motivation.

Verywell Mind

www.verywellmind.com

Articles about procrastination, stress management, and motivation are available on this website, which also contains information about mental health.

Time Management Apps

Some phone apps may help you manage your time and stay on track. These are just a few of the many that can help.

AntiSocial: The AntiSocial app reports how much time you spend in each app and compares your usage to others'. It gives you a score that assesses your phone dependence.

Forest: When you open the Forest app, you see a virtual tree grow while you focus on your work. If you leave the app before your focus time is up, the tree will die. The app partners with a real-life tree-planting organization, and users can spend virtual coins they earn in the app to plant real trees.

myHomework Student Planner: This app allows you to track assignments, grades, and projects as well as other dates and events. It includes a homework widget that sends reminders to keep you from missing deadlines.

My Study Life: Classes, assignments, and personal obligations can be tracked on this app, which uses a to-do list and color-coded tiles to help you organize your tasks.

Remember the Milk: This time-management app is designed for anyone, but it can help students organize their to-do list and remind them when a task is due. It also allows bigger tasks to be broken down into smaller pieces, and it can be synced with a calendar and email.

StayFocused: This app restricts the amount of time you can spend on websites that waste your time. After your allotted time is up, the sites are inaccessible for the rest of the day.

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