

Overcoming the Addiction to Urgency

Steven Covey's Insight on How to Improve Your Quality Of Life

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In today's busy world, it's easy to become swallowed up with matters that are urgent – yet not important. The phone rings. A reminder pops up on your smart phone. Your boss drops by looking for a report. Your friend IMs you. The list is endless ...

Urgent tasks provide us with excitement and often leave us with a feeling of accomplishment and success. Because of this, urgency can become an addiction and consume an inordinate amount of our time, leaving important matters on the back burner.

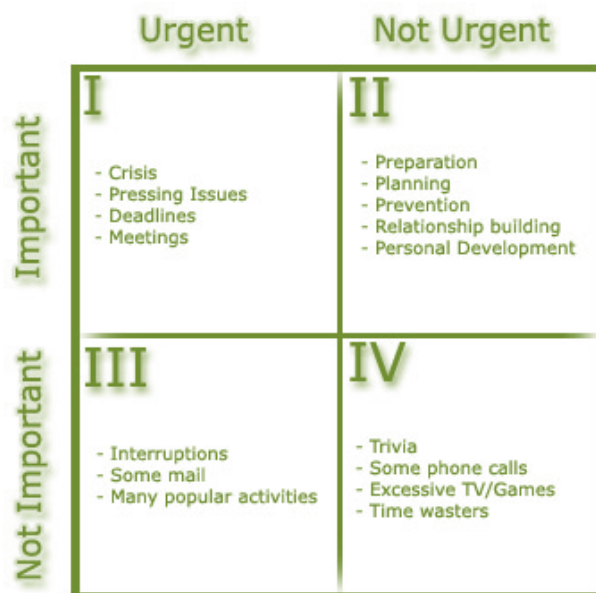
Steven Covey explains the dangers of becoming addicted to urgency in his book, *First Things First*¹. He points out that urgency in and of itself is not the problem. The problem is when urgency, not importance, becomes the *dominant factor* in our lives and the important things get left by the wayside. To better understand the issues of urgency and importance, take a look at Covey's Time Management Matrix below. We spend our time in one of these four ways:

Quadrant I activities are those that are both urgent *and* important. These are those “fires” that really need to be put out— crises, pressing issues, deadline-driven projects, and meetings. Because ignoring these issues would have material consequences, it is critical that we all spend a reasonable amount of time in this quadrant. However, it's when we spend *too much* time here that we risk becoming over-stressed and burned out.

Quadrant II activities are those things that are important but not urgent. This is the quadrant of quality. Here is where we anticipate and prevent problems, set long term goals, invest time in building relationships and broaden our minds through reading, etc. While very important, these responsibilities don't beg our immediate attention. As a result, they

unfortunately get set aside and put into the “someday file.” To avoid this tragic mistake we must be proactive.

Activities in Quadrant III are urgent but not important. Covey explains that this is “the quadrant of deception because the noise of urgency creates the illusion of importance.” This can be really dangerous because these activities are only important to someone else and should probably be avoided. Interruptions, urgent e-mails, and most phone calls fall into this category. Ever have your Outlook e-mail alert pop-up, beckoning the need for an immediate response, or have your colleague drop into your office to complain about how the boss didn't give him a raise? While these issues may be important to someone else they really are not significant to you personally.



Quadrant IV is the true quadrant of waste. Technically, we shouldn't be spending any time here at all. Covey explains that these aren't necessarily recreational things, because recreation is an essential Quadrant II activity. Examples of Quadrant IV activities include trivia, busywork,

time wasters, and escape activities (such as habitually watching “mindless” television shows). Some may argue that mindless activities are often welcome after a hard day’s work – but if they don’t add to your quality of life, you shouldn’t waste your time on them.

Ironically, for most people, a significant amount of time is often spent in Quadrants I and III, doing things that are not so important. Quadrant II – where most of the really valuable things in life are – is often neglected. Sure, setting aside things in Quadrant I and III (like meeting project deadlines and finishing household tasks) is hard to do, but how many people on their deathbed wish they had spent more time at the office or sweeping the kitchen? It is much more likely that you’ll wish you had spent more time in Quadrant II, spending quality time with the family, preparing a personal mission statement, or planning your legacy to ensure you leave a meaningful mark on the world.

Embracing Quadrant II: Putting First Things First

After moving from an urgency paradigm to one of importance, you can begin to put first things first. More specifically, Covey explains that humans have four basic and innate needs:

- ❖ To live – our physical needs such as food, clothing, shelter, economic well-being and so on.
- ❖ To love – our social need to interact with others and be accepted.
- ❖ To learn – our mental need to continually develop and grow.
- ❖ To leave a legacy – our spiritual need for meaning, purpose, and contribution to the world.

When these four needs are met, your quality of life improves. Covey goes as far as exclaiming “Fulfilling the four needs in an integrated way is like combining elements in chemistry. When we reach critical mass of integration we experience spontaneous combustion. An explosion of inner synergy that ignites the fire within and gives vision, passion and a spirit of adventure to life.” And when one or more of these needs are **not** satisfied, they negatively affect all the others.

It’s essential that as you’re fulfilling your needs, you pay attention to **how** you’re doing so. To achieve quality results, you need to stay true to your principles. According to Covey, when you align your actions with your principles, and bring each of your needs into balance with the others, you’ll experience true fulfillment in life.

To succeed in putting *first things first*, Covey recommends that you make plans one week at a time, rather than focusing on individual days. When setting your weekly goals, it’s also important to include the various roles you play – a loving parent, best friend, coach, etc.

While outlining your goals, ask yourself, “*What are the one or two most important things I could do in this role **this week** that would have the greatest positive impact?*” For example, if you are a parent, you may want to take your son or daughter for a long walk in the park and read them a book. Make these your top priorities and let the other tasks in your life fit in around them.

Your weekly goals should also be congruent with your lifetime goals. Spending more time in Quadrant II gives you time to reflect and think long-term about how you want to impact the world – and how you’ll be remembered. Covey refers to a great exercise where you envision your friends and family gathering to celebrate your 80th birthday. What would you like them to say about you? What would make you feel like you really accomplished good things with your life? What is the theme? What is your legacy? Your answers will tell you how you should live your life right now.

Incidentally, the more time you spend in Quadrant II, focusing on renewal, reflection, and recommitment, the better you become at performing urgent tasks and making daily decisions that are true to your principles, values, and lifetime goals. By overcoming your addiction to urgency, you’ll find time to focus on what’s truly important to you ... to have your needs met ... and build your legacy.

¹ Steven Covey. *First Things First*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. Print.