



Time Confetti And The Broken Promise Of Leisure, by Ashley Whillans

It's true: we have more time for leisure than we did fifty years ago. But leisure has never been less relaxing, mostly because of the disintermediating effects of our screens. Technology saves us time, but it also takes it away. This is known as the autonomy paradox. We adopt mobile technologies to gain autonomy over when and how long we work, yet, ironically, we end up working all the time. Long blocks of free time we used to enjoy are now interrupted constantly by our smart watches, phones, tablets, and laptops.

This situation taxes us cognitively, and fragments our leisure time in a way that makes it hard to use this time for something that will relieve stress or make us happy. Researchers call this phenomenon time confetti, which amounts to little bits of seconds and minutes lost to unproductive multitasking. Each bit alone seems not very bad. Collectively, though, all that confetti adds up to something more pernicious than you might expect.

Each interruption in itself is mundane and takes only seconds. But collectively they create two negative effects. The first is the sheer volume of time they take away from your hour. The second, more invasive effect of time confetti is the way it fragments the hour of leisure. It's most likely that these interruptions are randomly distributed throughout the hour.

When we try to enjoy a birthday dinner, notifications about our friends' tropical vacation photos make our pasta taste less delicious. When we try to choose a restaurant for our next date, the endless ocean of reviews and ratings leads us to spend more time choosing our meals than savoring them. When we try to have meaningful time off with friends and family, our alerts from work create guilt and dread over what we're not getting done.

Thinking about work while trying to relax induces panic, because feelings of time poverty are caused by how well activities fit together in our mind. If we are trying to be a committed parent while our work email goes off, we can't help thinking we should be working on our next deadline instead of being present with our child. This conflict makes us feel like a bad parent ("Why am I thinking about work while trying to hang out with my kid?") and a bad employee ("Am I hanging out with my kids too much? Will that promotion go to someone else?").

It also takes time to cognitively recover from shifting our minds away from the present to some other stress-inducing activity. People end up

enjoying their free time less and, when asked to reflect on it, estimate that they had less free time than they actually did. That's how invasive the technology time trap is: time confetti makes us feel even more time impoverished than we actually are.

When we feel time-poor, we take on small, easy-to-complete tasks because they help us feel more control over our time. We think, There! I made a protein shake and finished that errand. I'm getting stuff done! In this case, it's a false sense of control that doesn't alleviate the root cause of our busyness.

Time poverty feels the same for everyone, but time affluence looks different for everyone. It could mean spending fifteen more minutes strumming the guitar instead of scrolling through your phone, or it could be ten minutes of meditation, or a Saturday morning learning how to invest your savings instead of Slacking about work gossip. No matter what time affluence looks like for you, the happiest and most time affluent among us are deliberate with their free time. Working toward time affluence is about recognizing and overcoming the time traps in our lives and intentionally carving out happier and more meaningful moments each day.