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BATTLING TIME

Psychotherapists face many challenges in practicing their craft. Some patients feel hopeless, while others may be threatened by awareness of negative feelings, and some may be paralyzed with shame. But what can be most threatening to the integrity of the therapeutic process is when patients chronically come very late to sessions or miss them completely. The usual approach to dealing with challenges to the therapy process is to explore them in session. Chronic lateness, however, leaves little time for these explorations. I have long tried to get a better understanding of the causes of these difficulties.

Those who suffer from ADHD often struggle with executive function challenges including time management but many who struggle with time issues are not suffering from ADHD. What might be the psychodynamic issues that make time management such a challenge to some people?

Not surprisingly, there are many factors that can contribute to this problem. Several years ago, I worked with a young man, whom I'll call David. He was 18 years old when I first met him. He was the oldest of four children and the only boy. His parents had a conflicted relationship and when David was 15 the marriage ended with an acrimonious divorce.

David struggled mightily to establish a normal sleep schedule. Although he seemed to be highly motivated to work in therapy – even enduring a two-hour commute to come to therapy, none the less he chronically came significantly late to sessions.

David was intelligent, insightful, and articulate. He found journaling very helpful in his journey and he often shared his writings with me. During a period when we were trying to better understand his struggles with time, he shared with me his journal explaining his struggles in a most insightful manner. With his permission, I am sharing what he wrote, in his words except for minor editing to preserve confidentiality. My comments are in italics.

The challenge

I really value the ideal of keeping a good schedule and being efficient with time. I really value the ideal of waking up early in the morning, going to sleep early, and having a

productive and efficient day. In terms of physical organization, I am actually pretty neat. I like to categorize things in my mind as well.

But when it comes to my schedule, I am extremely disorganized. I have desperately tried many times to fix my schedule. There have been times where I saw how late it was and I just decided to force myself to stay up for the rest of the night and the entire next day, thinking that tomorrow night after going over 24 hours without sleep I will be so exhausted I could go to sleep early, and then from now on I will be on a great schedule. I've done this many times and had absolutely miserable horrific days where I was mind-numbingly exhausted. Oftentimes I just ended up collapsing in the middle of the day, sleeping all afternoon, and then staying up all night. Even when I made it to the following evening, it never worked.

Starting from around 11 pm, I am constantly aware of the fact that I should be going to sleep soon. It's not that it just slips my mind. I go through the entire evening with the burden of constantly thinking "I need to go to sleep early." "I don't want to mess up my day tomorrow." "I hate feeling like such a loser when I miss *shachris* and wake up in the afternoon." "I have to be more like other guys that go to sleep early and have productive lives." These thoughts are constantly running through my head, all the way until 1:30 - 3:30 am on an average night. I think my difficulty with going to sleep early has a lot of different factors.

David exhibited an insight that, surprisingly, eludes many people who struggle with waking up on time. That is the connection between waking up on time and going to sleep on time. Most people who bring up their difficulty with getting up at a reasonable hour can spend weeks discussing the problem and its repercussions and – unless I bring it up – won't even mention their bedtime. At some point, after much bemoaning their struggles with waking on time, I'll ask: "what time would you like to wake up?" and they'll say "7:00 am." I'll then ask, "What time do you usually go to sleep?" and they'll answer "3:00 am." Even at this point they don't make the connection. For example, when I asked them why they didn't text me to cancel the next morning's 9 am appointment when they saw that they were still up at 3:00 am, they insisted that they had every intention of waking up on time the next morning!

The fear of losing hope

1. I'm not doing so well in life, and I keep thinking that if only I get on a good schedule, life will be better. I attribute a lot of my difficulties during the day to my bad schedule. Maybe I am scared that if I do get on a good schedule and life still isn't good, I won't have any excuse/hope anymore.

This dynamic makes its appearance in many situations. For example, if it is suggested that a person suffering from significant depression try antidepressant medication, the person will often be resistant. There are usually many reasons for the resistance. One common reason is the one mentioned above. Whenever the person is feeling despair over his situation he thinks, "If nothing else helps I can always take medication". But there is also a tremendous fear of what happens if he takes medication, and it doesn't help. Now all hope is lost!

Counterwill

2. When I was younger my father was extremely controlling about bedtime. He would constantly say how important it is to go to sleep early, and how if I didn't it would mess up the next day and I would be tired and cranky. In his mind, as soon as he decided it was time for us to go to bed, I was supposed to follow him instantly and obediently off to bed.

I think because of all this I have very negative associations with bedtime. I view it as a very controlling thing, and I hate being controlled.

David is articulating the basic human characteristic of not wanting to be controlled. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz¹ discusses the incident described in the Haftorah of Parshas Vayechi, where Shlomo Hamelech exhibited his superior intelligence by commanding Shimi ben Gera to refrain from leaving Yerushalayim. As Rav Chaim explains, Shlomo Hamelech was trying to get Shimi to disobey his command. He realized that although many people in his time never left Yerushalayim without any problem, that was only because they could leave. Once Shimi was commanded not to leave, now Yerushalayim felt like a prison, so he would feel compelled to break out as he eventually did.²

In psychology, this instinctive resistance to any sense of coercion is known as "Counterwill"³ or "Reactance"⁴

Time itself can be experienced as the ultimate dictatorial force since it has zero flexibility.

Man can confront every enemy he has in his time on Earth and hope to vanquish it. Illness, poverty, deprivation of all sorts of essential needs – he can at least aspire

¹ שיחות מוסר מאמר עח'

² See also מאמר ל'.

³ The term was first used by Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank and has been popularized by developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld.

⁴ Psychological reactance theory was developed by psychologist Jack Brehm to explain the human response to the loss of personal control. According to this theory, when free choice is limited or threatened, the need to retain our freedoms make us want them (as well as the goods and services associate with them) significantly more than before.

to overcome them all. But there isn't a chance in the world of surmounting mortality, of stopping the advance of time.⁵

Not surprisingly, those who grew up in an overly controlling environment are most sensitive to any sense of coercion. They are constantly battling time, resentful of its demands on them. Those who grew up in a more reasonable environment where control is not heavy handed are more likely to develop healthy self-control, which is clearly distinguished from external control.⁶ Those who were traumatized by heavy-handed control, in contrast, develop such an aversion to control, that they can't distinguish between external control and self-control.

Escaping the tyranny of the shoulds

3. The night is often the only time I feel relaxed and energetic. Many times, I spend the entire day sapped of energy, languidly moving through the actions and places I am expected to do and be. The whole day is structured very rigidly, and the entire day is just one obligation after the next. I don't feel very accomplished during the day, and I spend most of the day feeling really bad about myself for not doing better, learning better, having a healthier mindset, etc. The entire day is full of expectations, expectations that I never seem to properly fulfill. At night I finally feel freedom from the oppressive schedule. There are no obligations, no expectations. The entire night is one unbroken stretch of time lying before me, beckoning with limitless potential.

The daytime hours are experienced as threatening not due to any specific external controls but because of the expectations (spoken and unspoken) inherent in the daytime: "You should always wake up on time, you should always learn well, you should be able to socialize without being overwhelmed with anxiety etc." ["The tyranny of the shoulds"⁷].

Escaping the judging eye of people

4. The entire day I have to be around other people. For someone that doesn't feel social anxiety or crippling self-consciousness, it is hard to describe how exhausting this is. But I will say this. Every single conversation or interaction I have with another person, the foremost thing on my mind throughout the entire interaction is me wondering how this

⁵ Eytan Kobre in *Mishpacha Magazine*, Issue 719.

⁶ Jonice Webb calls this **Compassionate accountability**: A caring, reasonable internal voice that coaches you through your mistakes and helps you make choices. It holds you accountable but in a compassionate way. It neither lets you off the hook, nor judges you. It helps you learn from your mistakes and choices, put them behind you, and move on. *Running on empty no more*, 2018, page 156.

⁷ Karen Horney.

person is thinking of me. The more people there are, the more ways I have to split my mind to try to focus on what each individual person thinks of me. Not only that, but I am also occupied by thinking about how different stuff I could do or say in the future will make them think about me, as well as how stuff I did in the past made them think about me. I am also thinking about how if they knew certain things about my life or what I'm thinking about now, that would make them think differently of me.

This is very scary to me, but sometimes when I think very badly of myself and I'm around someone that doesn't appear to hate me, thoughts pop into my mind of cruel outrageous things I could do or say to them that will cause them to look at me in horror and revulsion. For example, I was recently learning with my night seder chavrusa, and he took off his glasses and laid them on the table. I saw that, and this thought popped into my head that "I could quickly reach over and grab his glasses and snap them in half." I dwelled on that thought a lot, terrified I would lose control of myself and actually do it. I imagined his furious reaction, how he would never want to learn with me again, how he would think of me like the disturbed person I really am instead of the nice boy he thinks I am.

It is just so hard for me to be around other people. Even just walking down the street in the middle of the day makes me feel so insecure and awkward and self-conscious. I feel uncomfortable every time I pass someone walking on the sidewalk. Every. Single. Time. *Frum* people are worse. I'd rather pass *goyim* on the street than *frum* people. I assume most *frum* people are very judgmental and think critically of me for not being better in *Yiddishkeit*. I am reminded of the *tosfos* where it says Rebbe Akiva hated the chachamim because he thought they hated him. I feel the same way. Every time I pass by a group of friends speaking to each other, it just makes me more aware of how isolated I feel. The day is horrible.

But at night, nobody is on the streets. At night, nobody is around. I feel so much more safe and comfortable walking down a deserted street at 3 in the morning than a busy road in the middle of the afternoon.

Those who grew up with excessive criticism - spoken or unspoken - tend to become hypersensitive to the perception of being judged. When someone is, in fact, being critical of them they tend to experience it as being on a much higher level of criticism than it objectively is. If the mashgiach notes to such a bochur, in a calm and low-keyed manner, that he has been coming late to davening lately and encourages him to make an effort to come earlier, they will be certain that they are about to be thrown out of yeshiva! The only way they see to avoid these situations is to avoid people.

Avoiding negative thoughts

5. Perhaps I am scared of lying down to go to sleep. When I am awake there are many things to occupy myself with and focus my thoughts on, but when I lay down in bed there is nothing to do and my thoughts often go to a negative place. Perhaps my aversion to getting into bed is out of fear of the moments before sleep overtakes me. The later it is and the more exhausted I am, the sooner I fall asleep and don't think as much before bed.

Nothing to get up for

6. I need relaxation. After all the time spent in the routine of getting ready for bed, I crave leisure. The night is often the only time I have to myself to do things I like, such as reading or playing video games. When I get into bed, I get into bed knowing that tomorrow morning isn't something I have to look forward to, and the next time I'll feel okay is tomorrow night. Knowing that makes it hard for tonight to come to an end. It also makes it hard to get up in the morning. I don't feel I have anything positive to get up for.

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman would strongly caution against excessive pressuring of children or students to wake them in the mornings. He especially cautioned against allowing that pressure to undermine the relationship with the child. He pointed out that often a bochur truly feels that he has no reason to get up, for example, if he doesn't have a chavrusa that he enjoys learning with.⁸ Of course, many of those struggling with getting up in the morning anticipate adverse events during the day of a magnitude much larger than a chavrusa they don't enjoy learning with.

Technology addiction

7. One of the things that often keeps me up late when I am home is an addiction to technology. I don't mean I am looking at anything "inappropriate" online. In fact, I am very careful about that, and I have honestly never really seen anything online that I would have any problem with anyone else knowing about.

The problem isn't the content, it's the time. I find the internet to be incredibly captivating. It offers me everything I am lacking in my life.

⁸ ספר עיני חינוך – מתורת מרן הגראי"ל שטיינמן (רב משה סחייק תשפ"ג בני ברק) - פרק ג' - השכמה: ויתכן גם שאין לו חשק לקום כי אין לו חברותא שנהנה איתו (עמ' סו').

I feel I am lacking in opportunity. When I open my laptop and gaze at the bright screen before me, there is an infinite amount of potential. I have the collective information of the entire world at my disposal. Every object available to purchase in the entire world is available for me to look at. Every picture of every location in the entire world is at my disposal. The answers to all questions, reams of knowledge, countless videos and tutorials explaining how to do anything - all there are waiting for me.

My hand grips the mouse, my fingers poised on the keys, the blank search bar beckoning me to fill it with anything I can think of, guaranteeing instant results. The pages load quickly, transporting my mind from one topic to the next, web pages full of images and information loading instantly, giving me a feeling of progress simply at the speed of what I am doing. New tabs are opened in milliseconds, each white bar and blinking cursor waiting for my command to take me on a journey to whichever area of the World Wide Web I care to visit. No longer is my mind occupied with all the worldly concerns that characterized my offline life. Here I can surf the web at a speed which renders linear thought impossible, inundating my mind with loads of information.

While I often feel inhibited in communicating with other people, behind the shelter of my glowing screen I can express myself to the world in a way I am unable to in real life. Where in real life I feel stifled and rooted to my unhappy location, online I can explore the entire world, traveling to faraway places, videos lighting up the pixels on my screen, displaying beautiful images of fantastic places I can virtually visit. The only reminder of reality is the small clock in the corner of the screen, showing how many hours I am whittling away precious time. But I can't stop, can't return to the reality of my painful existence. I am on the internet, and I am hopelessly addicted.

Hours later, eyes bloodshot, starving, I finally manage to pull myself away from the thrall of the net that has ensnared me. Hating myself for the hours I wasted, hours I didn't even really enjoy. Hating myself for my lack of self-control in managing my time, thinking of all the better things I could have done, dreading the exhausting day I know I will have tomorrow.

"Saint or sinner" syndrome

8. Every time I wake up late, I hate myself for how late I got up, and I always resolve "never again." I don't narrow my focus and think that just tonight I will go to sleep early. No! Instead, I hate myself so much for getting up late that I need to do something big. "From now on, for the rest of my life, starting today, I will go to sleep early every single night!"

"Gone are the days when I get up mid-morning, whiling away my days in slumber. Gone are the nights where I skulk around until dawn's rays begin to brighten the horizon. I am fed up with this dysfunctional schedule, and starting right now it will all end. Permanently."

I imagine how after weeks of being on a fantastic schedule, being the first guy in Yeshiva to *Shacharis*, going to sleep at 11:00 each night, the past months of me going to sleep late will fade into a dim memory.

But then it doesn't end up happening, probably because the self-imposed pressure of never again going to sleep late instead of just focusing on one night at a time makes the whole thing too overwhelming for me.

David is touching here on an issue that is a major impediment to progress, in therapy or out of therapy. When someone experiences overwhelming and persistent shame over perceived major deficiencies, he will often try to wipe away the shame with a grandiose plan to achieve perfection. Anything less than perfection is not powerful enough to undo the massive shame. Sustainable change, however, almost always requires a step-by-step approach. Every step needs to be appreciated and celebrated in order to maintain the growth.⁹ When a person can only feel accomplished by being perfect (a saint) he will inevitably find it unsustainable and revert back to his baseline (being a sinner).

Thinking about my life, I don't have much hope that I will ever be capable of getting on a good schedule and feeling like I am successful in life. I recognize that it is not realistic to expect myself to change overnight, and I hope that with time I will slowly get to the point where my life and my schedule is something that I am proud of. I hope that by describing some of my challenges in time management I have helped others gain greater insight into their own struggles. Like many challenges in life, people struggling with their schedule aren't happy with themselves that they are always showing up late. Perhaps recognizing some of the reasons someone might struggle with time management will help people be more understanding of themselves and others that struggle with these issues and help them make positive changes in their lives.

There are, of course, other possible dynamic explanations for struggling with time. For example, a person may feel unworthy of having a therapist listen to him with undivided

⁹ **גר"א משלי** (יט:ג) – אולת אדם תסלף דרכו, ועל ה' יזעף לבו- לפעמים אדם מתחיל ללמוד תורה ולעשות מצות ואח"כ פורש מחמת שקשה לו מאד לפי שאין מסייעים לו, וזועף על ה' למה לא סייעהו, ובאמת הוא מחמת אולתו. והיינו, כי כל אדם צריך לילך כפי מדרגתו ולא לקפוץ, ואז ילך לבטח בדרכו... אך זה האדם לא התחיל לילך **בדרכו** לכך לא סייעהו. וזה אולת האדם, כלומר מחמת אולתו, שעשה בלי ישוב הדעת, סילף דרכו והוא זועף על ה' למה לא סייע לו. [גם **בעלי שור** (ח"ב עמ' ריז') מובא גאון זו ומאריך בכך שאדם צריך סבלנות כלפי עצמו. וכן מובא בספר בכרך עשה, עמ' כב']

attention for a full session, so he “gifts” the therapist with some of the time by coming late. Another common dynamic is the fear of increased expectations if the chronically late person comes on time on a few occasions. (More on this below).

Helping David

The focus of my efforts with David was to help improve his battered self-image so that he could develop hope for a happy future.

The first step was to help him see more clearly the connection between the many adverse experiences in his childhood and his current difficulties. For reasons I have discussed at length elsewhere,¹⁰ this is a more difficult task than one would imagine. Understanding and accepting this connection helps reduce the enormous burden of shame that is a result of believing that these hardships reflect inherent defectiveness.

The next step was to help David resist the temptation to aim for perfection as the antidote for his shame. (See above “Saint or Sinner Syndrome”). As I stated in my article “Understanding and treating perfectionism”:¹¹

While the therapist clearly has to be empathic in regard to the patient’s need for perfection ... the goal of therapy is to find satisfaction and meaning in the process of growth and in the everyday activities of the self. This is more difficult than it sounds since it is very painful for someone with a poor self-image to give up the dream of glory inherent in perfection for the, as yet never experienced, joy of gradual emotional growth. A crucial ingredient of successful therapy is recognizing and taking pride in every small step of progress. The difficulty this entails for the perfectionist was expressed by one youngster: “You don’t understand, how can I be proud of a step toward solving my problem when I’m not yet ready to admit to myself that I have a problem?!”

It is unlikely for someone to endure the ongoing effort necessary for sustained growth if there is no celebration or even appreciation for every step taken in the long process of growth.

David was bright, psychologically astute, and highly motivated. Still, it was understandably very difficult for him to overcome years of negative self-perception.

To make it even more challenging, he was in a school where the principal was a well-meaning but highly critical person. He truly felt that this was the best way to motivate his students. Whenever David showed some improvement in his attendance the principal’s attitude would make David feel that such minor improvements were insignificant and certainly nothing to celebrate when

¹⁰ See for example, my article on “Chemical imbalance” at www.DrSorotzkin.com

¹¹ At www.DrSorotzkin.com

he is so far from where he should be. This negated much of my efforts. I discussed this issue with the principal a few times but to no avail.

Fortunately, the next year David switched schools. His new principal had a completely different perspective on the way he viewed his students' behavior. He was more empathetic to the challenge David was facing, and he recognized the importance of small steps. In fact, the first time David showed improvement in his attendance, the principal wrote him the following note:

David, you have really improved the last two weeks with attendance, and I very much appreciate it. Keep up the great work!! No pressure of course

Finally, someone who appreciated every small step and celebrated it! Especially noteworthy was the principal's sensitivity to a major fear experienced by those struggling to function adequately. That is the fear of increased expectations from them. Authority figures will say things like, "I thought that maybe you really can't get up on time. But now that I see that you can, there are no more excuses ("no good deed goes unpunished").

By saying "No pressure" the principal showed that he understood that a person can put in extra effort and push himself to come on time, rather than seeing it as evidence that it wasn't ever really difficult, and it was all "excuses." When you recognize that it is truly more difficult for some people, then the fact that a person did it a few times doesn't necessarily mean that it is no longer a challenge. Rather, you encourage the effort and hope for gradual improvement.

David gave expression to these feelings with the following letter to the principal:

Hi Rebbe,

I was very moved by your kind text. It indicates a lot of amazing points.

1. Many days I have struggled to make it on time. Throughout all of those times, you never criticized me or made me feel less welcome in school because of my poor attendance. Instead, you always greeted me warmly and gave lots of encouragement.
2. You noticed I have recently been coming on time more frequently. Instead of thinking "it's about time that David started showing up and fulfilling the barest minimum of the expectations I have for the guys in my school", you actually took the time to send a note and compliment me on doing something you know I have a hard time with. Instead of viewing my better attendance as me simply no longer doing anything wrong, you actually view it as a positive accomplishment!
3. You have the insight to realize that when someone is complimented for something, it can make them feel a lot of pressure to continue doing whatever they are complimented for. You specifically took the time in your note to make sure I knew you weren't praising me as a way to try to pressure me to come more often by setting up higher expectations. Instead, you send me that note merely to acknowledge and compliment what I have already done, simply to make me feel good without any ulterior motives!

I am so lucky to have a Rebbe like you.

David