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End Errand Madness

A writer hooks up with a time-management expert to change her daily routine and help her—and you—find more free time.

BY **KAREN HAYWOOD QUEEN**

I thought my schedule was airtight, not a minute wasted. I mean, I deliberately eat lunch late in the afternoon to maximize my morning. In line during weekly trips to the market, I write reminders to myself on any handy scrap of paper, to transfer later to the planner I use. I even choreograph errands based on which side of the street I need to be on.

So it didn't seem like a big deal when *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine paired me with Marcia Ramsland, organizing pro and author of *Simplify Your Time: Stop Running and Start Living*. Ramsland's job was to give me a time and task makeover. First, though, she gave me homework, having me log all 168 hours in my week. I was sure this exercise would only confirm that I was the master of my schedule. The time log revealed I was a master, all right—at fooling myself. Here are a few highlights (I'm using the term loosely) of my week.

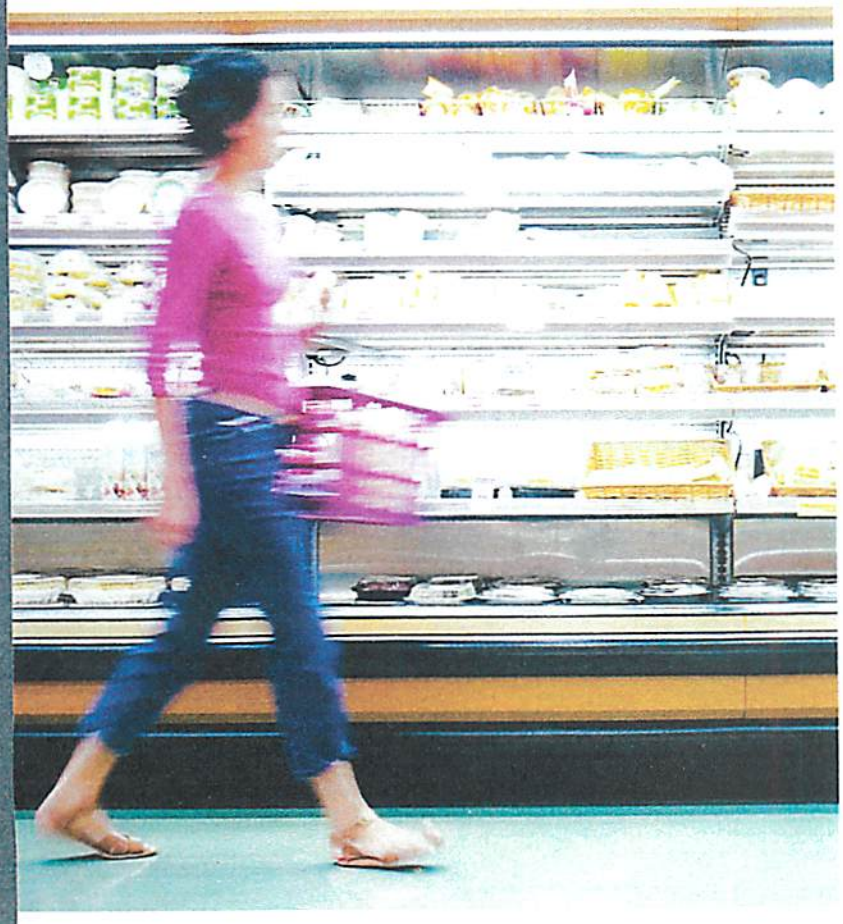

PHOTO: JUPITERIMAGES

week one

- Lost the time-tracker log.
- Found the log in a huge pile of papers.
- Saw that I was at the market 4 days a week.
- Waited in line at the bank because I made my deposits during the Friday afternoon rush.
- Let my car inspection sticker expire.
- Racked up $4 in library fines.
- Lost the time-tracker log. Again.
- Got a notice about a late fee on the phone bill.
- Couldn't find the phone bill. Was it under the couch where I shoved a pile of paper?
- Shoved more piles of paper behind the furniture when guests were on the way.
- Found the log. But not the phone bill.

I soon realized that I wasn't just wasting time, but money too. Cost of being disorganized for that week: $95, including late fees. But I had learned a valuable lesson: No matter how well you think you organize your time, you'll never know until you account for it.

The idea of tracking your time may seem overly fussy, but consider this: Most people try to keep track of their money by writing down what they spend and sticking to a budget. Why wouldn't you do the same with your time?

"After all, time is life's money. The less you have, the more carefully you have to spend it," says Ramsland. After she reviewed my log, she gave me the following prescription to whip my week into time-saving shape.

SET BASIC GOALS They really do free up more time. Ramsland suggests:

- Get chores done before the weekend
- Cut the number of trips to the grocery store (4 in one week *was* a bit much)
- Stay ahead of deadlines
- De-clutter to avoid losing things (like the log) and wasting time trying to find them.

To stick to my weekly goals, Ramsland recommended that I...

CHANGE ROUTINE It was time to adopt a weekly schedule with regular days for errands and chores, including one major grocery run, one minor grocery pickup, trips to the bank and dry cleaners, and doing laundry—something I never allowed for in my day planner.

Ramsland felt this would be a comfort to me. "Most people have too much to do and too little routine to help them get things done," she said. "Without a schedule, you wonder: When am I paying bills? When do I go to the cleaners? With a schedule, you trade chaos for calm." Ramsland recommends scheduling up to two routine chores or errands per day. Plan about 60 percent of the day and leave the rest for spontaneous activities.

STOP JUGGLING While Ramsland praised my use of a day planner for certain appointments, my time log revealed something that's true for a lot of women: We have *way* too much to do.

"Our minds can hold only seven things at a time," Ramsland said. "More than that, we have to write it down. And you need to keep your planner in the same place so you don't have to use the back of an envelope or check register."

That hit home. I thought I was making use of down time by writing notes on any handy piece of paper. I never had my planner with me.

As for eating lunch later so I could do more in the morning? Bad move. Ramsland pointed out that I was delaying suppertime, which pushed bedtime later, which meant the next day got off to a late start. Instead, Ramsland suggested I eat lunch at the same time every day, closer to noon than late afternoon.

"Most people have too much to do and too little routine to help them get things done." —MARCIA RAMSLAND

LOOK AHEAD Ramsland told me to spend the last five minutes of each hour looking ahead to the next hour to keep my schedule on track. Looking ahead helped structure my daily chores too. All those grocery trips? Instead of running out for forgotten items, Ramsland advised polling my family for their favorite meals then plan shopping around menus.

With my makeover strategies in place, I was ready to start a new week. The very first day, my hairdresser called to offer me an appointment. I looked for my planner—ack! nowhere handy—and almost wrote the time on the back of a check register. Instead, I put her on hold and ran downstairs for the planner. I basked in the glow of my first small success.

The week only got better. Even though we were missing some ingredients for dinner, I worked around the absent items and kept the grocery runs to one. The meal planning system was a hit too. One night, we made my children's favorite—burritos. The kids were happy to help cook while I de-cluttered the kitchen and paid bills. Gained: one happy, well-fed family, clean kitchen counters, and bills paid—on time.

I took the clothes to the dry cleaners on Tuesday as my new schedule dictated. When the clerk asked when I'd pick them up, I didn't have to wonder. It was already on my schedule.

LOG IT IN

Want to see how well you really plan your days? Get a free log to keep track of your 168-hour week: Download it at organizingpro.com, the Web site of makeover coach Marcia Ramsland.

PHOTO: CORBIS

168 Hours –Better Homes & Gardens Writer

GOALS: Find Time for Errands, Laundry, Free Time, Family Time

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
11-5 am			SLEEP				
5:00			QT=Quiet Time MR=Morning Routine				
6:00		QT	MR		Run/MR	QT	QT
7			Morning Routine			Run	
8	Laundry/ Work	2Min Pickups	Bills/ 2 Min PU	MR/ 2 Min PU	Meet	Family Brkfst	MR
9	Lndry-Dryer	Write	sick /read Simplify	Read Simplify	With	Brkfst Clean up	Church
10	Interview	Write	Write	Write	Builder	Declutter	Church
11	Phone Calls	Write	Rest Write	Write Rest	Builder	Go to lot	Church
NOON	Write/ Newslettr	Write/ Lunch	Lunch/ Rest	Write/ Lunch	Builder	Buy Plants	Church/ Lunch
1	Lunch	Lunch/ Grocery	Write	Interview	Builder	Lunch	Lunch
2	Pick up Kids (PU)	Pick up Kids	Write/ PU Kids	Pick up Son	Pick up Son	Cook w/ Daughter	Family Time
3	Teach Piano	Start Supper	Teach	Grocery/ Bank	Lunch Clean up	Cook/Org Music	Go to lot
4	Teach	Guests	Teach	Write	Write	Laundry	Grocery
5	Teach	Guests	Teach	Clean	Errands	Husband	Family
6	Supper	Guests	Email	Recital	Supper	Gifts	Laundry
7	Teach	Guests		Recital	Calls	Supper	Supper
8	Email	Guests	Supper	Cleanup	Bath	Family	Cleanup
9	Ans.Mach	Cleanup	Early	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep
10	Read	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep
11-5 a.m.							

TOTALS 1) SLEEP(blue) 49 Hr 2) Chores (green) 15 Hr. 3) Meals (diagonals) 28 Hr.

4) Activities (yellow) 9 Hr. 5) Personal (pink) 6 Hr. 6) Free Choice (white) 29,19 Hr.

***See *SIMPLIFY YOUR TIME* by Marcia Ramsland p. 110-116 to track your own time. **www.OrganizingPro.com**

168 Hour Time Tracker. My Best Time Routine

Track your time for a week. Write down the main thing you do in an hour.
Put totals below and evaluate. What adjustments do you want to make to your week?

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN
4:00 a.m.							
5		Example: Sleep (7 hours)					
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
NOON							
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11		Example: Sleep (11:00 p.m.- 6:00 a.m)					
Midnight							
1							
2							
3							

TOTAL 1) Main Work_____ Hr 2) Sleep_____Hr. 3) Meals/Travel Time _____ Hr.
4) Activity 1 _____ Hr 5) Activity 2_____ Hr. 6) Free Choice____ Hr.

Details in ***Simplify Your Time & Simplify Your Life*** by Marcia Ramsland * **www.OrganizingPro.com**