

The Best Thing Today

Maria Törnroos and Maija Taka on Time Management

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Jingle [00:00:00]: Aalto University podcast.

Maria [00:00:08]: Welcome to the best thing today, a podcast series by the psychologists at Aalto University learning services. Your host today is me, Maria Törnroos. I'm the psychologist for doctoral students at Aalto. With me, I have Maija Taka, who is a post-doc and project manager at the school of engineering.

Maija [00:00:28]: Great to be back from the holidays. Today, we're diving into academics [?? 00:00:33], which is time management. Maria, why are you brave enough to tackle this topic?

Maria [00:00:42]: Because this is something that I see almost every day in my work. And it's because the nature of academic work challenges time management. So, how to plan your day when most requests you get are things that you can prepare for? How to learn how much time certain tasks take. And also, how to accept that certain things are out of your control? Like the schedule of journals, for example.

Jingle [00:01:11]: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists.

Maija [00:01:20]: So, it's more about tolerating the diversity of tasks, or about saying no to things that are not on your priority list. Or do we even need a cultural change for letting the people to change?

Maria [00:01:35]: Well, it's absolutely about tolerating some circumstances, and also accepting the nature of academic culture, but it's also about changing the culture, slowly, but surely, towards more inclusion, more support and also, a healthier work attitude.

Maija [00:01:53]: And speaking up about these issues is one way to get support, because most academics have faced time management issues in their daily work. But also

understanding that what you are experiencing and feeling is okay, so you do not need to feel bad for feeling bad. So, what's kind of time management advice you would give in your work?

Maria [00:02:18]: What I do when I teach about time management is that I divide the lecture into three parts. And I actually came up with an analogy of this. Do you want to hear it?

Maija [00:02:29]: Of course.

Maria [00:02:30]: Okay. So, we could approach this topic like a treasure map.

Maija [00:02:34]: Ooh.

Maria [00:02:36]: First, when I start to talk about time management, I talk about the four pillars. What is good time management? And this is a treasure chest, the prize at the end of the map of time management. But before we can get there, we have to look at the routes on the map. We have to look for the time management pitfalls, the sandpits, or holes in the ground, or monsters that keep us from reaching the treasure chest. And finally, before we even start embarking on our journey, we have to make sure that we are not setting ourselves up to fail on this mission, and that we have with us what we need to succeed.

Maija [00:03:20]: So, you're actually encouraging us to be like Indiana Jones, having a good plan for the journey, and eventually, finding the treasure.

Maria [00:03:28]: I'm going to take out my hat and the whip. So, if we start with the treasure chest, with our goal, what is it that we want to achieve?

Maija [00:03:39]: Good time management.

Maria [00:03:41]: Yes, that. And to achieve that, we need the four pillars of time management. And they are goal setting, chopping tasks, prioritization and scheduling. Have you heard of the SMARTTEST Goals model?

Maija [00:03:56]: No, I haven't. Before summer break, I learned about the DRAMA, but SMARTTEST sounds worth knowing as well.

Maria [00:04:03]: The SMARTTEST Goals model is also an acronym, like the DRAMA model we talked in the episode on recovery. So, the SMARTTEST word comes from seven, no, sorry, is it eight? Eight, eight actually, eight factors that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Reflection, Time-bound, Enthusiastic, Significant and Transparent. So, the first two, Specific and Measurable, mean that the goal that you set needs to be specific and you need to be able to measure it. So, what is it exactly that you will achieve, how will you measure when you've achieved this?

Maija [00:04:50]: But goal setting in research is really difficult. Like think about writing. I don't know how many words or pages I need to write to express my work, and even harder is to estimate how much time the writing takes. I know you learn these things by experience, but do you have any easy-to-use tips for this?

Maria [00:05:14]: I don't have any other easy-to-use tips than to practice setting goals, and to accept that sometimes you don't know how much you're going to be able to write, but you can set some sort of goal that you know that will motivate you. So, the next word in SMARTTEST is the Achievable, the A. So, can you actually achieve this goal? If it's not achievable, then it might not motivate you. And if it's not achievable, you might be setting yourself up to fail. Because, if you say that I'm going to write 400 words today, that's perhaps not going to happen, and then you're going to feel bad. And then you're going to think that you're a failure, just because you didn't reach the goal that in the beginning already was impossible.

Maija [00:06:05]: Sounds like reflection.

Maria [00:06:07]: Yes. Great work, Maija. So, the R in SMARTTEST stand for Reflection. You need to stop and also think about how are you evaluating achieving your current goals, and do you feel like you've achieved something. So, not just, you know, moving ahead, but also sometimes stopping and reflecting on this.

Maija [00:06:31]: Based on my experience, the goal shouldn't always be to reach the goal, but to learn more about your process.

Maria [00:06:38]: Exactly. Yeah. And to become better perhaps at reflection and accepting and setting goals that you are able to reach. And then also being self-compassionate when you're not able to reach them, for some reason or other. And then, the T in SMARTTEST stands for Time-bound. And this is something that is an important feature, because you need to know when you are going to do this, when you are going to reach this goal. If you say that my goal is to graduate, you know, sometime, it might not be that motivating. It might not even be motivating to say I'm going to graduate in two years, because that's quite a long, you know, goal. But then you can chop down that goal into smaller, more close goals, to be more motivating.

Maija [00:07:36]: What if I don't have a deadline, a scary deadline ahead?

Maria [00:07:39]: Do you mean that's a good thing or a bad thing?

Maija [00:07:42]: I never achieve anything unless I have a deadline. What if I don't have an external deadline?

Maria [00:07:48]: Well, then, you have to try and set that deadline for yourself. And if that doesn't work, you could ask someone else to set some deadline for you. But this is also a question or a comment I get sometimes from doctoral students that their supervisor hasn't set any outside deadline for them, so it's very difficult for them to get motivated or to get done. And then, I always encourage them to tell their supervisor that they are a sort of person that needs external deadlines. Okay, so then the E in SMARTTEST stands for Enthusiastic. And this doesn't mean that you always have to be jumping up and down of joy and be like very, have very ambitious goals or motivating goals. But you know, the ultimate goal that you're reaching needs to be motivating and enthusiastic, you need to be enthusiastic about something, you don't need to be enthusiastic about all the sub goals that you've set, but there needs to be something that's driving you. Is it joy or is it anger that you just want to get this over with, it doesn't matter, but it needs to motivate you in some way. And then, the S and the T, so Significant, why are you pursuing this particular goal? Sometimes it helps to motivate you if you start to think about your values, why are you doing a PhD in the first place. Is your PhD a means to an end? Is it a steppingstone to an academic career? Is it a steppingstone of an industry career? Or is the degree in itself already for you very significant and important? So, deciding or thinking about what your values are, what is important to you in your life and how does this goal relate to that.

Maija [00:09:49]: So, in terms of the Significant part, it also means that once you know what goes are the most significant ones, it's also easier for you to prioritize your own work.

Maria [00:10:00]: Yes. And that's why it's important to first think about these goals, and then we go to prioritization later on. And the last letter, the T stands for Transparent. So, have you shared your goals with other people? For example, if you're planning on running a marathon, I think you will be more motivated if you share it with friends and colleagues and on Twitter or Instagram or something, because then everyone is expecting you to do it. Have you had some goal like this that you've shared?

Maija [00:10:33]: I just mentioned my long-distance running in the previous episode.

Jingle [00:10:39]: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists.

Maria [00:10:46]: Okay. So, when you set your goals using the SMARTEST Goal theory, it's easier to start chopping up your work. So, how do you eat an elephant? Bit by bit. And this is also how you complete your thesis. One step at a time. And if you treat your thesis or your research project like a big lump, a big, scary monster, it will be harder for you to start doing it or even to complete it. And you can visit my website at mariatornroos.fi to learn more about chopping goals, because there is an exercise there for you to try out.

Maija [00:11:27]: Oh, that sounds great. I like the idea. And I also like the numerous opportunities to see your progress, be proud and celebrate. We often celebrate in our research group, especially the small milestones, not just the published papers. Pennies worth a million dollars, as they say.

Maria [00:11:47]: This is so important to do, yes, and show that there is more to academic work than only the big successes. You can celebrate small successes, but there are also failures, and you can be there for each other for those failures also. And then, you can pick yourself up and move on.

Maija [00:12:08]: And learn from the failures as well.

Maria [00:12:11]: Yes. So, the next step in time management is prioritization. And the ability to prioritize tasks is crucial for time management. And as a doctoral student, you might be constantly bombarded by requests and assignments from the outside. And on top of that, you have your own dissertation to write.

Maija [00:12:35]: It can sometimes be difficult to figure out what's important and what's not. The main thing is, though, that everything can't be equally important. So, you'll have to learn how to distinguish what matters right now and what doesn't. I'd encourage to use peer support for this. And that's what I do.

Maria [00:12:57]: So, think about your goals. What is the most important goal to reach right now and what can wait? What can you do with great effort and what do you need less effort to do? And if you had to choose only five things to focus on, what would they be? And important to remember in prioritization is that there are other things in life than work, and you have to prioritize free time and recovery also.

Maija [00:13:30]: One handy tip is what is often used in planning teaching, there is content that is divided into the must-know things and the nice-to-know things. That could be a useful tool for planning our own work and manage it.

Maria [00:13:46]: And many students have realized after doing these prioritizing exercises that you can on Aalto's My Courses website under, if you search for Time to Get Cracking course, or then on my webpage, mariatornroos.fi, so many students have realized after doing these exercises that they are spending their time on completely the wrong thing.

Maija [00:14:11]: I'm managing my work at various levels, monthly, weekly, even daily. On a daily level, the tasks are more concrete, and for me also easier to work on and start working with. I'm trying to define SMARTTEST goals that are fascinating to start with. And one afternoon per week, I collect all the fragmented, the minor and the unpleasant tasks and take care of them at once.

Maria [00:14:40]: So, [?? 00:14:40].

Maija [00:14:41]: Yes, that's [?? 00:14:42] afternoon. And that needs a reward afterwards. Recently, I also found an app called Toggle, to better understand what is wrong with my working time and tasks and what to get rid of.

Maria [00:14:59]: It is evident that you love numbers.

Maija [00:15:01]: Oh, yes.

Maria [00:15:03]: And the last pillar of time management is scheduling. So, it's a good idea to use some sort of scheduling tool, you can use an app, or you can use a calendar or just a simple to-do list, and all these work equally well, you just have to find what's right for you.

Maija [00:15:19]: And try different tools to find out the right one for you.

Maria [00:15:23]: And with scheduling, the key is to block out time in your calendar or in your schedule, and you should block out time for active work and also preparation time. Like you brought up the example of teaching. So, in teaching, when we do, when "we", I'm not so academic personnel anymore, but when I did these work plans and we put in the hours of teaching, we had the preparation time also and time, you know, after grading exams and so on. So, this you could use with all your work. What is the actual time that you do some assignment? What is the preparation? What do you need to do after? Plan this and block a time in your calendar. And some suggest that you should block out proactive blocks and reactive blocks. So, proactive work is when you focus on important tasks that you must get done. So, if you've tried these prioritization exercises, then this is an A task that I'm talking about. And then, reactive work is when you deal with requests and interruptions, such as emails and sudden meeting requests and so on.

Maija [00:16:38]: So, block time, but also block out the external interruptions, such as emails, Teams, WhatsApp, Facebook, whatever they are. Be flexible and always overestimate the time needed to complete tasks. For example, use one-hour slots with breaks included, and then use methods like Pomodoro to increase the focus during these slots. So, learning about the ways of working. It's amazing to see how you can train to become a better time and task manager.

Maria [00:17:15]: And as I said in the SMARTEST goals, there's reflection, you should also do reflection and analysing after scheduling, after prioritizing, because the same things can't be important from week to week. So, readjusting and reflecting what's gone well and what do you need to adjust in your time management, how do you need to change the prioritization, and so on. And academic and creative work is very hard to schedule, but your skills will improve with experience.

Maija [00:17:48]: I love your point of actually having time for reflection and preparation. So, it's not just that you go for running, but you actually plan it and make preparations.

Maria [00:17:58]: Yes. And this has been, for me also, very difficult to learn, as a former academic, where productive work is like the thing that you are counting, but for your own productivity and for your own wellbeing, you need to also have this reflection and preparation.

Maija [00:18:20]: Yeah.

Maria [00:18:28]: So, that were the four pillars of effective time management, but how do we get there?

Maija [00:18:33]: Let's take out the map.

Maria [00:18:35]: Okay. So, then you need to, again, think about what is it that you're using your time. So, time thieves, procrastination, problems with energy and wellbeing and problems of prioritizing. How do these time management pitfalls show in your life and how do they affect your way, your path towards good time management? And then, when you recognize what your time thieves are, for example, make a plan to tackle them. But remember to make small changes, don't change everything at once. If you try to make too big of changes in your routines, then you will set yourself up to fail. So, what is the smallest change that you could do to improve your time management?

Maija [00:19:25]: In a sustainable way. I've tried loads and I've also understood how, for example, seasons affect and how I change, yeah, throughout the year. I've been focusing on planning, goal setting, learning from peers, setting even the atmosphere or the setting for writing, like having different snacks or wearing earplugs, working in the mornings, working in the evenings, reflecting the output, the feelings of joy, drivers for motivation, my own energy, et cetera. So, start by trying something small in a different way. If possible, try that together with a couple of colleagues, so you get more insights towards change for the better.

Maria [00:20:14]: And finally, before we even can start our journey, we also have to make sure that the map we have is the correct map, and we are not setting ourselves up to fail. So, there are some tips from the literature, for example, see that your physical workspace supports your focus and motivation, so that you minimize distractions and interruptions, that you are not sitting in a crowded place when you need to work on something that you need to focus on. You could also try and create a routine, because a habit of planning your week might help you to remember to do that and to schedule time for that in the beginning or in the end of every week. So, I usually take a time on Monday morning to plan my

upcoming week. And this helps me to relax during Friday or the weekend, because I know that come Monday morning, I will have everything under control. But then, I have a colleague that does this on Friday afternoon, so that she knows that the weekend is saved, or the next week is fine, but it depends on how you want to do it. And you should try what works for you.

Maija [00:21:28]: But try to avoid drifting and focus on good planning.

Maria [00:21:32]: And then, as we mentioned before, the Pomodoro technique is also an efficient way to make sure that you are focusing on the right thing for the right amount of time and reflect on your motivation and on your dedication. So, sometimes, it's not just about time management, but it's about your values, why you are doing this. Are you doing the right thing? Are you prioritizing the right things in life, in general? And then, I'm going to say this for the 10,000th time, rest and recover, eat and drink properly. That also helps.

Maija [00:22:11]: And last but not least, learn to say no. For you, it must be quite familiar that learning to say no is quite challenging. So, what are your tips or what are the root causes for always saying yes to everything?

Maria [00:22:25]: Well, the academic setting puts a lot of pressure on young scholars to take on tasks that they think might help them in their future career. But actually, then at the same time slows them down. So, it is common, and I try to encourage them to speak up and say to their supervisor that, "I would love to do this, but I just don't have time, or I want to focus on my own research, or I want to choose what my next project will be". Or you know, have a discussion, because it might be that the supervisor also thinks, if they think that this is an ambitious young scholar, they want to give extra things for them to do, so that they will succeed on their academic journey. But having an open communication about this is key. I actually wrote a blog post about unreasonable tasks in academia, that can be found on my blog, mariatornroos.fi.

Jingle [00:23:27]: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists. Today, Maria Törnroos and her special guest Maija Taka.

Maija [00:23:40]: As always, we have a guest of honour to share their experience on the day's topic. Ville Kukkonen is a doctoral student in Aalto department of electrical engineering and automation. He works 60% in the industry in Granlund, 20% at Aalto and 20% in his thesis.

Maria [00:24:01]: Wow. What a package!

Maija [00:24:03]: Yeah, Superman.

Maria [00:24:05]: So, if someone, Ville has great tips on time management. He indeed has great tips to share. First, it's his time blocking in calendar critical for his time management, as we spoke earlier. And this is because it helps avoid drifting into reacting things. You know, just being reactive all the time to things that pop up. And Ville does time blocking and task allocation both daily in the morning and weekly for the next week. And he also blocks time on Fridays for reflecting on the past week and planning the next week. Hey, wow, he uses all our advice. And he says that, "I found the weekly review to be very helpful in seeing where my time goes and having less stress daily."

Maija [00:24:54]: Maybe that's one of the low hanging fruits from this episode. Okay. Second, he also mentions prioritization. So, he assesses what are the projects that are going to have the most impact when they are completed. We also asked his tips for tolerating the high level of uncertainty in the academic world, which we all know about. And in fact, research has loads of uncertainties due to unexpected problems in the research setting or a sampling the journal process times and so on.

Maria [00:25:34]: Research is very unpredictable, or the timeline of research is very unpredictable. And Ville shared his example of a recent journal manuscript that he submitted. And he just received second round of comments over seven months after the initial submission. And despite that he knows that it might take time, he wasn't prepared for this long.

Maija [00:25:59]: Sounds harsh. He says that, even though he often thinks like, "I wonder when the decision will come or what will the decision be, what if I need to completely rethink my approach", he just tries not to worry about the things until there is something to actually worry about. I must say that I'm a huge Ville fan by now.

Maria [00:26:23]: Yeah. And I actually have my own example of a long process, because I had a journal article that was accepted by the, was it 11th journal, so it took four years and I called that paper my shit paper, but I never gave up. But four years is a long process.

Maija [00:26:46]: But I think that you're resilient to the [?? 00:26:50]

Maria [00:26:52]: Yeah. And finally, Ville gave examples of how to balance several works without working for too long days. So, it's not like 100%, 100% and 100%, like 300% work, but he highlights the importance of good time management in keeping work-life balance. So, for example, time blocking helps him to see how much of time he has allocated to which job. And he's very strict on the time and avoids working on evenings and weekends. And that's rare.

Maija [00:27:27]: He says that he is still learning to say no, great topic, especially as there is new, interesting projects arising all the time. What I found interesting was his conclusion that working on several projects is surprisingly heavy, that as all the work requires deep focus, combined with intermittent meetings. This switching is, of course, heavy, and those intensive and demanding periods, Ville aims to balance with active recovery and with things he enjoys. He says that, "If my recovery starts to falter, that's when performance starts to fall off as well."

Maria [00:28:09]: Sounds like he's been really reflecting on what helps him with time management, what helps him with wellbeing and what helps with recovery. So, we hope that you've enjoyed this episode of The Best Thing Today. And if you want to read more about the subject, go to mariatornroos.fi, or if you are an Aalto student or employee, you can search in My Courses for self-study material under the name Time to Get Cracking. And there is also a podcast episode available on the subject in Finnish under [?? 00:28:47]

Maija [00:28:49]: Wow. So, there's really no excuse not to develop one's time management skills, is there?

Maria [00:28:55]: Definitely not. Thank you for listening and stay tuned for more episodes.

Maija [00:29:01]: Bye.

Maria [00:29:01]: Bye.

Jingle [00:29:12]: Aalto University podcast.

[Transcription ends 00:29:18]

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