

A Step-By-Step Guide to Better Time Management

openup



Introduction

Time is the only thing in life that you give away but never get back. Suppose you buy a new table, but once you get it home, it turns out that it doesn't match the rest of your furniture very well. So, you pack it back up, take it back to the store and ask for a refund. You'll get your money back and everything will be as it was before.

That's not how it works with time. If you go somewhere and it turns out not to be as fun as you'd hoped, there's no way of asking for a refund. Once you've given away your time, you never get it back. That's why being able to manage your time well is a really useful skill. As they say, time flies.

"The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot." -- Michael Altshuler

Unfortunately, most of us weren't taught time management at school. It's a shame because time management has a wide range of benefits, including better focus, more control and structure, increased productivity, and reduced stress. These are the kind of advantages that can help you in all areas of your life.

That's why we've put together this guide to teach you how to manage your time better. The better you get at time management, the more clarity you'll have about your daily tasks and the less stressed out you'll feel about your to-do list and any unexpected projects.

Step by step we'll go through the appropriate tools and tips you can use on your personal *road to better time management*. Apply the things that speak to you, leave behind anything that won't serve you right now and remember: It's never wasted time if you learn something.

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Time management & productivity

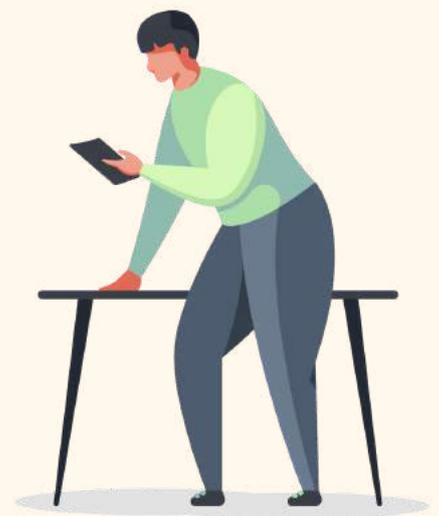
Time management is about allocating your time according to your priorities. It's the art of using the time that you have in a useful and effective manner, particularly at work, but also at home.

Managing your time doesn't mean that you steadily end up doing more and more things. It's about doing the right things and not getting distracted by unimportant tasks. The result should be more clarity and peace of mind, less stress and maybe even a little extra time at the end of the (work) day.

“Being productive is about maintaining a steady, average speed on a few things, not maximum speed on everything”. - James Clear

The strange thing is that we usually think twice before making an expensive purchase and we're happy to say "no" if we think something costs too much. Many of us are very good at keeping at budgeting or keeping track of our finances: What's coming in, what's going out, and what we have left at the end of the month.

However, when it comes to our time, we're often less careful and attentive. We find it difficult to say "no" if somebody wants something from us, and making a weekly schedule that emphasizes our priorities is, in many cases, the exception rather than the rule. Instead, we work our way through our inboxes, do ad-hoc chores, squeeze in the odd phone call and don't take enough time to really look at how we're spending our time.



According to Stephen Covey, author of the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: "Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent, and not enough time on what is important."

We often let ourselves get swept up in the (supposedly) urgent tasks that keep popping up and gradually forget to do the important things. By the end of the day, you haven't managed to complete your to-do list and this makes you feel stressed. How are you supposed to accomplish all these tasks?

What is time management?

So, what exactly is good time management? Good time management is about managing yourself and your life. You need to know what is important to you and where you want to go or what your goals are, both at work and in your personal life. Once you've got that clear, you can allocate your time and attention accordingly. In this guide, we'll take you on a step-by-step journey through the wonderful world of time management. And once you've got the hang of it, it's something that will benefit you in all aspects of your life.

“Large-scale surveys routinely find time management skills among the most desired workforce skills, but at the same time among the rarest skills to find.” - Erich C. Dierdorff



What are you doing right now?

If you want to figure out the best way to divide up your time, taking a closer look at what you're doing right now is a good place to start. What are the pain points that you'd like to tackle differently? And what, in your eyes, is going well?

Maybe you're too easily distracted by social media, or the emails that pop up in your inbox throughout the day are controlling most of your time. Do you make a daily to-do list? And a weekly schedule? Do you have a clear idea of what your overall goals are? And at which times in the day do you have the most energy? Are you organized? Do you delegate unimportant tasks? Do you block out time in your schedule to work on important tasks?

Whatever your answers are, take a moment to reflect on the situation as it stands. Write down three things that are going well and three things that you could be doing better.

These things are going well:

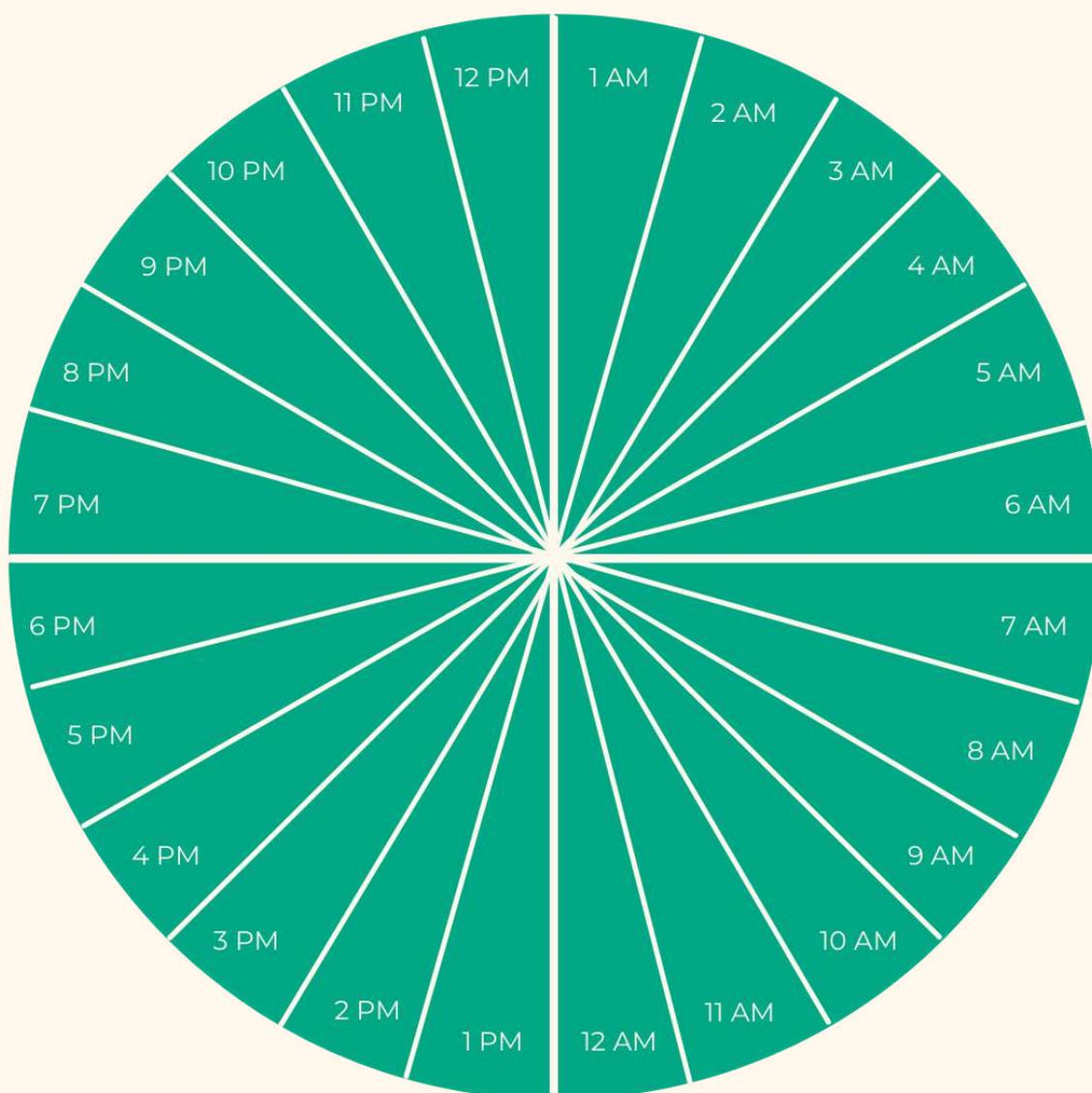
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

These things could be better:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Additionally, you may find it helpful to draw and fill out the wheel below. You can do this based on an average day, or for each day of the week. Fill in what you do each hour and create an overview of how you're spending your time at the moment.

You can also make a version showing how you'd ideally like to be spending your time. How different are these two wheels? What do you need to do to get closer to your ideal?



By the end of this guide, you'll have the tools you need to tackle the things you aren't doing so well and to spend your time more effectively.

Step by step plan

You've just written down a few things that are going well and a few things that aren't going so well. In this step-by-step plan, we'll take you back to basics. We'll put together a good overview of your goals, tasks, and the time you have available. We'll then teach you how to use this time as effectively as possible. You can adapt this step-by-step plan to suit both your personal life and your work life.

1 Define your goals

If you want to be good at managing your time, you need to know what your goals are and what you're working towards. To put it simply: You need to know what really matters to you. This is different for everyone. For some people, major changes may be involved (for example, a career switch or moving abroad) while others will be looking at smaller changes (maybe learning a particular skill or saving a certain amount of money).

It's up to you what your goals are. Psychologist Kelly McGonigal tells [TED](#) that it's important to set goals that mean something to you. What do you want to achieve in your life or what are you hoping to have more of by reaching this goal? Say your goal is to do yoga three times a week.

Ask yourself three times why that is:

1. Why do you want to do yoga? I want to feel better about myself and happier with my body.
2. Why do you want to feel better about yourself and happier with your body? I feel more relaxed, energetic and content when I'm happy with my body.
3. Why do you want to feel relaxed, energetic and content? So that I can get as much out of my life as possible.

Usually, by the time you've made it through all of those "whys" you've arrived at something that truly matters to you. This gives your goal more meaning and motivates you as you work towards it.

Pia, a psychologist at OpenUp, confirms this: "If you want to stay motivated, you need to know why reaching a goal is so important to you. In addition, here are some questions that can help you when you're setting or reflecting on your goals, ask yourself:

- Where do you want to be in five years? And a year from now? And in a month?
- What does success look like to you?
- What are the advantages of achieving your goal?
- What are the greatest obstacles standing in the way of you and your goal?
- What is your plan for tackling these obstacles?
- How are you going to stay focused throughout the process?"

Make it SMART

As your first-grade teacher used to say: You've got to make your goals SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, time-bound). This is about making sure your goals are tangible and can actually be achieved. 'Save more' could mean anything, but 'I want to have saved 10,000 dollars by the end of 2022 by putting aside 833 dollars every month' lays out exactly what the goal is.



Break things down into sub-goals and tasks

Your main goal is usually too big to simply jot down on your to-do list.

Breaking your main goal down into sub-goals, and possibly even breaking these down into smaller tasks, is a great way to make your goals manageable (and plannable!).

In the savings example, we were using, a sub-goal/to-do list item could be to review your current spending and eliminate any unnecessary purchases.

Another sub-goal/to-do list item might be to see if you can find cheaper alternatives to some of your common purchases. A further sub-goal could be to schedule a meeting to talk about your salary. Try to make sure your sub-goals are also specific.

2 Determine what is and isn't important

There's a good chance that you've encountered the Eisenhower Matrix at some point in your life. Dwight D. Eisenhower was a general during the Second World War and President of the United States. It goes without saying; these are both demanding jobs that require you to manage your time well. To do that, he designed the Eisenhower Matrix.

“What is urgent is seldom important and what is important is seldom urgent.” - Dwight. D. Eisenhower

His rationale? We often tend to focus on tasks that are more urgent than important. This usually comes from a place of not having an overview of what the (un)important tasks are. The Eisenhower Matrix helps you to understand this and plan accordingly.



It consists of four quadrants:

- **Important and urgent (do):** Tasks that need to be done right away, such as filling in for a sick colleague, helping a customer with a problem, or calling someone to fix your drain so you can take a shower
- **Important but not urgent (schedule):** Tasks that need to be scheduled, such as making a monthly report, going to an event to keep your knowledge up-to-date, or attending your workout class tomorrow morning.
- **Not important but urgent (delegate):** Tasks that can be delegated, such as responding to emails, helping a colleague with a problem, or assisting your dad with his computer issue.
- **Not important and not urgent (eliminate):** Tasks that you don't need to fit in, such as continuing to read up on a particular topic without taking action or endlessly scrolling through social media.

"Don't wait. The time will never be just right." - Napoleon Hill





Take a week or day in your work and/or personal life and write down all the tasks you carry out. Then categorize them according to the diagram. Which are the important tasks? And is this where your focus lies? Or are there lots of tasks that maybe aren't particularly important, but are still taking a large amount of your time and attention?

In his book, *The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective People*, Covey too cites the Eisenhower Matrix as a basis for deciding which tasks you should and shouldn't do. He explains that we often spend a lot of time on activities in the wrong quadrants and that's why we aren't good at managing our time.

For example, even though it may seem like a good thing when we're always working on important and urgent tasks, we're actually just operating at such a consistently high level of stress that we'll eventually burn out.

Of course, it's sometimes necessary, and even beneficial, to take a detour and do an urgent and important task every now and then, but ideally, you'll spend most of your time working on important things that aren't urgent. You'll get everything done that you need to do, but because you've managed to schedule it, you won't experience much stress.

The Eisenhower Matrix offers insight into the tasks you have to do, but also the ones you can eliminate or delegate. You can use this when planning your day or week (or when deciding what to outsource to somebody else).

3 Figure out your biological prime time

Have you ever noticed that there are certain points in the morning when you sit behind your computer and words just seem to fly out of your fingertips, but after lunch, everything takes three times as long?

This might be because your so-called "biological prime time" has passed: The point in the day when you have the most energy and concentration. It's during these moments when you want to start tackling important tasks – the tasks that bring you closer to your goals and require you to have good concentration.



What does this look like for you? Do you know when your biological prime time is? Do you schedule your most important tasks for these times? For many people, the morning is a good time for concentration and having lots of energy, but simultaneously, it's also when we start checking our emails and getting caught up in ad-hoc assignments. It's a shame because this is precisely the time when we're best able to concentrate and complete important tasks.

This coming week, keep track of how your energy peaks and troughs throughout the day. This may vary depending on which day of the week it is, or you might always have a consistent energy flow. Write down your findings and use them when planning out your day (step 4). During the times when your energy and concentration is high, do things that are important and more urgent. When your energy is starting to slump, you can always work through your inbox, for example.

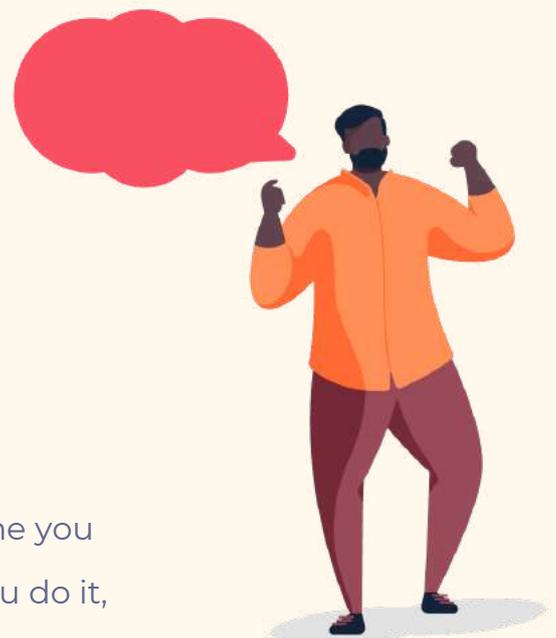
"Productivity and creativity are polar opposites. Taking breaks and going for regular walks is necessary for your brain and promotes creativity." - Mark Tigchelaar

Saying no

Saying no is a painful process for many people. We tend to want to please everyone and find it difficult to not help others or choose ourselves.

But all the clichés are true – saying no to others means saying yes to yourself.

It can feel like quite a big deal the first time you have to say no to somebody, but when you do it, you'll soon notice that it really pays off.



Soesja, a psychologist at OpenUp, explains: "There are four ways to say no. Keep in mind that by saying no, you're offering a lot of clarity to the other person and, as a result, you're actually being kind."

- 1.No with an explanation ("No, I have a previous engagement on that day")
- 2.No without an explanation ("No, unfortunately, I'm not going to make it")
- 3.No with an alternative ("No, I can't make that time, but I could do...")
- 4.No with a delay ("I need to think about it")

"Clear is kind."

4 Block your time and plan your week

Once you know what goals you want to achieve, you can figure out which tasks will help you get there (step 1). Then, once you know which tasks you need to complete, you can begin to schedule these at the times when you do your best work.

In step 3 you explored when your energy is high and when your concentration is lower. Block out appropriate times in your day, label them as 'focus time' and spend these hours doing important and/or urgent tasks that require high levels of concentration.

"Plans are nothing; planning is everything." - D. Dwight Eisenhower

The times when your attention slumps are good opportunities to tackle tasks that require less concentration. For example, this might be working through your inbox, calling back a colleague who tried to reach you during your focus time, or holding meetings.

Block out time for planning

At the end of the week and/or the end of each day, take time to plan out your upcoming day or week. And if you're thinking "well, I don't have time for that", then that's exactly why you need to start.

Focus expert, Mark Tigchelaar, uses the Big Three Method when creating goals, sub-goals and tasks, he tells [Sprout](#). This means that he works with three goals per day, per week, per quarter and per year.

So, you need to ask yourself each day and/or week what your three most important tasks are. How are these contributing to your main goals? At the end of the week, reflect on whether you were able to accomplish these three tasks. If not, why not? What got in your way? Can you prevent that from happening next time (delegating or eliminating) or was everything important?



Don't forget to take breaks

A misconception around productivity and time management is that you need to spend every minute of your day doing something useful. Newsflash: That's not possible. You need to take time to rest so that you can continue to work with focus and energy.

As humans, we aren't designed to always be "on" and burn the candle at both ends. In the long run, you'll start making mistakes and later pay the price with a big slump in productivity, Mark Tigchelaar tells Sprout. "If your concentration is way off and you keep putting off tasks, it's a good time to take a break and go for a walk. That way, you'll return to work with a fresh burst of energy," stresses psychologist, Pia.

Make sure you're actually using your breaks to rest. That means: Not checking your social media or reading an interesting article, but really letting your brain rest. Make a cup of coffee, go outside to get some fresh air, and step away from your desk. "Research shows that it is unhealthy to sit still for long periods at a time. Getting up from your chair every hour - even if it's just for a cup of tea or a piece of fruit - stimulates your circulation and is good for your body," says Pia.

"What also helps is making a list of the activities that energize you," explains Margit, a psychologist at OpenUp.



"Break this list down according to the duration of these activities, for example, 15, 30 and 60 minutes (say solving a sudoku, going for a walk or doing some stretching) to get a clear picture of what you could be doing in your breaks instead of scrolling through your emails or looking at social media."

When and how take breaks depends on how you like to work. You can use time management techniques here, such as the [Pomodoro Technique](#) (see step 5). Pia: "Say you're in a really good flow, it's probably better not to break your concentration and instead stay working while it feels good to do so." Then afterwards, you'll just need to take a slightly longer break.

5 Examine what distracts you

Finally, it's important to figure out what your biggest distractions are. Maybe you wrote some down when we asked you how you're managing your time right now. For example, social media and WhatsApp are major distractions for many people.

If you want to get better at managing your time, you need to know what distracts you and how to eliminate these stimuli. Maybe it's your phone, but it could also be having chats with other people, emails popping up in your inbox or – if you work from home – the temptation to do household chores.

There are all kinds of tricks you can use to resist these distractions. If you want to spend less time on your phone, for example, you can put it in another room or download an app that stops you from being able to access it ([for example Forest](#)).

You can also work in a quiet space where there are fewer things to distract you. However, sometimes it is still difficult to avoid getting distracted. In these cases, the Pomodoro Technique can help you to focus better.

“Discipline is choosing between what you want now and what you want most.” - Abraham Lincoln

Pomodoro Technique

The Pomodoro Method was developed by Francesco Cirillo and helps you to focus better on a task, be less distracted, and work smarter.

How does it work? You set an alarm (in Francesco's case, it was shaped like a tomato, which is "pomodoro" in Italian) for 25 minutes. After those 25 minutes, you take a 5-minute break and then set another alarm for 25 minutes. After about four pomodoros (25-minute sessions), you can take a longer break of fifteen to twenty minutes.

Setting the alarm clock makes you feel like you have to work on a certain task right now, instead of feeling like you have all day. It forces you to concentrate for these 25 minutes. At the same time, it also ensures that you're getting up every 25 minutes, walking away from your screen and actually taking a break. A lot of us tend to overwork (after all, it seems productive), but looking at a screen for hours on end isn't healthy.



This method might sound strict at first, but that's actually really not the case. It makes you feel more productive throughout the day, but it also gives you plenty of time to rest. Try it out for a day and see how it works for you.

Top tip: If you don't want to set an alarm, there are various apps you can download. Search "pomodoro" in your app store. Or put on [this YouTube video](#) to "pomodoro" for two hours.



What not to do and myths

We covered this briefly in the intro: Time Management is not about steadily doing more and more; it's about doing the right things and not getting distracted by unimportant tasks.

This means there are a lot of myths and misconceptions floating around about the term and also lots of things you should really not be doing.

Thinking that time management is all about hacks

Sure, when you're learning about time management you might come across various tricks and hacks you can use to focus better while you're working, but these are really just the metaphorical icing on the cake. The basis of time management is knowing what your goals are, knowing what's important to you (and not important), and being able to divide up your time effectively. The rest is all a bonus.

Thinking that it'll sort itself out from here

This guide has given you the information you need to help you work better, but at the end of the day, it's up to you to put it into practice. Sadly, you can't control time itself. The only thing you can control is how you manage your time. And that requires discipline and - ironically - time. Margit:

"Keep reminding yourself that changing your behavior is a process and there are always going to be ups and downs. This means it's a good idea to think of ways to stay motivated when things get tough. One way to do this is to remind yourself of the "why" or the reflection questions from step 1."

Thinking that you have to change a lot about the way you work

Some people are just naturally better at managing their time than others. It might be that you don't really need to change much at all about the way you work. If you're not short of time and you don't often feel stressed then you must be doing something right. However, you might find that some of these tricks make work even easier for you (for example, the Pomodoro Technique if you notice your focus is starting to slip).

Thinking that you'll now have time to spare

Obviously, we all love the idea that we'll suddenly gain a few extra hours at the end of the day once we've got the hang of time management. Unfortunately, that's not necessarily the goal or even the likely outcome of your efforts. This process is mainly about improving your concentration and taking more time to rest. As a result, you won't get so stressed out by unforeseen tasks, and have more control over your work.

Thinking that you can do more now

Just because you know how to manage your time now doesn't mean that you can or should suddenly do more. You're not a superhero and you can only concentrate for so long. At the beginning we looked at how to distinguish between important and unimportant tasks. This helps you to know what needs to be done and what can be eliminated or delegated. Avoid taking on too much by saying no when you need to.

In addition, it's good to be aware of your own expectations in terms of managing your time. We all have a habit of overestimating our abilities. Margit: "Challenge your expectations by asking if they are really realistic and achievable. If not, how can you modify them? If yes, what do you need to do or can you do differently?"

Read, watch or do more:

For better timemanagement.

Watching

David Allen about '[Getting in control and creating space](#)'

Rory Vaden about '[How to multiply your time](#)'

Reading

[Eat That Frog](#) by Bryan Tracy

[The ONE Thing](#) by Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

[Getting Things Done](#) by David Allen

[7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) by Stephen Covey

[Focus AAN/UIT](#) by Mark Tigchelaar

[De pomodoro-techniek](#) by Francesco Cirillo

Doing

[3 minutes meditation](#) by Inner Space

[10 minutes meditation](#) for focus by Declutter The Mind

[16 minutes meditation](#) for more productivity by Meditable meditations

The [W.O.O.P.-method](#) by Gabriele Oettingen

Experiences with OpenUp

The mental well-being of employees is of vital importance. When an organisation deals with it in a careful and open way, it gets more satisfied, engaged and productive employees in return.

It can be very helpful for employees to receive neutral and professional support. In addition, there is a growing need to deal with mental challenges and personal development themselves. At OpenUp, employees can go within 24 hours for a one-on-one meeting with a psychologist. They also get access to useful webinars, self-help programmes, surveys and more.

55%

Of the employees states that they have never been in contact with a psychologist before.

95%

In 95% of the cases, we solve the request for help; the remaining 5% we guide employees to insured care.

97%

97% of employees recommend OpenUp to a friend or colleague.

9.6

Employees give the conversations with a psychologist an average of 9.6.

"With good reason, I call you OpenUp, because it has helped me to make contact in an approachable way, to open myself up to the conversations and ultimately to achieve or start to achieve (new) goals."

"To the point, no nonsense and practical, but without immediately shooting in 'easy solutions'."

Let's OpenUp

Do you need a 1-on-1 conversation with a psychologist to discuss your personal situation? Book an appointment without obligation. Our psychologists are ready to help you with your personal development or mental challenges.

Our licensed psychologists work from the philosophy that daily practice is the key to lasting change. Just as we eat, brush our teeth and sleep every day, it is also important for the psyche to be cared for daily.



Myrthe Weijschedé

Psychologist at OpenUp