

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 6: 6 Formulas

for More Output and Less Overwhelm

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Welcome to the Tim Ferriss Show, folks. This is an experimental format. I am going to be putting out a short form audio, in this case. Tell me if you like it, if you do not like it, what you would suggest instead by pinging me on Twitter @tferriss – two R’s and two S’s – #tfs. This is going to be an essay – reading of an essay that many of you have not come in contact with and that is as a start, the choice minimal lifestyle, six formulas for more output and less overwhelm. That is today’s essay, this week’s essay, and it is intended to give you some philosophical tidbits, as well as practical tools that you can apply over the week or over the weekend. And it is intended to be, of course, shorter than the normal podcast, which is one to three hours in length. So, again, this is the choice minimal lifestyle, six formulas for more output and less overwhelm. I am not going to edit this thing because quite frankly I do not know how, so if I misspeak at any point, you will just have to pardon me and I will catch myself and then correct.

Here it goes. I was stressed out over dog cartoons. It was 9:47 P.M. at Barnes and Noble on a recent Saturday night and I had just 13 minutes to find a suitable exchange for a book titled *The New Yorker Dog Cartoons*. \$22.00 of expensive paper. So, should I go to the bestseller rack? The staff recommends rack? New arrivals? Or classics? I had already been in the store for 30 minutes. Beginning to feel overwhelmed with this ridiculous errand I had expected to take five minutes, I stumbled across the psychology section. Once tome jumped out at me as all too appropriate in this case. And it was *The Paradox of Choice, Why More is Less*.

Now, it was not the first time I had seen or read Barry Schwartz’s 2004 classic, but it seemed like a good time to revisit the principles. Among them, 1.) The more options you consider, the more buys regret you will have or regret in general.

2.) The more options you encounter, the less fulfilling your ultimate outcome will be. So, this raises a difficult question. In life, in many, many things, is it better to have the best outcome, but be less satisfied? Or have an acceptable outcome and be satisfied? For example, would you rather deliberate for months and get the one of 20 houses that is the best investment, but second guess yourself until you sell it five years later? Or would you rather get a house that is 80 percent of the investment potential of the former, still to be sold at a profit mind you, but never second guess it? Which is better? That’s a tough call.

Now, Barry recommends making non-returnable purchases. So, in this case, with the dog cartoons I decided to keep the stupid pooch cartoons. Why? Because it is not just about

being satisfied, it is about being practical. Income is renewable. That is a renewable resource, but some other resources, like attention are not.

I have talked before about attention as a currency and how it determines the value of time. For instance, I have a blog post you can search on Google for, *The Art of Letting Bad Things Happen*. This post explores this entire concept using case studies, but here is one example. Is your weekend really free if you find a crisis in the inbox Saturday morning that you cannot address until Monday morning? Okay, think about that. So, if you are just about to go into your weekend and then you find a big mess in your inbox that you cannot fix until Monday morning. Is your weekend really free even if you do not have something scheduled?

So, for instance, even if you have a scan in the inbox that lasts 30 seconds, the preoccupation and forward projection for the subsequent 48 hours effectively deletes your entire experience of the weekend. You had time, but you did not have attentions, so the time has no practical value, okay? Time has no practical value without attention. Alright, coming back to the choice minimal lifestyle idea.

The choice minimal lifestyle becomes an attractive tool when we consider two truths or things that I consider to be truths. 1.) Considering options costs attention that then cannot be spent on action or present state awareness. So, considering options sort of pulls you out of the present state. 2.) Attention is necessary not only for productivity, getting things done, but appreciation. Attention is necessary for both of those things. Achievement and appreciation, therefore too many choices equal less or no productivity. Too many choices equal less or no appreciations. Too many choices equals sense of overwhelm. So, all in all pretty bad thing.

Some people find that religion enables a practical choice minimal lifestyle, as religion tenants often limit the number of possible actions. And we could look at a very fun example with AJ Jacobs. AJ Jacobs is a friend of mine. He writes for *Esquire*. During his year of attempting to follow the rules of the bible, literally, which is a book called *The Year of Living Biblically*.

It is fantastic. The then agnostic AJ only actually said I am to Judaism what Italian food is to – or what the Olive Garden is to Italian food, which is kind of funny. But, so AJ then an agnostic, sited the rules and restriction of the bible as amazing in this respect, that is limiting options. Not having to consider a wide spectrum of actions as he was following immutable if then rules, allowed him to focus undiluted attention on the areas that weren't constrained. So, the result, he had increased output, increased happiness, all around. These were positive constraints.

Personally, even though I attended an episcopal boarding school, I am not religion in the conventional sense and I do not use the term spiritual because I think it is kind of a copout. So, his approach is not mine. So, what are you to do if you are secular or perhaps if you are undecided about religion, what to do?

And there are six basic rules or formulas that can be used regardless of denomination to decrease the number of options you consider in life and to be therefore happier, more productive, and generally just a more smiley person, okay? For lack of a better description and there are six rules.

1.) Set rules for yourself so you can automate as much decision making as possible. You can search on my log, which is just fourhourblog.com, for email auto responders and so on. Automate as much decision making as possible. It could be as simple as putting your bills on autopay. It could be many other things and we will get to a couple of examples.
2.) Do not provoke deliberation before you can take action. In other words, do not ruminate on decisions until you can actually make them, alright? Most decision do not require months and months of deliberation. So, one simple example, do not scan the inbox on Friday evening or over the weekend if you might encounter work problems that you cannot address until Monday. That is a very practical example.

3.) Do not postpone decisions or open loops, which is what they would be called in the GTD or getting things done parlance, just to avoid uncomfortable conversations. Open loops are a huge drain. For instance, if an acquaintance asks you if you want to come to their house for dinner next and you do not – you know that you will not. Do not say, “I am not sure. I will let you know next week.” Instead, you could use something soft, but conclusive like, “Next week? I am pretty sure I have another commitment on Thursday, but thank you for the invite. Just so I do not let you hanging, let us assume I cannot make it but, but I will let you know if that changes.”

Okay, so rather than follow up with me next week or I will follow up with you next week, say, “I am pretty sure I cannot make it. I will let you know if that changes.” Alright, so decision made, move on. 4.) Learn to make non-fatal or reversible decisions as quickly as possible. So, risk, to me, is the possibility or the likelihood of an irreversible negative outcome.

If the risk defined as such is low, make decisions and move on. Most of them are going to be non-fatal or reversible. So, in practical terms, you can set time limits for certain decisions. I will not consider options of more than 20 minutes and then just go with something, anything. You can limit the number of options. I will consider no more than three options. If you are looking at homes or startups or whatever. Or you can set financial thresholds.

For instance, if it costs less than \$100.00 or the potential damage is less than \$100.00 I will let a virtual assistance make the call and that is how I freed myself up with my first business in large measure. Was saying, “Hey, I am no longer your customer. The customers are your customer to these contracted companies. If anything could be fixed for less than \$100.00, I do not want to hear about it. Do not contact me as an intermediary, just go ahead and do it.” And then I raised that threshold over time.

I wrote most of this essay after landing at the monster that is Atlanta airport. It is a beast. Now, I could have considered half a dozen different types of ground transportation, right?

In 15, 20 minutes maybe saved 30 percent, but I grabbed an Uber instead. Now, why? Why did I do that? I could have saved some money. I did not want to sacrifice ten attention units, let us just say, of my remaining 50 to 100 total units. Since those ten units could not then be spent on this essay, right? You have limited decision making capability. Google decision fatigue. It has been written about.

I had about eight hours before bedtime due to time zone differences. Plenty of time, but scarce usable attention after I pulled an all-nighter doing fun stuff and a cross country flight. So, fast decisions preserve useable attention for what matters. Likewise, you should not spend a lot of time deciding what to have for breakfast in the morning and I will come back to that. It is a waste of your decision making power that you should only allocate to creative or valuable things.

Alright, rule 5.) Do not strive for variation and thus increased options when it is not needed. Routine enables innovation where it is most valuable. Routine, routine, routine and there is a book in fact – it is part of the Tim Ferriss Book Club, called *Daily Rituals*, which provides I think it is 167 rituals of some of the most productive people of the last several hundred years, composers, artists, scientist. Take a look at it. So, *Daily Rituals*, a great book. I produced the audio book in fact. But, do not strive for variation. Embrace routine.

Okay, explaining this, in working with athletes for example, it is clear that those who maintain the lowest body fat percentage generally speaking, eat the same foods over and over and over again. I have eaten the same slow carb breakfast and diet – same breakfast and lunch for nearly two years. Putting variation only into the meals that I focus on for enjoyment. Okay, so there is utility and then enjoyment and for me, that is dinner and then all meals on Saturdays.

So, just cheat day I go ballistic and on any given Saturday you can search on Twitter #cheatday and you will see all sorts of crazy stuff. The same sort of distinction can be found in exercise versus recreations. So, utility versus fun. Exercise versus recreation. For fat loss and muscle gain, even as much as 20 plus pounds of muscle gain in four weeks, I follow the same exercise protocol. Occam's Protocol, which was explained in *The Four Hour Body*. With occasional experiments since 1996. That is a long time. Same thing, without variety.

For recreation though, when the focus is enjoyment and not efficacy, I tend to try something new each weekend. So, long, long walks, climbing, rock climbing, at Mission Cliffs or outside, mountain biking in Mirin, tasting wine in Napa, whatever. There is a lot of variety in the recreation category, but not in the exercise category.

So, do not confuse what should be results driving with routine exercise, fuel for breakfast, with something that is enjoyment driven. The benefits in variation. Okay, 6.) Regret is past tense decision making. So, think about this. Regret is past tense decision making. It is already water under the bridge, so eliminate complaining to minimize regret. Condition yourself to notice complaints and stop making them with a simple experiment,

like the 21 day no complaint experiment, which you can also search in the blog. If you just search 21 day no complaint experiment and my name it will pop right up.

You take a bracelet or a rubber band, you put it on your wrist, and you snap it every time you complain and we need to define what that means very, very carefully. What is a complaint? Exactly. But, just a bracelet and awareness can prevent wasted past tense deliberation, right? Regret, being pissed off with people who have wronged you, grudges, all of that nonsense that improves nothing and depletes your attention and emotional reserves.

So, consider a 21 day no complaint experiment. It is really a game changer. Complete life changer and it is so simple to do. Alright, so in conclusion, decision is not to be avoided. That is not the problem. You want to be a good decision maker, but – and of course, you are going to look at any good CEO, top corporate performer, and you will see a high volume of decisions. But, it is the deliberation, the time we vacillate over and consider each decision, that is the killer. Total deliberation time, not the number of decisions, is what determines your attention bank account balanced or debt where you start to make really sloppy mistakes.

If you look at, for instance, Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines, he had a journalist with him at one point and they said, “Oh my God, your job must be so stressful. It must be so difficult.” And he said, “No, actually it is really simple because I have parameters. Are we the lowest cost airline? Every decision can be made through that lens.” And he had the journalist sort of make decisions for him with a bunch of different proposals that came in.

Lo and behold, really easy, really fast, low emotional tax because you have good rules. Okay, so let us assume that you pay sort of 10 percent over time by following the six rules that I mentioned. You cut your average decision cycle time by 40 percent. So, ten minutes go to six minutes for example. Not only will you have much more time and attention to spend on revenue generating activities, for instance if that is our goal, you will also get greater enjoyment from what you have and experience. And you really need to focus not just on achievement, but appreciation of what you have.

If you cannot be happy with you have and what you are doing, you will never be happy with what you get or do. So, consider that payment over time, that 10 percent of additional cost, literally you could say. The things you buy are 10 percent more expensive because you are cutting down your decision time as an investment in part of your ideal lifestyle tax.

It is not a loss. It is an investment in your quality of life and your results. So, embrace – not only embrace, but embrace the choice minimal lifestyle. It is a subtle and underexploited philosophical tool that produces dramatic increases in both output and satisfaction all with less overwhelm. So, make testing a few of these rules – there is six of them. You could listen to this again. It is pretty short. Make testing a few of these

principles the first of many fast and reversible decisions because most decisions are not that risky. You can get back to where you are now, so make them faster.

I hope you enjoyed this essay. Let me know if you did. Shoot me a note on Twitter @tferriss #tfs. If you would like more of these, let me know. If you hated it, if it is a waste of your time, please also let me know. I can do more of these.

I can also do something where I answer questions for instance and I take – I have questions voted up and then each week or every two weeks I answer a few of them in this type of format, which is five to 15 minutes. Alright, that is it for now. Please visit the blog, fourhourblog.com all spelled out. Of course there is the normal show, The Tim Ferriss Show, with long interviews one to three hours. Visit the blog. I hope you test some of these things out and let me know what you think. Thanks so much for listening.