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Opening Extract from...

The 15 Minute Rule

How to stop procrastinating and take
control of your life

Written by Caroline Buchanan

Published by Robinson

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THE 15 Minute RULE

Caroline Buchanan



*To my beloved friend, Tania, a shining example
of willingness and enthusiasm.*

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FOREWORD

by Zelda West-Meads

My first instinct on reading Caroline's brilliant new book, *The 15-Minute Rule*, was that I really must go out and buy a copy for everyone who I thought would find it useful. Then I realized that I would need so many copies that I would probably have to buy a bigger car while I was at it to bring them all home in.

The thing is, everyone could gain something from this book in at least one aspect of their lives. The principle is so simple: the hardest part is getting started, but you can do anything for 15 minutes. And Caroline offers inspirational advice on doing exactly that: tackling anything by breaking tasks down to 15-minute chunks and simply getting started.

It is written with great warmth and humour, and manages not to be preachy or judgemental. There is no assumption that you have to be superwoman (or man) to be able to make changes in your life, and from the small tasks such as sorting out a cluttered room, to the larger ones, such as mending a broken heart, they are all treated with the same respect.

And over and above the very practical and straightforward advice, Caroline has also drawn on her many years of experience as a Relate counsellor to offer fascinating insights and help with emotional problems in her chapters on relationships, friends and family.

An extremely useful book that many people will want to

read and then keep on their shelves to dip into time and again whenever they need a friendly pep-talk on any aspect of their life that's bothering them.

CONTENTS

Introduction: The 15-Minute Rule	1
1 How it Works	3
2 The Myth of Willpower	15
3 Pulverizing Procrastination	25
4 Willingness and Enthusiasm	48
5 Your ACE Card	60
6 Weighty Matters	69
7 Your Love Life	84
8 Your Career	110
9 Finding Financial Freedom	124
10 Friends and Family	137
11 Getting the Glow, Inside and Out	153
12 Conclusion	164
Acknowledgements	168

INTRODUCTION:

THE 15-MINUTE RULE

Can you spare 15 minutes? Do you want to become a more motivated, productive person? Do you want to make your dreams come true? Then this book is for you.

The 15-Minute Rule is a lifestyle tool that can work for anyone. It is designed to deal with all the tasks we put off and which then become such heavy weights to carry around. Focusing your attention for just 15 minutes at a time is something anyone can do. It can help you to tackle all the things you don't want to deal with, the things you run away from, put off or ignore at your peril – all those irritating little chores that can give you a big headache: the shopping, the uncomfortable phone calls, the housework, office hassles and even the dreaded paperwork.

Before I go any further may I first say congratulations to you for picking up this book. You are obviously someone who is willing to try something new. Whether you are keen and motivated to change or are using the escape of a good read to put off some evil chore that is screaming for your attention, then this is the book is for you.

The 15-Minute Rule is going to change your life.

If procrastination is your enemy, you are about to learn how to overcome it. All the problems you feel you are avoiding or

resisting can be resolved with the minimum of effort and leave you free from fear, anxiety, exhaustion, misery and all the other balls and chains you drag along behind you. Once you learn how to get started, you will be amazed at how easy it is to get on top of those undone chores. You'll even find your energy levels rising dramatically.

And following the 15-Minute Rule is fun! All your must-dos can be tackled with a much lighter heart. The method is tried and tested and the results speak for themselves. The essence of the Rule is extremely simple:

***YOU CAN DO ALMOST ANYTHING FOR
15 MINUTES AT A TIME***

HOW IT WORKS

This book actually started with a 15-minute commitment. I was about to tackle one of my ghastliest chores of the year – my tax return. Like most people, I loathe paperwork and the anxiety attached to this particular task was hideous. I would have done pretty much anything to avoid it. Pairing socks was always a good one – my husband's, my daughter's, mine, all lying at the bottom of the ironing basket, which was where I'd left them until I had nothing better to do than to sort them out.

At times like this, all kinds of jobs suddenly seemed vital but sock pairing was definitely in the top ten, as was washing the kitchen floor, making sure I hadn't thrown away anything important, making that telephone call to the friend I've been meaning to call for ages, or phoning the gas man for a service. These things need to be done! They're important! Well, yes, they are, but they're not going to help you get the tax return done.

Procrastination, though, just makes the thought of the job that much worse; it starts assuming nightmare proportions. All the dreaded 'What ifs?' start creeping in: What if I can't do my tax? What if I can't get it done on time? What if I'm fined? What if I can't pay it? What if I get sent to prison? What will happen to my family if I'm locked up? How will I cope with jail? Will the uniform suit me? Oh, yes, our imaginations can

run riot, round and round and hither and thither when anxiety takes over.

So how did I solve the tax-return problem? I couldn't keep ignoring it and hoping it would go away forever. I didn't have a choice, and decided to give it just 15 minutes. Anything would be a start. But when? The deadline was fast approaching. It would have to be today. Well maybe tomorrow.

Yes, tomorrow would be good.

And guess what? Tomorrow came and was suddenly today, and I couldn't put it off any longer.

All the procrastination had given me a rotten headache. It was 10 a.m. I took a couple of painkillers and decided to start at 2 p.m. I felt a tiny bit of relief once I'd set the time for action but the headache didn't budge. There was so much to do and I knew I really should be getting on with it. So, I decided to bring it forward an hour and finally it was time for lift-off.

Surprise, surprise, it was much easier than I'd thought it would be. By the time I had pulled together a few relevant bits of information and set up and dated the document I was done for the day. I felt peaceful. My headache had vanished. My anxiety had plummeted. I had my perspective back! I also had my energy back. At this rate I knew I'd have it finished by the end of the week – it was only Tuesday and a few more 15-minute sessions would see the job through.

As the week progressed I found the subsequent 15-minute sessions were a lot easier to start than the first one. Because I had already begun I no longer had the head-banging, screaming frustrations of trying to locate all the relevant pieces of paper that you need for a tax return. They were already in place. The second 15 minutes was beautifully straightforward – the feeling of being overwhelmed had completely disappeared. The third 15 minutes was a breeze and the final 15 minutes saw the job checked and completed.

I felt wonderfully relieved, and I've found it much easier to do my tax return ever since. I'm not saying it's my favourite job in the world but it's so much more manageable than it ever

was. It still has the potential to irritate me but I know I can nip it in the bud by going back to my Rule and spending just 15 minutes on getting the process started.

Those first 15 minutes are for laying the vital foundation stone which is the beginning of the end of the horrible task. Indeed, with some jobs, one session of 15 minutes may turn out to be all you need to complete the whole thing.

To get us started, here's an inspiring quotation from the author Thomas Carlyle. It's worth writing out, pinning up or placing it somewhere obvious so that you can refer to it regularly.

‘Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.’

Carlyle also said: ‘The best effect of any book is that it excites the reader to self-activity.’

And I sincerely believe this is what the 15-Minute Rule can do for you.

CHASING DREAMS AND MAKING DECISIONS

The 15-Minute Rule is not just about dealing with the tricky things you have left undone. It is also about embracing all those dreams you long to become reality. The thing to remember is that you really can do almost anything for 15 minutes. For example, if a sixty-year-old woman wants to become a ballet dancer, why shouldn't she? Just 15 minutes a day in a tutu learning the basic ballet positions is possible. It might not lead to a starring role in the next production of *Swan Lake*, but it could allow her to express a love of dance while improving her health, confidence and joie de vivre.

It's an extreme example, perhaps, but I'm a great believer in following your passion. If you long to become a best-selling novelist, a star of stage and screen, a highly respected academic,

a famous artist, a successful musician and so on, then you really need to give it a go. If the passion is there then follow it. We can't do everything but we can improve our well-being if we combine our passion with our talents.

Here's another quote that I love. It's a line from the film *Terms of Endearment* and is spoken by the character played by Shirley MacLaine:

'Work like you don't need the money
Love like your heart has never been broken
And dance like no one is watching.'

And what about the other big things in life? Do you want to find love or dramatically improve the relationship you already have? How are your finances – is there room for improvement? Do you want to lose weight? Do you want to create positive new habits? Stop obsessing? Banish worry? Would you like oodles of confidence, and to learn to love yourself?

Are you trying to pluck up the courage to step outside your comfort zone? Do you long to make the most of your potential?

How about decision making? Is it difficult for you? Do opportunities pass you by or do you grab them with both hands? How is your goal-setting technique? Or have you put that task off until another day too?

Whatever it is you want or need, why not try the 15-Minute Rule? You have nothing to lose and plenty to gain.

There's only one thing holding you back from your dreams. And that is you. Not the core of you, the essence of you, but your distorted beliefs about yourself – the old tapes in your head that are giving you false or outdated messages. The tapes that go round and round on an endless loop saying things like: 'I'm not good enough'; 'I couldn't possibly'; 'I don't deserve it'; 'It's too scary'; 'I haven't got the time'; 'It's not my thing'; 'I'm just lazy', etc.

Now is the time to update your internal technology and switch to a positive message.

One of my dear friends is a highly inspirational woman who embraces change; she told me that she thinks of a negative thought as a groove in a record, one that we deepen when we imagine worst-case scenarios. For some time now she has been working at overlaying those grooves by imagining the complete opposite – the best-case scenarios.

So why not try it? Replace each negative thought with a positive one and keep practising until you get the hang of it and it starts to become second nature. No more plaguing yourself with negative ‘What if . . . things become really difficult?’, instead, concentrate on the positive ‘What if . . . things become wonderfully straightforward?’

So how about trying this positive ‘What if?’ What if you commit to embracing the 15-Minute Rule? It really is a win-win situation. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

‘What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.’

THE UNEXPECTED GLITCH

We are all horribly aware of the jobs we just don’t want to do. On top of that, problems often crop up that we haven’t anticipated. If we’re not careful this sort of thing can throw a huge spanner into the workings of our day but the extent to which it derails our plans is up to us. We can react badly to it or we can react well. The choice is ours. And if we feel emotional about what happens – even if we simply feel annoyance – we’re more likely to react badly.

‘But it made me feel terrible!’ we might say, as an excuse for our day getting completely out of hand.

Or worse still, ‘My day is ruined now!’ Of course, nine times out of ten, the day is not ruined. And it doesn’t mean that everything else that day is going to go wrong. The truth is

that we can restart our day at any time, telling ourselves, 'From now on, my day is going to be a good one!'

It's no use panicking about how to deal with the unexpected, and worrying about the time we won't be spending on what we had originally planned. Why? Because there's a problem, and we have to deal with it. Perhaps we feel angry, especially if we're trying to keep lots of plates spinning in the air, and anticipate the hours we will have to spend trying to sort it all out.

But not if you adopt the 15-Minute Rule. If you know this problem is only going to take 15 minutes to resolve or at least partially resolve, you are less likely to waste hours fretting about it and running around ineffectively like a headless chicken.

Devote just 15 minutes to focusing on what you can do about it even if, ultimately, it's going to take a bit longer. For a good start, focus on the solution rather than the problem and try to let go of any resentment the problem might have created. Brainstorm solutions and get cracking. You may find you resolve the whole thing with time to spare.

WHY IT WORKS

One of the reasons my 15-Minute Rule works is that you get to suspend any muddled thinking while you get on and just *do* your 15 minutes. The instructions are clear, concise and not open to manipulation and it appeals to both the disorganized and the organized.

It's a tool that is made up of imagination, positive thinking, fun, focus and creativity. It also happens to follow the SMART goal-setting rules: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-phased.

The 15-Minute Rule also has elements of a therapy known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which is used by psychologists to treat many emotional and psychological problems. This therapy changes the way you feel by changing how you think (cognitive) and what you do (behaviour). By using these

techniques, you can start to conquer negative emotions such as misplaced fear, as well as addressing self-defeating behaviour such as avoidance. So, you can see how this relates to the 15-Minute Rule where we change how we feel (anxious, guilty about putting things off) by changing how we behave (we spend 15 minutes doing it).

The 15-Minute Rule is flexible, and appeals to those who want instant gratification, who want everything *now*, and also the longer-term players who recognize the benefits of consistency and persistence.

Whichever camp you're in, it can give you the opportunity to explore all kinds of ideas until you find projects, passions and activities that really suit you.

When you commit to those 15 minutes you will find yourself completely focused on the task at hand. Even if you're floundering about what to do first, you will still be focused. You will find that you want to get on with it and will naturally use the time to its best advantage because you know it will only be for 15 minutes.

Never forget that laying the foundation stone will underpin the whole project. Whatever you actually achieve, you will at the very least have made a commitment. No matter how busy you are, or however lazy or stressed you might be feeling, 15 minutes is manageable, especially when you reward yourself afterwards. Virtue, of course, will be an automatic reward and it will go a long way towards making you feel good because you will feel a sense of relief – and maybe real joy – that your project has been started. The good feelings may actually feel out of proportion to the 15 minutes. You may wonder why you're feeling so fantastic after such a short time investment. But does it matter? It's entirely natural to feel good about yourself when you know you've sown the seed that has the potential to bring great rewards, even if that reward is simply peace of mind.

Both small and large gains can be made with the 15-Minute Rule, and each can bring enormous satisfaction and a hefty boost to your self-esteem.

THE SECRET SIX

The 15-Minute Rule is made up of six stages that will help you with whatever you wish to achieve. For larger creative and constructive projects take note of each one of them; for smaller tasks you may find that you need only the first 15 minutes to get yourself started and possibly the task over and done with.

One: Be Inspired

Copy out the following quotation and pin it up where you will see it several times a day:

‘Whatever you do, or dream you can do, begin it – boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.’

Goethe

Two: Visualize

Close your eyes and imagine yourself just as you’ve completed your chosen goal. Feel it, taste it, touch it. You are more likely to reach your goal if you visualize being there. Next, write down your goal in a safe place: a brand new file on your computer, for example, or in a notebook bought especially for the purpose. Writing it down will help you to see it, store the thought of it in your memory and also greatly increase the chances of your achieving it. Visualize, visualize, visualize.

Three: Plan

If you haven’t started already, pick a time to begin. How about now? Or some time within the next three days? You must be able to find just 15 minutes out of those seventy-two hours. Once you have picked a start time, stick to it; commit to it. If you wait until you feel motivated, it won’t get done. If you

conquer the behaviour that leads to procrastination then, regardless of your mood, the thinking and feeling will catch up.

Four: Prepare

It's all in the preparation. Read this book, become inspired and you are well on your way to making those dreams come true. Take note of the section on willingness and enthusiasm, which will serve you extraordinarily well by giving you an extra boost. As you read, imagine all the positive changes that you could embrace and write down any ideas that occur to you. You can sift through them later and see which ones have real appeal.

Five: The 15-Minute Rule

Time to implement the 15-Minute Rule. Pick your chosen task, set your watch and start timing. These 15 minutes will include everything – for example, turning on the computer and waiting for it to warm up and getting comfortable in your chair. Now, if necessary, brainstorm. Write down anything and everything that occurs to you regarding your chosen project: sentences, phrases, words, drawings – whatever will speak to you when you look at it again. Stick with your task. Making a cup of tea at this stage is to be avoided. Focus on what you need to do, avoid all distractions, apart from emergencies, and simply get on with it. If nothing much is happening then brainstorm further. Do anything that will help you achieve something! When the 15-minutes is up – stop!

Even if you are eager to go on, stop. Stick to your boundary. This gives you the important message that you can trust yourself. You said 15 minutes, so 15 minutes it will be. It will also be much easier to come back to the project if you have left it while feeling full of enthusiasm, and possibly wanting more time.

When you've finished you are likely to feel so much better than you did just a quarter of an hour previously. You might not believe where the time has gone. How are you feeling?

Relieved? Excited? Hopeful? Now savour the experience and enjoy every moment of your accomplishment. Bask in those rewarding feelings. By doing this, you will be creating good memories that will inspire and strengthen your motivation for your future 15-minute sessions.

Once you've grasped the whole idea of the 15-Minute Rule, you can tailor-make it just for you. But don't run before you can walk. After your first segment, I suggest your next two 15-minute sessions are done within a three-day period. In seventy-two hours you can definitely manage three lots of 15 minutes. Of course you will eventually be 'allowed' to spend as much time as you'd like on your particular project but only when you're really into it. The moment you get stuck or bored, go straight back to the 15-Minute Rule and follow this until you feel raring to go again.

Another wonderful thing about the 15-Minute Rule is that a lot of work goes on subconsciously and effortlessly in between sessions. Your project is lodged in your brain and your brain is still thinking about it even when you're doing something completely different and not aware that you're thinking about it.

Six: Reward Yourself

Pat yourself on the back for each step and celebrate your victories large and small. Rewards are important.

Make a list of various treats that are easily accessible – anything from reading a chapter of your new book, watching a television programme (even if it's a recording or a download), lying down and listening to some favourite music, planning a trip of a lifetime.

WHAT'S BEEN STOPPING YOU?

Are you frightened of failure? Or frightened of success? Perhaps it's both? Either way those fears present an obstacle.

Remember what Susan Jeffers said: 'Feel the fear and do it anyway.' Taking action is better than lying around doing nothing; it's when that sense of having achieved nothing kicks in that we feel low, stressed, anxious and are more likely to beat ourselves up.

You can avoid feeling like that if you just get on with it and do your 15 minutes. Please, please don't wait until you feel ready to start! You could end up waiting forever.

According to William James, the nineteenth-century psychologist and philosopher, and the father of the modern day self-help book:

'Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not.'

FIRING UP YOUR POTENTIAL

The tried-and-tested examples in this book will hopefully inspire you to strive for your goals. Of course achievement is wonderful for self-esteem and confidence, and for every 15-minute commitment you make you'll see that it gets easier and easier to achieve. You will actually be creating new habits, many of which will eventually become second nature to you.

You will also find the tools to help you give up some of your bad procrastination habits, which you've spent so much time and energy practising, over and over again, and telling yourself you're going to stop, also over and over again . . . Practice makes perfect and boy are we good at practising bad habits! Einstein had it about right: 'Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.'

BEATING BAD HABITS

There is a technique called ‘surfing’ that’s used to tackle addictions and which lends itself brilliantly to the 15-Minute Rule. What stops so many people from tackling an addiction is the fear that their cravings will become overwhelming when they quit. But when the craving ‘wave’ hits, you can distract yourself by doing something, anything, other than give in to your addiction, the bad habit. Committing 15 minutes to doing something else will keep you busy, and hopefully by then the craving will have passed. If not, you can repeat the process by spending another 15 minutes on a second task. Cravings do not last – they are temporary. And each time you surf a wave, and ride it out, you will reinforce your new good behaviour until, before too long, this new good habit takes the place of the old destructive one.

For the scientific among you, one of the reasons the 15-Minute Rule works is that activity promotes vitality. There is an area of the brain called the reticular activating system (RAS), which is a complex network of nerve connections that has a role in our ability to be alert and wakeful. Activity in the extensive nervous system connecting our brain with our bodies stimulates the RAS. Simply put, the more active we are, the more alert we feel. Activity promotes well-being, which feels good, and this then leads us to want to do more activity. It is a constructive circle, and when you change your behaviour patterns you are cutting out a lot of the dead wood in your life to make room for all the good new stuff. Commit to 15 minutes, and be inspired:

‘The moment one definitely commits oneself,
Then Providence moves too.
All sorts of things occur to help one
That would never otherwise have occurred.’

Goethe