

The speed of life

“Whatever I do, I want to give it 100%. I don’t want to waste any of my time or opportunities. I expect myself to work at my full capacity.”

The person above sounds pretty admirable, no? Our culture pulls for this attitude – particularly in the work environment, though many people apply the idea to the whole of their lives. *“Go for the gusto.”*

Here’s another way of putting it: Figure out your absolute maximum capacity; the most you can possibly accomplish in a day, the fastest you can move, the most you can pack in. Then live every day at that level. *“At whatever you try, do your very best.”* Although this may sound like a good idea, there are three reasons why it isn’t.

Problem #1: Performance problems appear as you approach 100%

Automobile engines are designed to run at variable speeds from idle to several thousand RPMs. What happens if you run the engine at close to its maximum speed for an extended period of time? It becomes less efficient with fuel and develops far more wear and tear than it would if operated at a more moderate speed. Drive your car on a racetrack at a constant 50 miles per hour and it will run almost indefinitely. Drive it with the pedal pressed to the floor and you’ll be making far more pit stops.

Human beings are the same. There are limits to what you can do: the most you can lift, the hardest you can work, the most you can pack into a day. You are fully capable of working at your maximum capacity for short periods of time. But if you try to extend this and make it your normal speed, problems will arise.

People who constantly push themselves to their limits become anxious and irritable, their stress response is constantly activated, their physical health suffers, and their relationships begin to fall apart. They may wind up taking more time off with the flu, or burning themselves out. In the end they become *less* efficient, not more.

Life is a marathon, not a hundred-yard dash. If you push yourself all-out, you will not get as far. There may be times when you have to sprint. Fine. You were designed to sprint, but not all the time.

Problem #2: Unplanned demands

What if you *could* operate at 100% every day without experiencing ill effects? Unfortunately, there would still be a problem. Life isn’t completely predictable. It throws curve balls at you occasionally. Suddenly there is a family crisis, or a sick child at home, or a labor dispute, or even a traffic jam. If you have committed yourself to performing at 100%, you’re in trouble. There is no flexibility in your schedule, no energy in reserve for an extra push, no room to maneuver.

The closer you are to your absolute maximum, the less room you have for the unexpected and the more vulnerable you are to the whims of fate. Although the urge to strive your hardest might be designed to give you a sense of control, in reality it only makes you more helpless. The person in true control is in the car beside you, the driver who has an hour to spare and isn't desperate to live up to the demands of his appointment book.

Problem #3: Unplanned decreases in capacity

The world may be kind, and ask no more of you than your best. But what if you can't manage your best? What if you become ill, or experience a mood dip, or develop a full-fledged depression? What if you get a bad night's sleep? Your energy and ability to get things done will decline. You won't be capable of your best, of giving 100%. Your maximum will be 95%, or 85%, or 40%. If you have committed yourself to performing at close to 100%, you are going to have problems. You cannot be at your best every day.

If your ability to get things done is variable, then it can be wise to build some slack into your life. This doesn't mean that you have to sit bored on the couch when you feel perfectly well, or that a retreat to the couch is the best thing when you feel down or stressed. Far from it: Underutilization of your potential may be as big a problem as overcommitment. But it does mean that you should create a life that can handle periods in which you are able to do somewhat less than usual.



In sum, then, driving yourself to your limits can be good exercise, but it should not become a lifestyle. The good life is one that allows you to strive mightily but also one that provides time for calm reflection and keeps some strength in reserve for the unexpected.

Top speed is for emergencies, not for everyday life.

Do you tend to live your life at close to the absolute limits of your ability? How so?

Has this had any of the negative effects discussed in this handout? What have they been?

How could you build some flexibility into your life so that you have time for rest, energy left over for emergencies, and slack for times of low energy? Try to come up with at least two concrete strategies.

What would be the first step to put at least one of these strategies in place in your life?
