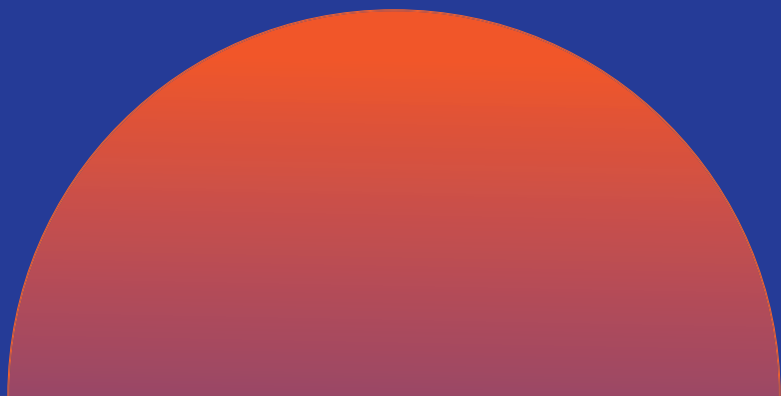


# TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR TIME



HIDDEN

BRAIN

# TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR TIME



WITH SHANKAR VEDANTAM


HIDDEN

BRAIN



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# ✦ Introduction

The television series *Never Have I Ever* is a coming-of-age story about the ups and downs of high school. There's popular kids, unpopular kids, and drama. There are lots and lots of crushes. And of course, there's applying for college. One of the show's main characters is an overachiever. Ben is determined to get into his dream school, Columbia University. His schedule is packed with studying, extracurriculars, and tests. Ben has no time for friends, socializing, or even breakfast.

**Patty** Time for breakfast, my little prince.

**Ben** No time, Patty.  
I'll just eat a jerky stick on the way.

**At school, Bens time start schedule  
elicits eye rolls from his classmates.**



**Ben** I have some free time between 1:15 and 2 a.m. tonight to work on this.

**Devil** Are you out of your mind? We're not operating on your psycho schedule. Both of you guys just come to my house after school.

**Ben** I can't. That's when I zoom with my Mandarin teacher.

Even Ben's principal has become concerned about his constant battle with time.

**Principal** Your schedule is untenable. You don't even have a lunch period anymore.

**Ben** I don't need a lunch period.

**Principal** Yes, I've seen you with your meat sticks.





Eventually, the stress lands  
Ben in the hospital.



# The solution to not having enough time might require us to rethink our relationship with time.

We speed through our days, rush to drop off kids, battle work deadlines, squeeze in emails before bed. Lots of us dream of doing less. Much less. We fantasize about striking it rich and quitting our jobs.

Lofly goals, demanding jobs and the pressures of parenthood leave many of us feeling burned out, on edge and overwhelmed. Lofly goals, demanding jobs and the pressures of parenthood leave many of us feeling burned out, on edge and overwhelmed.

# 01

● Most of us live our lives in a blur. Most of us live our lives in a blur.



## Cassie Mogilner Holmes

At UCLA, Cassie Mogilner Holmes studies the relationship between time and well-being. Among other things, she has studied what happens to people who get their wish to have all the time in the world.

**Cassie** Hi Shankar, thank you so much for having me. This is so exciting.

**Shankar** I understand you took a trip to Mexico. How did it go?

**Cassie** Well, it was a trip to Mexico that I was so excited about because it continued to be on the heels of crazy days of the busyness of work and getting the kids ready and teaching and all that sort of stuff. And so I was so excited about the idea of just sitting on the beach with the book with nothing to do. That sounded more than delightful. And it was delightful until the morning of the fourth day and I woke up and I was like, you know, tapping on my husband's shoulder. I'm like, all right, so what are we going to do today? I was done doing nothing. And I was eager to get going again.

**Shankar** For many of us, this is a relatable experience. We look forward to going on vacation, only to feel bored or antsy after a few days. Just like Cassie, we are unhappy when we are busy, and we are unhappy when we have too much time on our hands.

**Cassie and her colleagues, Marissa Sharif and Hal Hirschfield, have studied the connection between having free time, or discretionary time as Cassie puts it, and people's happiness.**

and people's happiness.  
and people's happiness.  
and people's happiness.



Threshold

The pattern of results showed an upside down U-shape. So what that suggests is that on one end people with too little time were unhappy.

But what was surprising to us was the other side of that arc, that beyond a certain

amount, there was such thing as having too much time. So when people had a whole,

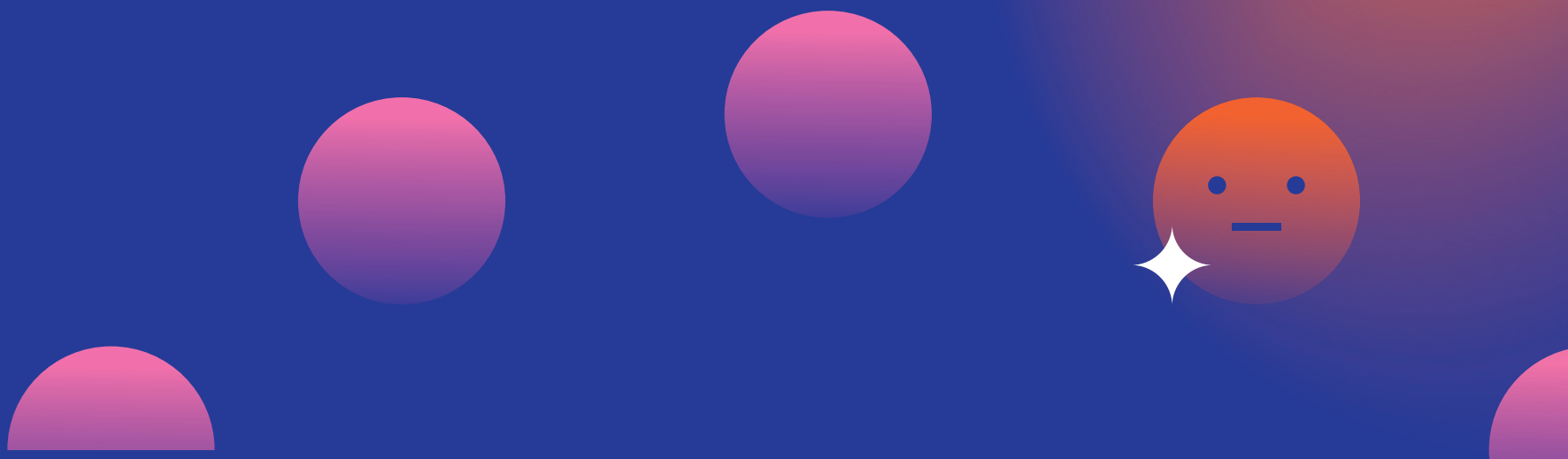
whole lot of discretionary hours in the day, they were also dissatisfied.

Too Little Time    Unhappy

Too Much Time    Also Unhappy





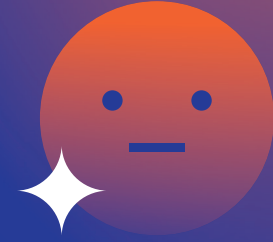


**Shankar** So, it's almost a paradox, isn't it? Because very busy people imagine that, you know, they dream about the day they can just put up their feet and do nothing. And, of course, when that day actually arrives, very quickly, like you found, you found yourself frustrated. And this is, it's apparently not just you, it's a widespread phenomenon.

**Cassie** Yeah. And what our data suggests is that when people have too many discretionary hours in a day, they feel unproductive.

And from that, it undermines their sense of purpose.

And with that, people are dissatisfied.  
people are dissatisfied.  
people are dissatisfied.  
people are dissatisfied.





At UCLA, psychologist Cassie Holmes has come to believe that many people underestimate how much control they do have in making their lives less busy and stressful. A powerful moment of insight in Cassie's life occurred one day in 2017 as she was racing across campus with a preschooler in tow.

**Cassie** I didn't have a long commute. I could walk through beautiful UCLA campus with my three-year-old to take him to preschool and me to work.

And there was one morning in particular where the sun was shining. It was a spring day, and the birds were chirping, and my son was skipping along as happy as could be.

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And I was charging ahead because I was thinking about the meeting that I was going to be late to and also thinking about all the things that I had to do that day when I dropped him off.

**And I heard him, he was like, mom, stop.** Hurry up.  
And I was like, we don't have time to stop.

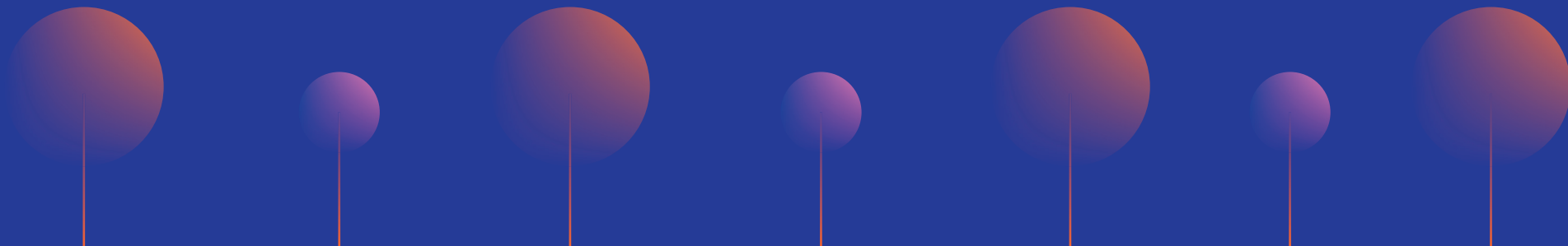
stop.  
stop.  
stop.  
stop.

**And he's like, mom, please stop.** And I turn around and I see that his nose is buried in a bush of roses. And I, without thinking, these words came out of my mouth:  
stop.  
stop.  
stop.



# We don't have time to stop and smell the roses.

And when I heard those words, I did stop.







Oh, my gosh, I am so in my head. I am so thinking about what's next that I was oblivious to this perfect scene that I was in, that my son was absolutely noticing.

And as a time and happiness researcher and expert yelling into the air that we don't have time to stop and smell the roses was definitely

a wake up call.  
a wake up call.  
a wake up call.  
a wake up call.



# ◆ Time Tracking

As Cassie tracked her time like a scientist, she started to see the epiphany she'd had with her preschooler smelling the roses, pointed to something much bigger. In all sorts of ways, she was not allocating her time to maximize activities that promoted happiness. She was allowing things she didn't enjoy, but felt she had to do, to intrude on time set aside for rejuvenation.

**Write down what you're doing every half hour.**

[What's the activity you're doing?]

Be as specific as possible.

[What are you doing at work?]

[What project are you working on?]



**Rate it on a 10 point scale how joyful or satisfying you felt having spent that time.**

[So one can look back on their personal data.]  
[What activities produced the most amount of happiness?]  
[What activities produced the least amount of happiness?]


**Evaluate Your findings.**

[what are some commonalities across those happiest activities and those least happy activities?]



### 3 Categories.


- [1. Things that are both fun and meaningful.]
- [2. Things you don't have to do but enjoy.]
- [3. Things you have to do even if they aren't enjoyable.]



Now, when Cassie talks about choosing activities that produce happiness, it's not like she's saying that our only choices are to do things that make us happy or do things that make us unhappy. All of us have to do things that are not fun. Time tracking can show that you might not be allocating your time efficiently.





The less mindful we  
are about how we   
deploy our time, the  
more we feel stressed  
out. This has implica-  
tions not just for our  
personal happiness,  
but how we behave  
toward others.

A famous study in the 1970s demonstrated this.

It centered around a parable from the Bible,

the Good Samaritan who stops to help

another person in distress.

## 02. ● When Time Controls Us



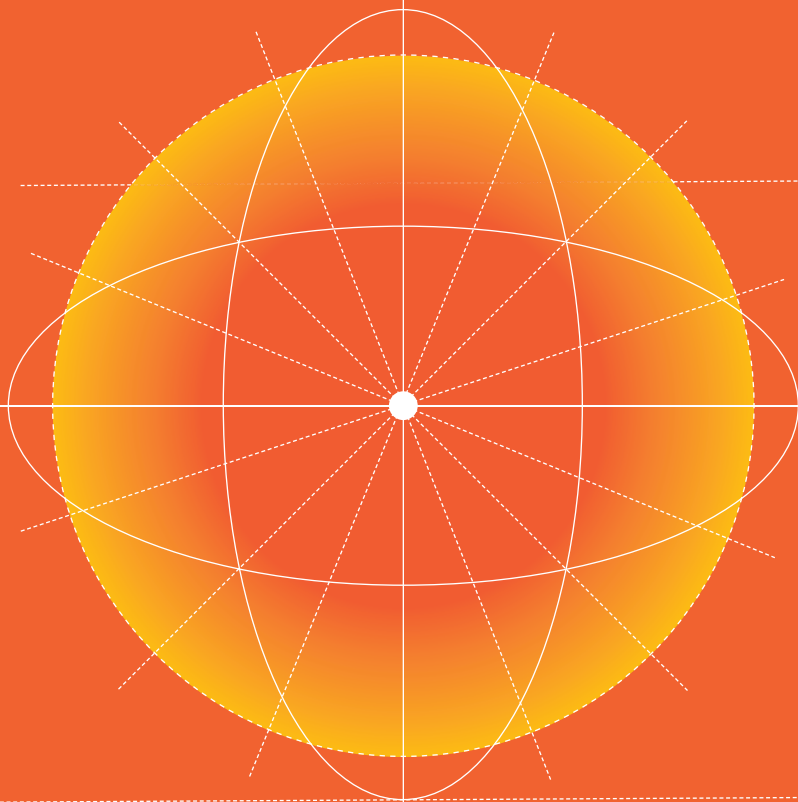
**This is a really interesting study and conducted among the kindest individuals one could come across, seminary students.**

And their task was to present the story of the Good Samaritan to others in a room that was down the hall.

On their way out, some of the participants were told that they were late, that they didn't have a lot of time. And on their way, there was actually a man on the side who was coughing clearly in need of help. Unbeknownst to the participants, he was someone who was hired as a confederate for the study. But what the researchers were looking at is whether someone who was told that they were late, who felt like they were in a hurry, would be likely to stop and help.

And indeed, they found when people felt they had scarce time, they were less likely to stop and help someone.



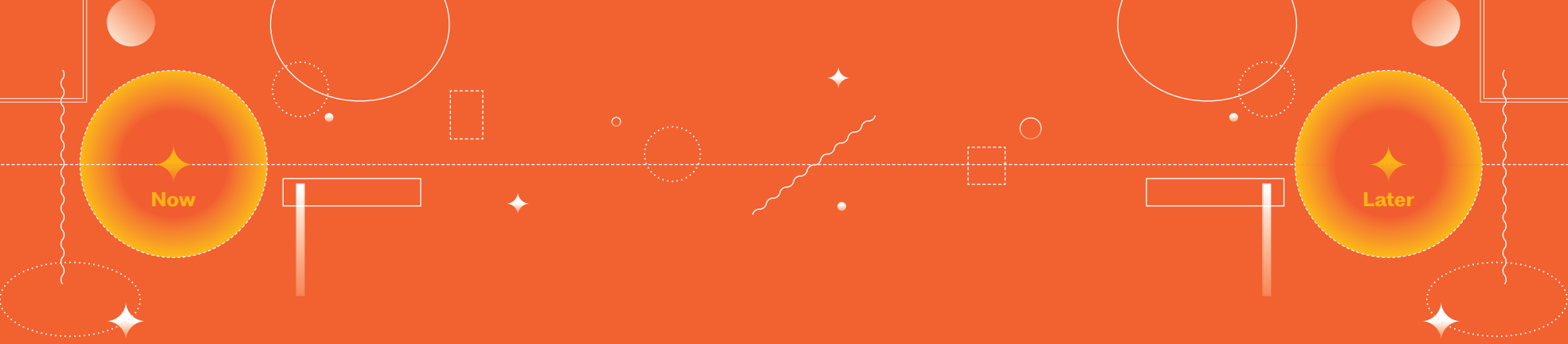


**Shankar** I understand that you've conducted a study and found a similar effect. Is that correct, Cassie?

**Cassie** Yeah, well, I conducted a study among college students simply leading them to think about how busy or not that they are. And I had them write a paragraph about how busy and how many things they have to do that day versus a control condition where they just wrote about their day. And then I asked them whether they would be willing to stay an extra 15 minutes to help out a high schooler by editing their college application essay.

And what I found was simply thinking about one's busyness made people less likely to be willing to spend the time to help another.





**Shankar** So we've looked at lots of ways that the feeling of time scarcity can change our attitudes toward others, change our behavior. One thing we haven't discussed is how time scarcity in some ways is a trap. It sets us up to make choices that will likely increase our time scarcity in the future. Psychologists describe something called the Yes-Damn effect. What is this, Cassie?

**Cassie** Yeah, this is an important study to remember. Gulls Zubermand and John Lynch, what they did was they asked people to think about today and all that they have to do today and the busyness of the day. And they also asked them to think about that same day of the month, one month from now. And inevitably, people thought that they will have more time available one month from now than they do today. But that's absolutely not true because what thinking that you'll

have more time available one month from now does is that when you are asked to do things, you say yes. You're like, sure, I will bring the snacks to that event in a month. Because while I'm busy today, I will surely have more time than, yes, I will give a talk for that conference because I will have more time then. But of course, there's no way I would have time to do that today.

**And by thinking, having this bias, that we will be less busy in the future than we are today, we take on these commitments. And then when the day actually comes, we say damn.**





**Cassie** Yeah, and I would actually sort of put it through a different filter, which it's not only how busy do you think you are today versus or it will be then, is that task something or that request something that you want to do today? That it seems worthwhile, because it's very easy to say yes to things when you're like, Oh, sure, later, because you don't value your time quite so much in the future. But using a sort of purpose filter or a happiness filter of if I were asked to do this today, would I say no, not just because I'm too busy, but because it's something that I don't want to do and doesn't feel worth my time.




So in other words, we not only discount how busy we're going to  
be in the future, in some ways we discount the happiness of our future  
selves by saying, yes, this is not really particularly enjoyable, but I'll just  
pass that off and my future self will take care of it.

# Hence the Yes, Damn Effect.



An abstract geometric composition on a solid orange background. It features a large white triangle at the top left, a large dashed white circle in the upper center, a vertical dashed white line on the right, a small yellow triangle at the bottom left, a large yellow circle with a dashed white border at the bottom right, and a small white circle at the bottom left.





◆ **Shankar** At UCLA, Cassie Holmes has discovered a number of paradoxes in the way we think about time. First, people who have too little to do are often as unhappy as people who have too much. Second, when we feel we have no time, it changes our behavior. It makes us focus less on others. It keeps us from enjoying wonderful things around us. It prompts us to make decisions that more or less guarantee we will be overstretched and exhausted in the future.



## ◆ Times Left Exercise

I have my students do this and one of my students who is in her late 20s counted her dinners with her parents. She realized that she had had about 6,800 dinners with her parents thus far in her life and 575 left. She redirected the conversation to learn about her parents, recognizing that their time together is limited and more consequently is really precious.

**Reflect on the past week,  
identify a moment of joy.**

[It can be an extremely ordinary or mundane experience.]





**Count how many times have you  
done that in your life so far.**

[This doesn't have to be super accurate.]  
[Estimate through different eras of your life.]  
[i.e. childhood, high school, university life]

**Count how many times do you  
have left to do it in your life.**

[Don't think too deeply about life-span,  
just use an average.]



## How do those numbers make you feel?

[Spend more time doing the little things you enjoy.]



It's so interesting that I think once something is in the past it's easy to recognize how precious it was. There's a real irony there isn't it which is when we look back we can actually see how precious things are but when we look in the present we often fail to notice that things in fact are precious and are finite.



There are a number of paradoxes with the way we think about time. It keeps us from enjoying wonderful things around us.

In her book, Happier Hour, Cassie suggests there is a radically different way to think about time.

She asked volunteers to think differently about their weekends right before the weekend started.

03

● A radically different way of thinking.



Yes, among a sample of working adults, leading into the weekend, we randomly assigned some to treat that weekend like a vacation. And others, we told them to treat that weekend like a regularly.

**Cassie** We followed up with them on Monday when they returned to work to measure how happy they are. And what we found was that those who were simply instructed to treat their weekend like a vacation were happier on Monday when they were back at work and they had enjoyed the weekend more. And we were



interested in what drove this. Did people spend their time differently? And we did find that people, there were slight differences in how people spent their time. So those who treated the weekend like a vacation did spend a little bit less time doing housework. They spent longer eating. So sitting at the dinner table, they

What did you find?



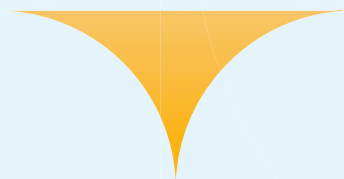




**Cassie** spent a little bit more time in bed with their partner. What was interesting too was that what the



activities that they did over the weekend actually didn't significantly influence how they felt when they returned to work on Monday. So those who were



treating the weekend like a vacation were more engaged in the activities they were doing. They were more in the present, which allowed them to enjoy that



time more and be fully engaged, not distracted by all of the work or all of the chores that are looming over.





What did drive that change in happiness was their

mindset.



# Hedonic Adaptation ● Cassie:

**Shankar** There's something about being a tourist in our own lives that in some ways opens us up and makes us pay attention and be mindful of what's happening around us.

After repeated exposure, we stop noticing it as much. And this is good when bad things ● happen because it makes us resilient. But it's not so good in the ● face of joys in our life because we don't notice them as much. If you think about the first time your partner said ● I love you, your heart is bursting with happiness. Then in 10 years it's shortened to just a way to say goodbye in the morning. ● We're missing out on the potential joy from those pleasures in our daily experience. ●





Seek out  
moments of  
transcendence.

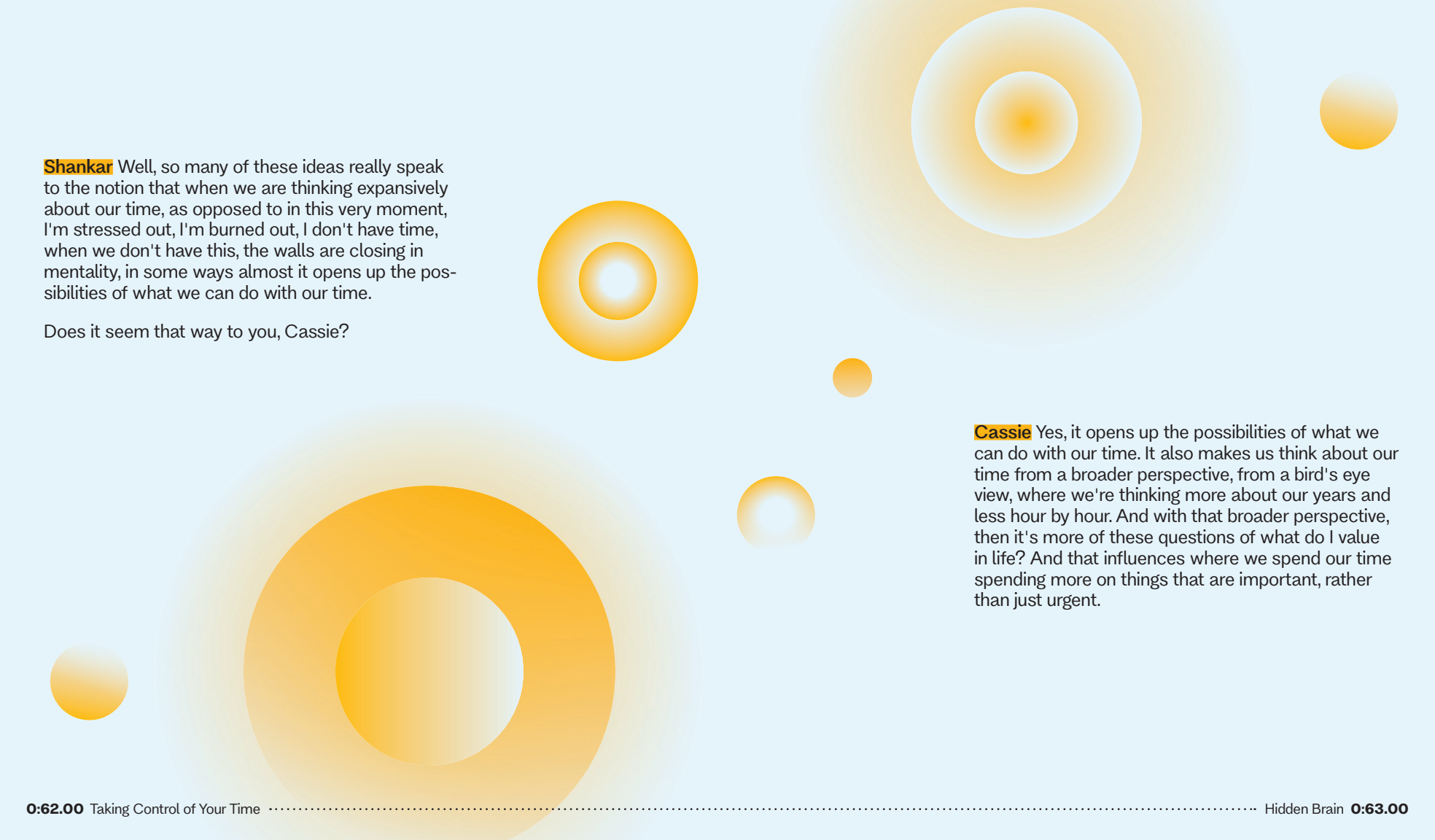
**Cassie has also found another powerful way to help people achieve a healthier relationship with time.**

**Cassie** Awe is the state where your perspective expands well beyond yourself. When we feel our time is scarce, we behave in very limiting ways that we pull into ourselves that we don't think about, we don't have confidence that we can complete all that we sort of want to and ideally would like to do. Whereas by shifting our perspective, expanding our perspective, then it expands our sense of how much time that we have.

**Shankar** Not all of us, of course, can hang out at the Grand Canyon with Mount Sege. Most of us are not astronauts who get to see the Earth from outer space. But Cassie argues that there is a simple way for each of us to get out of our own head.







**Shankar** Well, so many of these ideas really speak to the notion that when we are thinking expansively about our time, as opposed to in this very moment, I'm stressed out, I'm burned out, I don't have time, when we don't have this, the walls are closing in mentality, in some ways almost it opens up the possibilities of what we can do with our time.

Does it seem that way to you, Cassie?

**Cassie** Yes, it opens up the possibilities of what we can do with our time. It also makes us think about our time from a broader perspective, from a bird's eye view, where we're thinking more about our years and less hour by hour. And with that broader perspective, then it's more of these questions of what do I value in life? And that influences where we spend our time spending more on things that are important, rather than just urgent.



**Shankar** In some ways so much of this work has been about the idea that we miss the forest for the trees when it comes to time, and in many ways when we step back and look at the big picture of time, it changes our relationship to time in really profound ways.

Cassie Holmes is a social psychologist at UCLA. She's the author of Happier Hour, How to Beat Distraction, Expand Your Time, and Focus on What Matters Most.



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**HIDDEN**

**BRAIN**