American College of Neuropsychopharmacology
bulletin



Sarah Timm, CAE, CMP-HC, ACNP Executive Director

The Busy Epidemic in Science: Protecting Time for Discovery

"Never confuse activity with productivity. You can be busy without a purpose, but what's the point?" – *Rick Warren*

There is a very obvious but often unseen epidemic on our hands these days. It is the busy epidemic. I hear it weekly if not daily… "I am just so busy." I know you are busy, but…." It has become a badge of honor, but one that should be torn off and burned! I know you know the feeling as much as I do. Your day begins with the intention of finishing a grant proposal, reviewing a manuscript, or thinking through a new study. Before you've had your first cup of coffee, your inbox has filled with emails that we see from our phones (sometimes before raising our head from our pillow), a trainee has a pressing question, a department meeting has been added to your calendar, a collaborator needs feedback, and an administrative deadline demands immediate attention. By the end of the day, you've worked nonstop. Yet the grant remains unfinished. The manuscript is still sitting on your desk. The study you wanted to design never moved beyond a few notes scribbled in the margin of your notebook. You were incredibly busy all day, but did you make meaningful progress? For many senior scientists, this has become the norm rather than the exception. We have entered what I call the busy epidemic, a culture where constant activity is mistaken for productivity.

Ironically, success often creates the conditions that make future success more difficult. As ACNP distinguished members continue to establish themselves, opportunities multiply. Invitations to serve on committees, review manuscripts, mentor trainees, participate in collaborative projects,

and advise institutional initiatives are signs of a respected career. These responsibilities are important, but together they compete for the one resource that cannot be expanded: time. The result is a paradox. The more successful we become, the less time we have for the deep thinking that produced that success in the first place.

Science has never depended on constant activity. It has always depended on sustained thought. Breakthroughs rarely emerge between back-to-back meetings or while responding to email. They come from uninterrupted time spent asking difficult questions, challenging assumptions, analyzing unexpected results, and following ideas that may not immediately appear productive.

The cost of constant busyness is rarely measured because it isn't reflected in a budget or an annual report. Instead, it appears as missed opportunities:

- A grant proposal that never reaches its full potential.
- A promising idea that remains unexplored.
- A manuscript delayed for months.
- A trainee who receives quick answers instead of thoughtful mentorship.
- A collaboration that never develops because no one has time to think creatively.

These costs accumulate slowly, making them easy to overlook. Yet they may represent some of the greatest losses to scientific progress. Productivity is often framed as a question of time management. For me, I believe it is increasingly a question of attention management. Not every email deserves an immediate response. Not every meeting requires your attendance. Not every decision requires the principal investigator. This is harder for me to say than you would imagine. I think I am needed and deeply want to feel needed (analyze that!).

However, one of the many things I have learned by watching many of you, is that the most effective leaders intentionally protect time for work that only they can do. They recognize that delegation is not relinquishing responsibility; it is developing capable colleagues while preserving time for high-value scientific contributions. At the end of each week, instead of asking, *"How busy was I?"*, consider asking a different question:

1. Perhaps a trainee developed greater independence.
2. Perhaps a manuscript moved closer to publication.
3. Perhaps a new collaboration was launched.

Perhaps a study was redesigned in a way that will yield better science. Or perhaps you finally had uninterrupted time to think deeply about the next important question. Those are the moments that shape careers and truly advance our careers.

Scientific discovery has always required curiosity, discipline, and perseverance. Increasingly, it also requires protecting something that has become surprisingly scarce: uninterrupted time to think. As leaders of labs, departments, and research programs, we have an opportunity to shape not only our own habits but also the culture of our teams. If we reward constant availability, perpetual meetings, and overflowing calendars, we risk teaching the next generation that being busy is the same as being productive. Instead, we can model a different approach. One that

values thoughtful mentorship over immediate responses. Deep work over constant interruption. Meaningful progress over visible activity. Science does not advance simply because we work harder. It advances because we create the time and space to think deeply about the questions that matter most.

One exercise I have found helpful is this assessment. I try to take it every 3 to 4 months and pick two of the areas that I score a 1 or 2 on and make that an intention. I post those two areas up on the wall by my computer so they stare back at me each day. Because after all, it starts with us, the leaders. We have to show change and I do believe this is one epidemic we can thoughtfully eradicate.

Good luck... wishing you clarity, balance, and the wisdom to make space for all that matters most.