



Time and Stress Management for Civil Services Aspirants

Time and stress are interrelated and interconnected. Mismanagement of time usually leads to stress while stress may cause in turn even more time mismanagement. It becomes a vicious cycle where one begets the other. It is not easy to break this cycle without first getting clear about one's goals. Moreover, time and stress management is a long term process and so care must be taken to identify the root causes and not just address the outward symptoms.

The Civil Services Examination (CSE) is known to induce considerable stress on aspirants and this stress may even hamper their chances of getting through all the stages of the examination. The focus of this strategy is specifically on time and stress issues that come up during CSE preparation, even though some of the tips and tricks can be used generally as well.

To manage stress and for a proper management of time, first we need to identify the various sources of stress and the various reasons for time mismanagement.

Sources of Stress

The first and primary source of stress is in deciphering the CSE syllabus. Most aspirants find themselves lost in the vastness of the syllabus. They are simply confused whether or not they will be able to cover the entire syllabus within the available time. In this confusion even starting the preparation becomes a hard task. Thus, **lack of clarity** regarding the syllabus, **its open-ended nature** on some topics, are the primary sources of stress when preparing for the CSE. Also, aspirants often find it difficult to evaluate whether or not they are covering the important topics from the right sources. Therefore, having to make choices with respect to **reading materials** is another source of stress. There are multiple books on the same topic, a great number of websites and many different magazines catering to the same themes which causes confusion and information overload for the aspirant. Knowing what to prepare and from where is very important and we have already given you a strategy on what sources to consult for the CSE Prelims and Mains.

Other sources of stress in the CSE are the **long cycle of the examination** - *you have to start afresh if you fail to clear any of the stages* - and the pressures of **competition**. The CSE is a long drawn process and even if a candidate clears all the stages at one go, it takes close to a year for the process to complete. God forbid if one falters at any of the stages of the exam, one should utilize the time available for making the next attempt the best one. *You have to take it positively and keep working on your preparation.* For overcoming the pressures of competition you have to keep in mind that CSE is after all a competitive examination and as such competition is natural. It is not the competition that should matter but only the preparation that you do for it. If you prepare well there is no reason why you would not be able to clear the CSE with a good rank.

Reasons for Time Mismanagement

Wanting to cover the syllabus fully is the primary reason for most time mismanagement. Many aspirants set out for a **complete coverage of the syllabus** only to realise later that many topics are simply too vast or that very few questions, if any, are being asked from some topics. In this effort a lot of time is simply wasted because those topics needed to be covered differently and the time saved on its coverage should have been used profitably in covering other areas of the syllabus. Not knowing how to divide time according to the priority and relevance of the syllabus is the reason for time mismanagement and since

the syllabus is vast and sometimes open ended it requires a smart coverage with a **selective minimum number of sources**.

Starting with Time and Stress Management

Since both time and stress are correlated we must address these simultaneously. It will be easy to remove these from your CSE preparation once you understand and accept a few truths regarding the CSE syllabus.

First, the **dynamic nature of the syllabus** must be acknowledged. Topics in the syllabus cannot be studied in isolation, there has to be a connection with real world developments. Strictly speaking, this means that almost every topic in the syllabus is connected to current affairs. Thus, there can be only two types of questions in general - one that checks conceptual clarity or memory for important concepts, dates, events etc and one that checks the aspirant's awareness of the world around him. In CSE terminology we can say that Current Affairs should be your guide when covering various topics of the syllabus.

Guide to Studying Smart

- **Identify core areas for the CSE** - the core areas of the CSE syllabus can be segregated in an order of importance as follows - Current Affairs, Polity, Economy (*focus more on current developments*), Modern Indian History, Geography (*especially map based; places and locations*) and Science and Technology (*focus on current developments*). Once the core areas are covered, you can move on to peripheral areas like Ancient Indian History.
- **Segregate the syllabus** - the entire syllabus can be segregated into three parts. Parts that you already know well, parts that you have some idea about and lastly parts that you have very less or almost no idea about. Once that is done, we suggest that you only revise or brush up those parts of the syllabus that you already know very well. For parts that you have some idea about, try to get more clarity from reliable sources and for the parts that you have no idea about devote the maximum time and effort, provided that they are relevant topics and belong to the core areas of the CSE syllabus.
- **Prepare a simple plan for covering the core areas of the syllabus first.** After that, keep clearing new concepts, especially the basic concepts, as soon as you encounter them while preparing Current Affairs or any other subject. Also, while preparing CA keep revisiting concepts you have already come across by drawing backward and cross linkages. For example, if you find a new term 'bad bank' in the newspaper, look it up immediately. Later on, when you are preparing economy revisit the concept of a bad bank while connecting the concept with the problem of NPAs in the banking sector.
- **Make flexible routines** - the routine that you devise should be flexible and should be realistic enough for you to be able to follow it with heart. Keep in mind that it is better to study 5-7 hours with concentration, regularly, than to study 10-12 hours for a few days and then burning out. Remember that it is a marathon and not a sprint. You have to keep running and as such self-pacing is very important.
- **Devise and make use of acronyms and mnemonics.** For example, remembering Vijayanagar Empire's dynasties becomes easier with the acronym SSTA - Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva and Aravidu.
- **Keep evaluating yourself from time to time so that you stay on course.** Join a test series, solve CSE previous year's question papers or go for a peer evaluation with your friends.
- **Get involved in the preparation process.** Studying for the CSE is not a one-day affair, rather it is a long drawn process of at least 1 year from Prelims to Personality Test. It is advised that you treat the preparation as a process and not as an year end examination and get involved with it full time.
- **Remember to take breaks while studying.** You should drive out monotony by taking breaks and by studying different subjects in one session. Sitting with one subject for 5-7 hours is not advisable, instead study 2-3 subjects within that time to keep the study session interesting and challenging.
- **Selected minimum number of books, multiple readings of the same book,** is the mantra for success in CSE. Reading the same thing from multiple sources would only lead to confusion and a mismanagement of time, causing stress. Best advice here is to read from the same book, provided it is a standard text book, as many times as required to understand concepts properly.

- **Revise, revise and revise** - *revision is key to the CSE preparation.* Moreover, if you don't revise you may find it hard to recall topics that you have already studied earlier which could hamper your efforts at covering newer topics with ease.
- *Lastly* and most importantly, **improvise and customize your preparation plan as per your own strengths and weaknesses.** For example, if you are a science graduate you should ideally focus more on the humanities subjects, or if you like to study in the morning (or late in the night), you should plan accordingly; it is advisable that since all the CSE exam timings are during the daytime you should get accustomed to studying and performing during the daytime as well.

Second, a **smart method of study** must be devised to cover the syllabus. The traditional 'brute force' method for covering the entire syllabus should be replaced with a smarter method that takes into account the dynamic and evolving nature of the CSE question paper. This translates into two very important points - one, the CSE can be cleared with minimum selective books or reading materials and two, knowing and narrowing down what to study is more important than a wholesale coverage of the syllabus. A smart method of study also optimizes time among other things. Please refer to the box titled **Guide to Studying Smart** for more information.

Reasonable Methods for Managing Time

The good thing with time is that it can be managed. In CSE preparation, time management requires three steps - *the setting of goals, the devising of plans to reach these goals and the scheduling of day-to-day activities.*

- **Goal Setting** - For your CSE preparation you have to set time-bound goals. These have to be specific goals, as in your goals for the day, for the month and even for the entire CSE year. It is important that when you set your goals you do so carefully and realistically. Unrealistic goals like trying to cover the entire Polity syllabus in a month will do more harm than good. Also, keep in mind that once a goal is set you should not back out of it until you have reached the goal. If the goal, for instance, is to complete a mock test then do complete it at any cost even if it takes 2-3 sittings to complete. Habit formation, after all, takes time and effort.
- **Planning** - The famous quote by Antoine de Saint 'a goal without a plan is just a wish' best describes the essentiality of planning in achieving goals. To plan correctly an aspirant should take into account the entire CSE year into perspective. For instance, assuming that the ultimate goal of any aspirant is to clear the CSE, it would be difficult for him to plan for it at one go. Instead, he would have to plan it in stages - *planning for each stage differently* - Prelims, Mains and the Personality Test each requiring a different strategy. Unless an aspirant is clearly focussed on what each stage demands or requires he would not be confident of his chances at clearing that particular stage.
- **Daily Scheduling** - '*Either you run the day or the day runs you*' (Jim Rohn) should be the guiding mantra when practising daily scheduling. Daily scheduling is the art of dividing a day's worth of time into segments prioritised according to needs. It is highly recommended that an aspirant practices the habit of daily scheduling at least for a few weeks if not always. Doing so will help decipher the mystery that we all are familiar with - *where did the 24 hours go?* A lot of time per day is lost to trivial things and these add up to significant amounts of time in a month. Not necessarily this is time wasted but if we are to achieve our goals then we must sacrifice some of the trivial things that we like to do. In the next section **Tips and Tricks for Saving Time and Fighting Stress** there is a further discussion on this subject.

Tips and Tricks for Time and Stress Management

To practice time management and to reduce stress during CSE preparation we can follow some simple yet effective tips. In the list below we have put together some of the most simple, obvious and necessary tips that can help in both saving time and managing stress.

Step 1: *24 hours is available to us all, equally - make good use of it*

- You should make best use of the 24 hours you get in a day; often the difference between clearing and not clearing the CSE is determined by how one utilizes the time made available to him.
- A regular, disciplined and smart study of 5-7 hours everyday (*for a year if it is your first attempt*) is guaranteed to make a huge difference in your CSE performance.
- There will always be interruptions – sometimes it will be forced upon you, sometimes you will interrupt yourself - what matters is how soon you can get back on track. It is ideal if you can isolate yourself from any interruptions (like a relative's visit) but if you can't you should try and make up for the lost hours as best as you can. This is the simplest way to avoid stress.

Step 2: *Learn about how other people are managing time and stress*

- Most of us are fighting stress and managing time - some are doing it effectively, some are not. We all have devised plans, taken action and have got results from our struggles with time and stress and some of these plans and actions may even work for you. You should try and learn from others, how they are managing time and stress in their preparation.
- One of the common actions that people take for managing time is the deliberate casting aside of entertainment sources like TV, mobile phones or even the computer. It may work with some aspirants but if you are dependent on the internet for preparation it may not work for you. What you must do here instead is use your will-power so as to not abuse or waste time on the computer while using it diligently for study purposes only.
- Some of us are confused, some of us fear failing, some are distracted with jobs or academic courses and some of us are simply lacking self-confidence. The only way to ameliorate these difficulties is to start the preparation process immediately once you are clear in your mind that CSE is your goal. As we progress with our preparation these difficulties should generally lessen to a great extent, while at the same time also remove our confusion and give us ample self-confidence.

Step 3: *Take care of your health*

- For many people stress may induce severe physiological and psychological symptoms like insomnia, migraine, high blood pressure and for some it may even trigger episodes of depression. Therefore when preparing for the CSE take good care of your health, after all a healthy mind resides only in a healthy body. Eat good, healthy food, sleep well and exercise - take a walk, practice yoga or play your favourite sport. Also make going to bed and waking up in the morning at a particular time a habit. Healthy people are less prone to stress and are also more productive with their time. Consider good health a prerequisite to good performance in the CSE.

Conclusion

We must realize that we cannot create time nor can we kill stress permanently. What we can do instead is manage these efficiently. So, you should begin the process of time and stress management earnestly – starting slowly with smaller and easily manageable goals. Gradually you should be able to make good progress and also learn how to prioritize the various parts of the syllabus as per your personal requirements. Set deadlines but do not worry too much when short-term deadlines are not met. You will get your opportunity to make up for lost time if you keep following a routine. Also, since this is a marathon you must learn to pace yourself. A disciplined and regular study is the secret to clearing the CSE.