

# How to Conquer Your To-Do List

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Does the thought of all your unfinished tasks or goals distract you from what's at hand or even keep you awake at night, intruding into every cobweb-filled corner of your brain? That internal reminder to *get stuff done* is what researchers call the Zeigarnik effect—when your unconscious mind nags your conscious mind about unfinished tasks or goals.

Fortunately, there's a way to shake off that feeling of inertia without having to shift your productivity into overdrive. It was originally thought that the Zeigarnik effect could be quieted by completing undone tasks, but researchers E. J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister discovered that simply making a plan to complete those tasks satisfied the "inner nag."

In "Consider it Done!", published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Masicampo and Baumeister explain how it works, using exercise as an example:

The thought, "I should exercise" may be disturbing to the unconscious because it calls attention to unmet goals, and so in a sense it leaves the powerful unconscious mind not knowing how to proceed. But once the conscious mind articulates "I will go jogging tomorrow after my sociology class," the unconscious knows precisely how to proceed. It no longer needs to bother the conscious mind with intrusive thoughts about exercise. (2011)

Making plans for unfinished tasks "free[s] cognitive resources" to focus on other important activities, the researchers contend. One way those plans can materialize is with a daily to-do list.

## Too Much to Tackle

To-do lists have been around for centuries, perhaps most notably relied on by Benjamin Franklin, who used them rather religiously to keep tabs on his virtues. But for the rest of us plebeians trying to balance modern workloads, to-do lists often get neglected. In fact, a LinkedIn survey of 6,500 professionals found that although the majority (63 percent) regularly pen to-do lists, only 11 percent actually complete them. Respondents blamed unplanned interruptions, something all too familiar to teachers and administrators.

Even without interruptions, an overwhelming workload can lead to an equally overwhelming to-do list. In *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, Baumeister and coauthor John Tierney suggest that people juggle up to 150 tasks at once, resulting in unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in the span of a day or week.

## The 3+ List

Without choosing the most pressing tasks to address, the running list we keep in our heads can become a "runaway train," says M. Nora Mazzone, coauthor of *Stress-Busting Strategies for Teachers: How do I manage the pressures of teaching?* (ASCD, 2014).

To-do lists give teachers a roadmap to their work and help them avoid the "anticipatory stress" that accompanies thoughts such as, "How am I ever going to get this done?" Mazzone explains. In the following excerpt, Mazzone and coauthor Barbara Miglionico introduce the 3+ List, a technique for chipping away at tasks:

Start each morning with a 3+ List. The three tasks are your nonnegotiable tasks that will make the day feel productive and successful. Rank them. Then add two "plus" tasks. Your plus tasks are not urgent and can be considered bonuses if you actually get to them. When you get to work, post the 3+ List where you will see it often and cross off each item as you get it done.

### **Monday's 3+ List**

1. Create tiered math assignment for tomorrow night's homework.
2. Organize homogeneous book club groups.
3. Send an e-mail blast to parents about an upcoming field trip.

### **Plus List**

- +1. Arrange a time to meet with the literacy coach next week.
- +2. Request whiteboard markers and masking tape.

Stay attentive to your three tasks during the school day and don't add to them. After crossing off those tasks, you can consider working on the plus tasks. Plus tasks eventually make their way to the top of the list unless they are achieved as pluses. (pp. 23–24)

Mazzone, who is an assistant principal at Hommocks Middle School in Larchmont, N.Y., relies on this strategy to manage her seemingly infinite workload. "Every morning with my cup of coffee, I look at my calendar and my long to-do list and I establish what goes on my 3+ List," she says.

Sometimes the tasks feed into larger goals. For example, a typical task like "visit three classrooms and have follow-up conversations with teachers" would align with Mazzone's broader goal of being visible in the classroom. She also tends to assign at least one task to self-care, like exercising, while the two bonus tasks may focus on organizing (clearing the pile of papers off the cabinet) and planning (looking at next week's schedule and delegating tasks accordingly).

## **How to Organize Tasks**

When drafting a 3+ List, there's no out-of-the-box formula for deciding what takes priority. Instead, Mazzone and Miglionico believe that "tasks have to be regulated differently" based on an individual educator's needs, capacity, and schedule. If you're running on empty Friday morning or bombarded by a day of meetings or testing, then your 3+ List should be forgiving.

When you're ready to write your list, refrain from categorizing items by difficulty, advises Miglionico, who directs a before- and after-school care program for the Westchester (N.Y.) County School District. "If you put the label of 'difficult' on something, physiologically you're just going to feel more stressed."

Baumeister offers his own tips: First, try to be as specific as possible, organizing tasks "in the form of 'if/when X, then I do Y.'" Attaching a time, place, plan of action, or any other detail can help satisfy that inner nag. Second, "always strive for efficiency," says Baumeister. "Can tasks be combined? Can something be done more quickly or economically?" Lastly, "be flexible: many things take longer or more work than one anticipates."

## **Be Realistic and Review**

If you give it a shot and then find yourself among the 89 percent of professionals who struggle to complete their to-do lists, don't despair. Miglionico recommends eliminating the word failure from your vocabulary because "if it's not success, it's still progress."

"If you didn't accomplish [a task], evaluate why not and let it go," Miglionico says. Often, the task was too big and needs to be broken down into smaller parts, or the following day needs to be restructured to fit it in.

Baumeister offers an even easier solution to an incomplete list: "Just cross 'Wednesday' off the top and write 'Thursday!'" he quips. "Seriously, there is just too much to do in modern life. Judge yourself by what you do get done, not by what you didn't get done."

## **Celebrate Small Wins**

Creating a to-do list gives us a small win over our workload—and gifts us valuable headspace for those other 147 tasks on our plate. Choosing a few non-negotiables to undertake each day can increase our productivity, at least three (to five) tasks at a time.

In *Willpower*, Baumeister and Tierney view the to-do list as a welcome mental reprieve. "Try thinking of it as a to-don't list: a catalog of things that you don't have to worry about once you write them down." **EU**

## **KEYWORDS**