



# In Procrastination Nation

Why some of us *literally*  
*can't even* — and how we  
can overcome it.

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# Executive Summary

**1** Everyone procrastinates sometimes, but not everyone's a procrastinator. What separates the doers from the do-it-laters? Perception. In order to change habits, we have to change the way we view an issue.

**2** Recent research suggests procrastination is most often used to cope with feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. The good news? There are tools to help combat these negative vibes.

**3** Chronic procrastinators frequently overestimate challenges and underestimate their skills. The way around this? Starting with small tasks can ease self-consciousness and build momentum into a state of flow.

**4** Breaking down work into clear next steps helps to maintain focus by eliminating mental distractions. We've got a checklist to get you there.



# Introduction

“Who can even form a conception  
of it to be put in words?  
Yet what do we mention more  
often or familiarly in our  
conversation than time?”

— Saint Augustine, 400 A.D.

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In ancient Greece, the concept of time was expressed with two different terms: *chronos*, the quantifiable measurement of time, how long something lasted or will take; and *kairos*, the most opportune moment, the right time.

In extolling the importance of *kairos*, orator and overall big-thinker Isocrates wrote that educated people are those *“who manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgment which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely misses the expedient course of action.”*

To Isocrates, there must be no greater fool than the procrastinator. Yet it’s a foolishness that everyone has embraced at some point when we simply just don’t feel like it.

Anywhere from 15% to 25% of adults don’t feel like it almost all the time. These chronic procrastinators struggle to accomplish both minor and major tasks, opting to do anything—and often nothing—in their place.

As a chronic procrastinator myself, it’s a struggle I’m intimately familiar with. When I was first asked to write a piece on

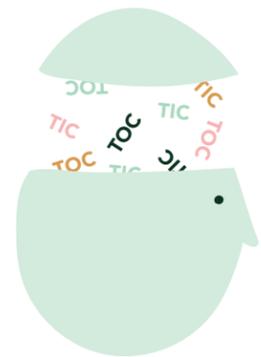


time management, I internally shrieked. I wrote much of the first draft in single-sentence bouts, only to recede into the comfort of distraction the moment punctuation hit the page. Writing about it made me feel anxious, and a bit like a fraud.

And that's exactly the problem. Modern research refutes assumptions that procrastinators are lazy, apathetic or unmotivated; rather, the root causes lay in our emotions and how we perceive the work we must do.

In this paper, we'll explore the reasons behind why we delay doing what matters, and practical steps we can take to focus on getting things done.

**Brad Tiller**, Copywriter & Researcher



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## Delayed Thinkers Through History

The spectre of procrastination has haunted many creative (and seemingly productive) minds throughout history.

Margaret Atwood says she would *"spend the morning procrastinating and worrying, then plunge into the manuscript in a frenzy of anxiety around 3:00 p.m. when it looked as though I might not get anything done."* To date, Atwood has published 60 books.

Douglas Adams, author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, once pushed his editors to lock him away in a hotel room for three weeks in order to complete a manuscript.

In his later days, Leonardo da Vinci lamented (perhaps with a tinge of sarcasm) *"never having completed a single work."* Though not totally true, completing the *Mona Lisa* took him 16 years, and *The Last Supper* was so behind schedule that da Vinci's client, the Duke of Milan, threatened to cut off

funds if he didn't hurry up and finish it.

Even the Dalai Lama was a prolific procrastinator in his youth. *"Only in the face of a difficult challenge or an urgent deadline would I study and work without laziness."* But as you might expect from one of the world's most introspective spiritual leaders, he's tackled those issues head-on and has advice for those looking to do the same: *"Since the illusion of permanence fosters procrastination, it is crucial to reflect repeatedly on the fact that death could come at any time. [...] Make preparations so that even if you die tonight, you would have no regrets."*

Yikes. OK, we'll try.

# Closing the Procrastination Gap

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## Closing the Procrastination Gap

Scientists and scholars have been studying procrastination for as long as we've been putting off the critical for the frivolous — basically, forever. But it's taken till the 21<sup>st</sup> century to understand the role emotion plays in why we delay.

The prevailing theory on why people procrastinate used to be that we place greater emphasis on events in the present rather than in the future — that is, a failure of time management. The thinking went that procrastinators place more value on the present and short-term rewards, with important tasks and long-term rewards only become relevant closer to the impending deadline.

“Living in the now” would be an extremely charitable way of describing it. And it would ignore that those struggling with chronic procrastination largely feel that they cannot control their urge to do so.

*“I think the basic notion of procrastination as self-regulation failure is pretty clear,”* Dr. Tim Pychyl, one of the world’s leading experts and researchers on procrastination, told *Psychological Science*, *“You know what you ought to do and you’re not able to bring yourself to do it. It’s that gap between intention and action.”*

Research increasingly points toward the issue being not one of time management, but one of emotional regulation. *“When we face negative emotions like frustration, resentment, boredom or anxiety that are associated with a task, we procrastinate on the task in order to regulate our emotions,”* Pychyl wrote on *Psychology Today*.

We may find a task extremely displeasurable to perform, or doubt our ability to perform that task so much that complete inaction feels preferable to failing. And so we sacrifice our long-term well-being in favor of distractions that relieve those negative feelings.

But when we fail to fulfill our responsibilities, we suffer the consequences of both not having completed our work (which means we have to do more work picking up the pieces), and the negative emotions that come with that failure.

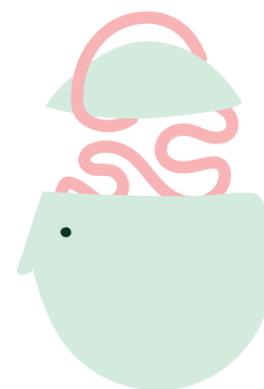
Ruminating over these feelings of guilt and shame only increases our anxiety, and along with it, the compulsion to distract ourselves. Research by Pychyl and others illustrates this loop of guilt-fueled paralysis: students who failed to prepare for an exam (i.e. procrastinated) and reported that they disliked or criticized themselves for this behavior were less likely to study for the next exam. However, students that acknowledged procrastination as self-harming and forgave themselves for it were more likely to study next time.

*“Forgiveness allows the individual to move past their maladaptive behavior and focus [...] without the burden of past acts,”* the study’s authors wrote. Not only does self-forgiveness allow us to continue with our work without obsessing over mistakes, it reduces the negative feelings we’re trying to ignore by distracting ourselves in the first place.

Understanding the emotional nature of procrastination is key to making improvements, and explains why typical time management advice—*Block out your calendar! Work in 20-minute bursts! Just do it!*—so often fails.

Joseph Ferrari, a professor at DePaul University who organized the 10<sup>th</sup> Procrastination Research Conference, says *“[Procrastination] really has nothing to do with time management. As I tell people, to tell the chronic procrastinator to just do it would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, cheer up.”*

So how do we get things done when we don’t feel like doing anything?



## iProcrastinate: A Podcast on Procrastination

If you’re looking for more advice and support on dealing with procrastination, look no further than Pychyl’s own *iProcrastinate* podcast.

Featuring authors and experts in the field (and appropriately irregular in its broadcasting), *iProcrastinate* explores the struggles that chronic procrastinators deal with and research that teaches us how to overcome them.

• • •  
**Finding the  
Flow.** • • •  
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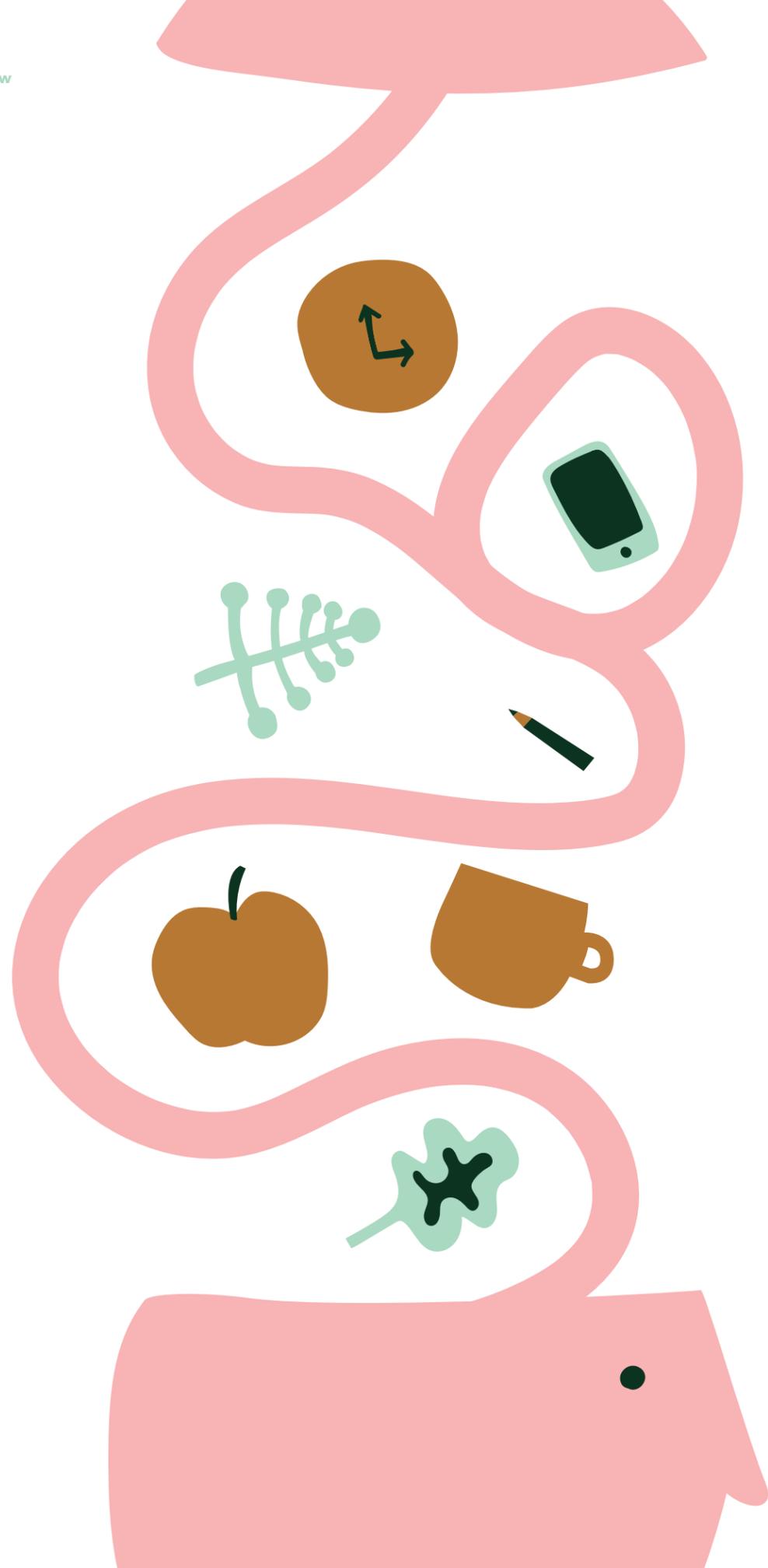


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# Finding the Flow

Your thoughts are racing between the five things you need to do, the 847 things you'd rather be doing, and the endless deluge of information coming in from bosses, colleagues, and various internet tubes. How does anyone focus?

The secret is flow: a psychological state in which, essentially, work comes easily. We become so absorbed in the task at hand that engaging with that task feels frictionless. We subconsciously push out distractions, time passes quickly, and perhaps most importantly, we feel in control of the situation.



For procrastinators, however, this state can feel nearly impossible to reach. In fact, it's something we're most likely to have experienced when we're so self-motivated and personally invested in a task that we can't help but let it consume us.

A 2005 study by Eunju Lee at Halla University in South Korea examined the link between flow and procrastination and found that students who identified as procrastinators were less likely to experience flow while learning. Flow requires a loss of self-consciousness and a sense of clear goals that the procrastinators didn't have.

Lee noted that the procrastinators were likely to overestimate the challenge of a task relative to their skills (i.e. they didn't think they could do it), and were *"more likely to be concerned with what others may have been thinking of them, how they were presenting themselves, and their performance during the learning process."*

Knowing how debilitating negative emotions can be on the constant procrastinator, it's no surprise that these students weren't able to perform to their abilities. The good news? It's possible to reduce self-consciousness by setting and achieving clearer goals—it simply requires reframing the perspective from finishing work to starting it.



Pychyl suggests, *"just get started, and make the threshold for getting started quite low... a real mood boost comes from doing what we intend to do."* Breaking tasks down to their most granular elements and picking them off one-by-one helps to build motivation and confidence in our abilities, and most importantly, helps instill a sense of control.

So then the question becomes, *how to build that sense of control?*

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# The Fundamentals of Getting Things Done

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# The Fundamentals of Getting Things Done

There are many schools of thought on time management but few address the fact that we know what we need to do, yet struggle to act. One popular method addresses both the emotional and practical barriers that hold us back.

“If you had two more hours a day, you’d just fill it up with two more hours of feeling overwhelming stress and confusion. Time is not going to solve that — what you need is space.”

— David Allen, author  
of *Getting Things Done:  
The Art of Stress-Free  
Productivity*

In a 2007 study, researchers Francis Heylighen and Clément Vidal discovered that Getting Things Done (or GTD for short), a time management methodology created by David Allen, was effective in getting people closer to the state of flow and control. By clarifying thoughts and putting them into clear actions, this particular method let people take control of information overload and focus on the task at hand.

Though commonly billed as a time management system, the time discussed in Allen's book is more of the kairós sort of "opportune" time.

Allen's methodology is unique in that it's designed with the understanding that our biggest barrier to productivity is not a lack of time nor our inability to manage it, but our fear and hesitation in dealing with our work. It's not about allocating and spending time in quantity, but about capturing information and acting on it when it's most opportune.

Isocrates would be proud.

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## How Allen Became a Time Management Guru

Born in 1945, in Louisiana, Allen's origins are somewhat unexpected for a pragmatic productivity guru. An early fascination with Zen Buddhism and other esoteric ideologies continued into college, where he studied philosophy and intellectual history.

He later enrolled in a master's program at the University of California. But his early years in the State were rough, his academic career was derailed and he found himself homeless and broke. It's a time in his life that Allen describes as "absolutely at the bottom physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually."

After recovering, he used his skills as a black belt karate instructor to earn money. It was during this time he encountered new-age spiritual teacher Sri John-Roger—late founder of the controversial Movement of Spiritual Awareness—and moved to Los Angeles.

There he worked numerous odd-jobs (landscaper, vitamin distributor, glass-blowing lathe operator, travel agent, gas station manager, U-Haul dealer, moped salesman, and restaurant cook) until Sri John-Roger founded Insight Training Seminars and brought Allen on board.

What began as a series of personal growth workshops evolved to into workshops for the workplace, that brought new-age thinking to corporate boardrooms. Allen's big break came when an executive at Lockheed Martin, after seeing a seminar of Allen's at a hotel, asked him to prepare an in-house version for his company. Allen eschewed the more touchy feely parts in favour of practical knowledge gleaned from his personal experiences. The event was a huge success, and laid the groundwork for what would become Allen's Getting Things Done empire.

# The 5 Steps of GTD

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## The 5 Steps of GTD

### 1. Capture

**Collect all information that's relevant in an in-basket.**

### 2. Clarify

**Decide how to take action on that information, or if not to.**

### 3. Organize

**Organize next steps into relevant categories.**

### 4. Reflect

**Regularly review and revise your in-basket and action items.**

### 5. Engage

**Do the work at the right time.**



## 1. Capture

The first step to Getting Things Done is **capturing the stuff**. For now, the stuff is anything on your mind: emails you've received, projects that have been assigned to you, an article that inspired you, or a kernel of an idea.

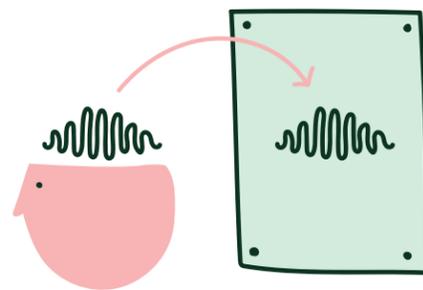
This collection of stuff is your in-basket, and can take the form of a list, a pile of post-its, an actual basket, or whatever else works for you.

What's important is to get everything out of your brain—where it can stress you out or be forgotten—and onto the page. Heylighen and Vidal's paper refers to this as externalizing memory, and notes that *"the limitations of both working and long-term memory are such that you cannot rely on*

*them to recall all the important facts when they are needed."*

This process is doubly important for chronic procrastinators, because they're present-biased, placing greater weight on present moments and de-emphasizing future outcomes and consequences. They're more likely to delay writing things down or setting reminders, only to end up losing those thoughts to the tides of distraction.

**PRO TIP:** Does most of your incoming work end up in your email inbox anyway? Consider using that as your in-basket, and sorting your emails into folders or tags depending on the actions required.



## 2. Clarify

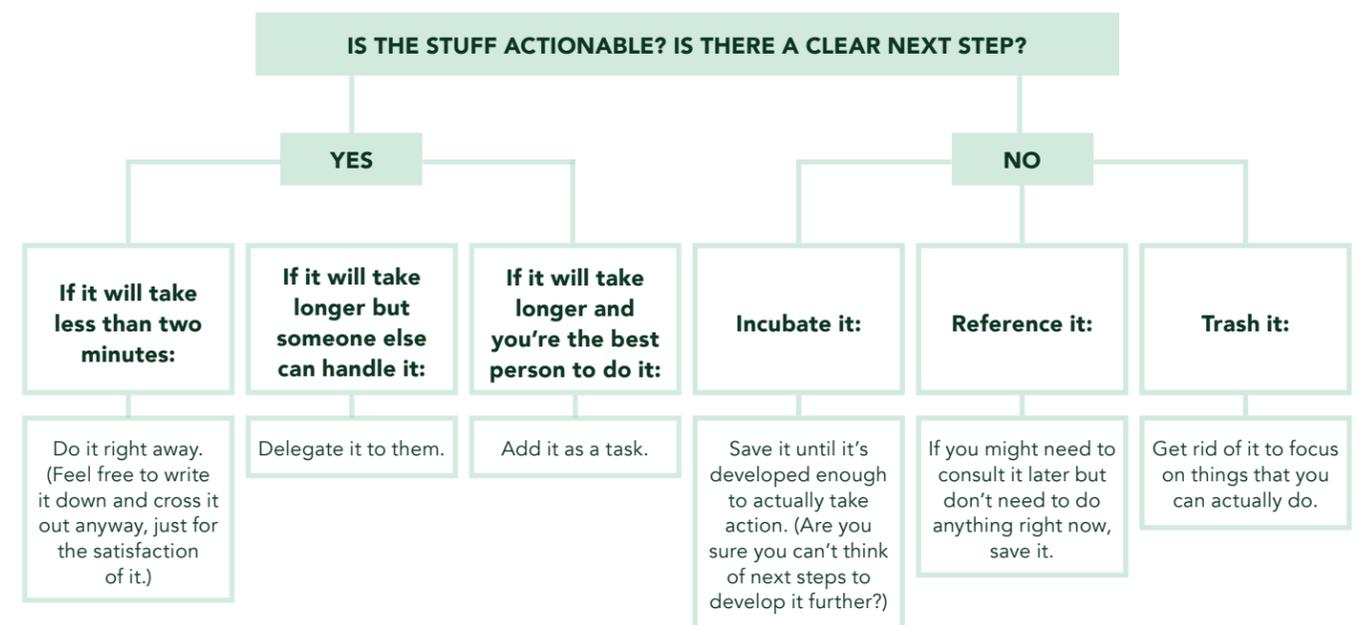
In another of Pynchyl's studies, students were paged multiple times throughout the day with questions on what they were doing, if they were putting something off that they should be doing, and how stressed they were.

When students engaged with the task they were delaying, their perception of how stressful or difficult the task was to complete decreased significantly, repudiating their initial fears. For anyone who's suffered chronic procrastination, this story likely sounds familiar.

Allen is keenly aware of how we psych ourselves out with *"phantoms of negative fu-*

*ture scenarios—of the thing not being done totally perfectly, and all the negative consequences if it's not."* Anxiety can cause us to perceive our work as overly daunting; clearly mapping out what we need to do next reminds us that the reality is rarely as insurmountable as we think.

GTD is designed to cut through those phantoms by breaking down ideas—the stuff you captured—into their most granular next actions, making it easier to get started. But first we need to determine whether the stuff is actionable.



## Struggling to break the stuff down into next actions?

Jiri Novotny, creator of the Swift to-do list application, uses the process of clarifying the steps needed to complete a task to **trick himself into getting work done**: *“I tell myself that I will merely write down the steps needed to complete the task. Just a rough draft, at first, and that’s it. Maybe just three steps. I then add more steps, breaking the three steps into smaller sub-tasks. I then add some details, and thoughts, notes of things that I shouldn’t forget when doing this task. I think the task through & write everything down.”*

## The Two Minute Rule

In describing GTD’s two minute rule, Allen **explains** that if *“an action can be done in two minutes, you should do it right then. It’ll take longer to organize it and review it than it would to actually finish it the first time you notice it.”*

For example: an email comes in and you see it immediately. You already know how you want to reply. Rather than file it as an action item, simply get it out of the way. The energy expended on managing the task would be greater than just completing it now.

**Pro tip:** Quick tasks like these also serve to help fill the dead time between other obligations—say, the few minutes before a meeting—that we might be most tempted to spend unwisely.

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# On Delegation:

President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said, *“I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.”*

And thus, the Eisenhower Box was born. The box is a method of prioritization based on a task’s importance and urgency—and crucially, how to handle tasks where our involvement **isn’t really that crucial**:

<b>Important &amp; urgent:</b>  Do it now.	<b>Important but not urgent:</b>  Schedule when you’ll do it.
<b>Unimportant but urgent:</b>  Delegate it to someone else.	<b>Not important nor urgent:</b>  Don’t do it.

Obviously not everyone has someone to delegate tasks to. But if you do, you might not be taking advantage of that as much as you should. **Researchers at Stanford University** identified the two key reasons why managers struggle to delegate:

1. Observers perceive work done under the control of a supervisor as better than if the work was done with less supervision.
2. Managers tend to evaluate work more highly the more involved they are in its production. (Whether you’re the manager or the managed, you’re likely nodding your head in agreement to this one—but for completely different reasons.)

Not only is delegation critical to building trust and confidence in teams, it’s a way to free up your mental space and focus on high-impact work that you could be doing instead.

*“If you asked most managers how they spent their day, they are not going to be able to recall it accurately,”* says Jeffrey Pfeffer, an author of the study and professor at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business.

*“You’re likely to find that a lot of time is spent on low-leverage activities that can be delegated.”*

### 3. Organize

Another way in which GTD breaks from traditional time management methods is that instead of completing tasks in order of priority, you complete tasks most suited to the context that you're in.

So, if you have a ton of emails to send or calls to make, group all of those items together in a list of... *Emails to Send* and *Calls to Make*. If you have to complete multiple tasks as part of a single project, group those tasks together into a project plan.

Tackling similar tasks together will make it easier to stay focused. If you know you need to make multiple consecutive phone calls, you're more likely to create an environment—both physically and in your head—where you can do so without being distracted.

Context-switching is the ultimate flow-killer; you end up wasting time and energy refocusing between incomplete tasks, it's the perfect moment for distractions to seep in. Accomplishing as much as you can in one context (ideally at least one complete task) before moving on to another saves time and leads to more thoughtful work.

**Pro-tip:** Remember that the GTD method isn't meant to replace project management tools; instead, the goal is to outline the immediate next actions so that you can tackle them when you're ready.

### 4. Reflect

Continuing to capture new information and turning it into next actions is crucial for the method to work. But perhaps more importantly, it will help keep you motivated.

When describing the importance of an in-depth weekly review of your in-basket and next actions, researchers noted that *"It is essential to get an overview of what has to be done in the coming period, and thus get the feeling of being in control. [...] A regular review is important in order to develop and maintain genuine trust in your system."*

## 5. Engage

This is the part where you actually do all the work. Before picking a next action to get started on, here are four things you should consider:

### Context:

Where are you right now and what resources do you have access to? If you're in a loud or chaotic environment, you might struggle to complete work that demands intense focus. If you need to finalize budgets for the next quarter, you probably don't want to do it on your phone on the subway during rush hour. Ultimately, the work you decide to do, should fit the context you're in.

### Time Available:

How much time between now and your next commitment? If you've only got 30 minutes between meetings, focus on a task you can complete in that small window. If your schedule is wide open, make progress on something big.

### Energy Available:

Select tasks that suit your current level of physical and mental energy. Save demand-

ing work for when you have the energy to do it. Overextending yourself can make tasks seem more difficult than they are and stop you from giving it your all.

**Pro-tip:** Energy isn't the same as motivation. If you have the energy but just don't feel like doing it, try getting started with something small you can cross off your list.

### Priorities:

Respecting the restraints of your time and energy, which action should you perform next?

When you finish a task, cross it off your list, reassess your time and energy and decide what to tackle next. If there's nothing else on your list, it's time to capture more stuff.

### Conclusion: Wielding the Tools

Much of the advice surrounding time management and productivity focuses on the tools we use to accomplish it—finding the very best to-do app, or the most stylish method of writing a bulleted list into a notebook. (And hey, the **bullet journal** is pretty cool.) It's easy to fall down the life-hacking rabbit hole, and it can be pretty fun, too.

But a tool's just a tool; it takes will to wield and use it to build something. One of GTD's virtues is that it can be practiced using pretty much whatever tools you want, so if you have a favourite to-do list app, go for it. If you love to write a list in six different pen colors, have fun! Allen himself prefers to scribble an idea onto a single sheet of paper and throw it into an actual basket. The tools you choose are basically irrelevant, what matters is that you do it.

And if you don't for a day, or two, or even longer than that—it's OK. Restart from step one and clear your thoughts. Complete a few easy tasks and start building momentum. If you can't get excited about doing something, try to get excited about the huge relief that

will come with completing it and never having to worry about it again. Odds are the task isn't as tough as you think.

Nobody becomes a master overnight. It requires picking up our tools and honoring our work—and ourselves—whenever we can.



# — 5 Make it Happen

## A GTD checklist to help you get started.



### Capture

Add anything you might need to act on to your in-basket (this can be list, a folder or anything else). Do this whenever new information comes in.



### Clarify

Go through your in-basket and decide what information is actionable.

**Actionable:**

Add it as a task, delegate it to someone else, or do it immediately (if it takes less than 2 minutes).

**Not Actionable:**

File it as reference, delete it, or incubate the idea until it's actionable.



### Organize

Group tasks by context (e.g. writing, calling) or by project, so that they're easily accessible when the opportunity to work on them arises.



### Reflect

Review your in-basket to clarify new information daily, and thoroughly review your tasks weekly.



### Engage

When deciding which task to work on, ask yourself:

- What work best suits the context I'm in right now?
- How much time and energy do I have to spend?
- What's the highest priority?

Moving past procrastination isn't easy but every problem has a solution. Breaking tasks down to their most basic steps is the best way to get started. And from there, you can focus on doing your very best work.



# How Disruptive Workspaces Break the Flow

Seventy per cent of all offices now have an open floor plan, with the goal of fostering greater collaboration. But are they really doing the job? A review of over a hundred studies by organizational psychologist Matthew Davis found that open-plan offices are consistently linked to lower levels of concentration, motivation, job satisfaction and creativity—and an increase in stress.

While open offices enable spontaneous communication, those conversations are often distractions from what we're trying to accomplish in the moment. The cost of losing focus compounds: once distracted, we tend to take 25 minutes to get back to our original task, and usually shift our focus to at least two other tasks in the meantime.

If you already struggle to stay focused and motivated, these factors are sure to make it even tougher to achieve that ever-elusive state of flow. Research by workspace furnisher Haworth suggests a way forward. Instead of trying to force all work to fit the same physical context, workers should be given more control over where they work, with a variety of workspaces available depending on the task at hand, with areas for both individual and collaborative work that are clearly separated. There should also be space to rest and recharge after extended periods of focused work. Think of a lounge, for example, or the ping pong table that's become synonymous with startup offices.

Teams who work in space-constrained workspaces should consider leveraging space outside the office. Breather makes it easy

to access distraction-free workspace of any size, with each space equipped for everything from one-on-one meetings to team offsites and creative kickoffs.

Other options include working from home or joining your fellow digital nomads at the coffee shop. Coffee shop hustle and bustle might not be for everyone but studies show that the ambient noise can be good for creativity, and seeing other people working hard motivates us to do the same. Whatever you do, be sure to find the right space to do your best work.



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