

Upfront

Do you make a “to do” list? I do. First, I define things by segments. For example: “The Skinny,” “Cutters Point,” “Real Estate,” “Teaching,” “Community,” “Writing,” and on and on. For each segment, I list bullet-pointed goals, typically by quarter or month. Then, I attempt to estimate the amount of time I’ll need to achieve each objective. Finally, I populate my calendar with time blocks that sum to the required totals. Then, in theory, I go to work.

Things almost never proceed as planned, and the subsequent quarter’s aspirations are too often a cut-and-paste of the previous collection that remain undone. Even so, without this structural folly, my life would be completely out of control. Which suggests that some planning-driven success is considerably better than none.

For a very competitive, driven person, it’s painful to find your to-do list woefully undone, even if you’re doing more than most people. You fixate on a paradox: You have so much to do, and you don’t feel like you’ve done anything. What’s behind this conundrum? It’s such a nagging challenge for me that I researched it, which, ironically, was a major distraction and time-suck of its own.

There’s a name for it, and it sounds intellectually pretentious and a bit soft, but Harvard Medical School says it’s a real thing: “Toxic productivity.” It refers to an obsessive preoccupation with being productive at all costs and never feeling like what you’ve done is enough. It exists across all aspects of life and is often fueled by fear or shame. Like most psychological dysfunctions, insecurity lies at the root.

The fallout: Burnout, neglect of your health and relationships, and a distorted sense of self-worth tied solely to tangible achievement. You feel anxious, and guilty for resting, like you’re never working sufficiently hard to meet your goals, and you have a hard time enjoying things if they don’t conspicuously contribute to satisfying your overarching aspirations. Basically, it’s bad.

The previously explained paradox stems from “analysis paralysis.” Social psychologists describe this thusly: Too many choices or an overwhelming amount of information can make it feel impossible to decide where to start. The brain fixates on finding the “perfect” or risk-free first step, delaying real action. Again, fear of failure is the insidious actor here.

A brain, no matter how powerful you believe yours to be, has limited processing capacity, which makes the possibility of cognitive overload a real condition. When you try to work through too many tasks at once, you deplete your mental energy, leading to “brain fog” and decision fatigue. This makes it harder to focus, think clearly, and make

sound judgments. We like to believe we’re better at multitasking than our limitations allow, but most people can’t effectively simultaneously solve complex problems. Instead, the brain rapidly switches its attention between things, which is an inefficient process with a “cognitive cost.” Switching leads to mistakes, poor performance, and stress.

Here’s a particularly nasty trap: the “productivity illusion.” It’s the cycle of constant, low-impact activity that creates the general feeling of being busy without resultant progress towards important goals. A closely related pathology is best described by a favorite phrase of mine: “Getting ready to get ready.” You use your time on pre-work. You never attack the important things. You exert energy, but you accumulate few measurable results. You’re finished before you get started, in effect.

As I ask my students: What good comes from lamenting a problem if you don’t develop potential solutions? So, I found some.

- Shift from a mindset of busyness to one of strategic, focused action.
- Zero in on the most important, highest impact tasks on your list. Remember the old “80/20 rule.” In this usage, 80% of results come from 20% of effort, so identify the crucial 20%.
- If a project feels dauntingly massive, break it into manageable steps. This provides a clear, actionable starting point.
- Remember: Perfect is the enemy of good. Set realistic evaluation metrics that highlight progress rather than perfection.
- Set time limits: Intensely pursue a single thing for a set, not-too-long time. Then, take a short break before doing the same thing with another task.
- Cut your to-do list down to size. Having fewer options can make decision-making easier and more effective.
- Suppress your fear of failure by accepting uncertainty. There are things you can control and things you can’t. Some risk and ambiguity are unavoidable. It’s okay to try and fail.

This cobbled-together seven-step plan to increased productivity seems like it’s worth a shot. But the most potent motivator for me is a hard deadline. Without one, I tend to drift. This column has one. It’s (more or less) every other Tuesday at noon. Those Tuesday mornings begin with uncertainty and a jarringly blank page. But there are no options other than doing what must be done. So, I do it. As I did it today. Nothing inspires, spurs productivity, or clarifies your thinking like a mercilessly ticking clock.



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