

## As Good as Done

Six powerful strategies for accomplishing more of what really matters.

By Joseph Hart

There are a thousand ways to go about *not* achieving your goals, but if you're serious about it — if you really want to sabotage your most fervent hopes and dreams — you have just one truly sure-fire option: *Don't get started.*

Sounds crazy, right? After all, nobody would consciously spoil their chances of succeeding in life. Yet many people unconsciously undermine themselves in precisely this way every single day of their lives.

They postpone doing the things that matter most, busying themselves instead with the unimportant or more immediately gratifying things on their to-do lists.

Volumes of research demonstrate that successfully getting things done — especially the challenging things that make a difference in our quality of life — builds higher levels of self-esteem, improves feelings of well-being and boosts overall happiness.

But when faced with big, odious or unfamiliar tasks (like writing a grad school essay or embarking on a fitness program), many of us are inclined to opt out before we ever get started. We prefer to busy ourselves with pleasurable pastimes (like watching the NCAA tournaments), or comfortably distracting chores (like alphabetizing our CDs) instead.

Unfortunately, the satisfaction that comes from sidestepping big, important tasks is fleeting. And when said tasks remain stubbornly undone over a long period of time, they become an ongoing source of stress — and self-doubt.

If you'd like to make meaningful progress on major life goals and overcome the distractions that anchor you to old limitations, there's no time like the present. Here are six effective strategies you can use to start getting things done — and reaping the rewards!

### 1. Take Small Steps to Get Big Results

One of the best techniques for getting things done is to divide big goals into small steps. Feeling overwhelmed is one of the most common reasons people give for not getting started on a project. And when goals feel overwhelming, we tend to suffer mental paralysis, says Julie Morgenstern, an organizational and productivity consultant and author of *Never Check E-mail in the Morning: And Other Unexpected Strategies for Making Your Work Life Work* (Fireside, 2005). "If you're overwhelmed by a task, you may feel, 'Well, I can't get to the big stuff, but I can get out a couple of emails,' even if they're nonsense." And before you know it, you've frittered away your day on nonsense.

"Most of us have a 30- to 60-minute concentration threshold," Morgenstern explains. "So if you've got a six-hour project, you need to spend some time breaking that down into six completable one-hour steps." For example, if your goal is to organize the basement, your first step might be making a trip to the hardware store to buy shelves. Your next step might be assembling those shelves, or clearing enough space to work in.

When you break your task down into its component parts, start with the one that elicits the least amount



of fear, advises Joseph Ferrari, PhD, a professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago and author of *Still Procrastinating? The No Regrets Guide to Getting It Done* (Wiley, 2010). Because more than an inability to manage our time, Ferrari explains, it's fear that persuades us to put things off — fear of change, fear of failing, fear of succeeding, fear of the task itself. By facing those fears a little at a time, you'll get the ball rolling, and as you build momentum, your anxieties will subside.

## 2. Focus Your Energy and Attention

If you reflect carefully on how you spend your time each day, you're likely to discover that you spend most of it trying to do two or three things at once, says Jim Loehr, cofounder of the Human Performance Institute in Orlando, Fla., and one of the leading researchers in energy management. And if that's the case, you're probably not accomplishing much of anything.

Multitasking "is simply not possible in the human system," says Loehr. "The research community has known this for many years. Human energy is binary; you're either focused or you're not. You're either talking on the phone or you're driving."

When we think we're multitasking, says Loehr, we're actually "parallel processing," or rapidly switching our attention from one task to another.

Shifting to single-tasking — essentially tackling one task at a time in a logical sequence — requires a more disciplined attention span, and there are several ways for even the most distracted person to cultivate that kind of focused attention.

Gregg Krech, author of *The ToDo Institute's Concise Little Guide to Getting Things Done* (ToDo Institute, 2001), found that he treated his appointments more seriously than he did his to-do list, so now he schedules his most important tasks as if they were appointments. The trick helped him elevate the importance of his priorities and train more focused attention on each one.

You can also gain focus by considering not just the time required to complete a task, but also the *energy*.

The quality and quantity of the energy you bring to any project affects how effectively you can focus — and whether you can focus at all. If you're tired, wired on coffee and haven't had a break in eight hours, your ability to pay real attention to anything dips dramatically, Krech notes. But if you're taking regular breaks, eating nourishing foods, getting enough sleep and moving your body, your energy and ability to focus will be substantially greater, and your capacity to complete challenging tasks will markedly expand.

## 3. Defend Your Big Yeses

Jonathan Fields describes himself as a "to-do-list bottom feeder" — one so dedicated to small tasks and obligations that, for a long time, more important efforts floated well beyond his reach.

The author of *Career Renegade: How to Make a Great Living Doing What You Love* (Broadway, 2009), Fields used to maintain a long list of "Minor Commitments" that filled an entire section of his office whiteboard wall.

"It was a collection of tasks, requests, small, one-time things I'd committed to doing," he recalls in a recent *Psychology Today* blog. Individually, none of them appeared very time-consuming, until one day, Fields took stock of their collective impact. "When I added up the time and energy it took to honor any 10 minor commitments," Fields writes, "it equaled the time and energy needed to honor one big, fat, honking commitment... the return on the big [commitment] I passed up would've been exponentially larger than the total return on all 10 minor commitments."

It's a quandary many of us can relate to. "We all have so many demands on us that the ability to say 'no' — so that we can say 'yes' to our biggest priorities and deepest values — becomes critical," says William Ury, cofounder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation and the author of *The Power of a Positive No: How*

to Say No & Still Get to Yes (Bantam, 2007). “Every great yes requires a thousand nos.”

There’s an art to saying no, Ury explains. “A positive no is a no that’s sandwiched between two yeses.” If your boss asks you to work during a weekend when you have a family commitment, for example, you say yes to the family commitment and a firm but respectful no to the request. “Then, instead of ending there, you give a follow-up yes that is a constructive proposal to meet the other party’s needs.” For example, you could offer to work late Wednesday and Thursday, still preserving your weekend for your family priority.

If you’ve already agreed to a list of requests, try renegotiating your commitments using the same technique: “I know I said I would volunteer to paint the set for the community play, but my work is quite demanding right now. What if I donate several gallons of paint instead?”

By giving up “bottom feeding” in favor of your biggest yeses, you’ll create more time for the commitments that count most.

#### **4. Reconstruct Your Confidence**

A multiyear study at the University of Calgary showed that people who chronically put things off do so because they lack confidence. They don’t believe they can accomplish a task, or accomplish it well, researchers noted, and so they don’t start, or they dramatically delay starting.

According to Stanford University philosophy professor John Perry, PhD, this often happens because we set our expectations too high, which in turn taps into our insecurities. For example, if your supervisor asks for a report on a key company strategy, you may correctly see it as an opportunity to shine. But if you frame the importance of the assignment in overly aggrandized terms (you imagine the report might be so successful that you’ll be asked to head your division! You’ll get a corner office with a view and a giant raise!) the task takes on outsized proportions. It’s no longer just a report, it’s a ticket to greatness — or an opportunity to fall flat on your face. That type of pressure is enough to get anyone quaking in his or her boots.

Perry suggests approaching tasks that trigger our insecurities with questions that probe their real-world impact: “How closely will my boss read this? Does he really care if I mix a metaphor? If I make a small mistake, would it really harm my career? What are the *likely* best- and worst-case scenarios?” This technique helps put tasks into a more realistic perspective.

If a project has you sweating (and procrastinating) because it truly is vital, then give yourself permission to get started — imperfectly. It helps to remember that most accomplishments take several stages before arriving at their ultimate state: A novelist starts out with rough ideas jotted in a notebook; an architect begins with pencil sketches; a restaurateur might start with a rough business plan and a collection of family recipes. Is there an analogous stage to your project? If you give yourself the freedom to create an imperfect “rough draft,” you’ll find it easier to build the confidence required to take it to a more finished stage.

#### **5. Align Daily Priorities with Life Goals**

It’s one thing to know what your top priorities are. It’s another to know how to stack them up on a day-to-day basis. For example, what’s more important: filing your taxes on time, meeting a work deadline or heading to your daughter’s basketball game? They may all feel, and be, essential for different reasons.

“The most important distinction in time management is between what’s *urgent* and what’s *important*,” says Krech. “Sometimes a task is both, like filing your taxes. But it’s the tasks we do that relate to our sense of larger purpose — such as writing a book or playing with our children — that hold real *importance*. The problem is, we let urgent tasks — like work deadlines — dominate because they have time pressure. Then at the end of the year we find that we haven’t done much that’s truly important.”

The solution, says Krech, is to set aside specific periods of time to do what's important, regardless of the urgent demands. "This is the time when we work on our book manuscript or play with our children or update our résumé so we can find a new job. Treat these times as sacred commitments, and hit pause on everything else — dishes don't get washed, phones don't get answered for a while."

The ultimate goal is to have a conscious, meaningful life, says Krech. If you review your calendar, or look back on your day, and all you see is a string of urgent obligations, that's a wake-up call — and an opportunity. Make your important priorities more central to your schedule, and you'll transform the daily grind into a life worth living.

## **6. Accept Your Limitations**

One of the reasons it's so important to align your values, goals and to-do list is that there are real limits on how much you can hope to accomplish on any given day. "Most of us simply can't do everything that we feel we should," explains Krech. There's just not enough time. "The question is: What are you going to *choose* to do, and what are you going to accept leaving undone?"

Ultimately, either something is important enough that we can and will make time for it, says Krech, or it's not. Either way, the sooner we make peace with that, the better. Otherwise, we stand a good chance of running ourselves ragged and still not feeling that we have lived the life of our highest choosing.

A little guilt can be good for us, Krech notes, when it alerts us that we're straying from our goals and values. But if we're carrying around a lot of generalized guilt about not being able to be all things to all people, it will just be paralyzing. And it's typically a sign that we haven't come to grips with our own limitations — or our internal contradictions.

"Most of us have gotten very good at responding to our feelings, rather than to our deeper sense of purpose," Krech says. You may feel like sitting around on a Sunday afternoon and watching football, he notes. But if guilt strikes when you flip on the game, pay attention to that. It might be a sign that you're putting off something more important — that you're choosing to "cut loose" a goal that is actually far higher on your list than watching the game.

This is the time to accept that you want to watch football, but then are choosing to pursue what you know matters more. "If your highest priority is to be fit, then sitting around watching football isn't going to be rewarding for you, even if it's what you feel like doing at the time," says Krech.

One of the great rewards of giving your best energy to the goals that really matter is that when you do decide to kick back, you can do so without regrets and anxieties. Get the really important to-do stuff done, and you'll find that you get more pleasure from the moments when you choose to do nothing at all.