



THE  
**BUSY  
PERSON'S  
GUIDE**

TO THE DONE LIST

The Science of Small Wins

by Bailey Adams

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# Hello!

Ever suffer sinking guilt from feeling like you didn't get nearly enough done? Does it seem like you're running around, busy all day but rarely get to the stuff that matters to you like spending more time creating or with your loved ones or making more of a difference?

Focusing on what's still left on your plate or thinking that you didn't accomplish anything today can get you stuck in a spin cycle, going in circles and never quite taking off, heading downward toward burnout and stress. There will always be more tasks on your to-do list, always more work to do.

At I Done This, we think there's a better way. Pausing to recognize all the great stuff you do with a done list provides vital motivation, accountability, and direction — lighting your path forward with encouragement and an enriched perspective.

Stick with us to learn the science behind how a done list helps you work smarter and get more of what matters done with encouragement, gratitude, insight, and inspiration.

# Why To-Do Lists Disappoint and Overwhelm

The to-do list is an inescapable, age-old productivity tool. We make lists in our very human attempt to create order in our disorderly lives. Whether you're a fervent disciple of the to-do list, or a begrudging list-maker, most of us keep one.

Yet to-do lists always seem to frustrate and overwhelm. Based on data from our app we discovered that:

41% of to-do items were never completed.

50% of completed to-do items are done within a day.

18% of completed to-do items are done within an hour.

10% of completed to-do items are done within a minute.

15% of dones started as to-do items.

In other words:

you'll always have unfinished tasks;

tasks that do get completed are done quickly; and

what you get done often doesn't correlate with what you set out to do.

So is the to-do list just a blunt instrument to wield in the quest to get stuff done? Or does the weakness lie deeper in ourselves in the human struggle to impose order and control?

Maybe we're just not doing it right. Here are four common problems in how people approach to-do lists:

### Problem 1: Too Many To-Do's

First of all, we overload our lists. Social psychologist Roy Baumeister and journalist John Tierney, authors of *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, report in their book that one person typically has at least 150 different tasks at a time, and that an executive's to-do list for a single Monday could take more than a week to finish. Sounds like a set-up for failure! What's more, research by Amy Dalton and Stephen Spiller uncovers how detailed planning works when you have one big to-do item but then, the longer your list of tasks and goals, the less powerful a tool the to-do list becomes.

The longer the list of tasks and goals, the less powerful a tool the to-do list becomes.

Overstuffing our lists causes a persistent thrum of worry in our head that distracts us from tackling the very tasks that are so worrying. Psychologists Robert Emmons and Laura King discovered that the anxiety that results from having too many conflicting goals causes our productivity as well as our physical and mental health to suffer.

So the to-do list gives and takes. It helps us remember the many things we have to tackle. At the same time, it's a nagging tool that can induce unhealthy, disarming anxiety.



## Problem 2: We Mistake the Function of To-Do Lists

Do you really understand how a to-do list actually works? Sounds simple enough — it's a memory aid, a sort of external brain that nudges you about all the stuff you mean to do. But what's surprising is that your to-do list's mental badgering isn't to provoke you to get stuff done!

Let's explain. Those distracting, nagging thoughts about uncompleted tasks and unmet goals hanging around in your mind are known as the Zeigarnik effect. You'd think that the logical response to "cure" the Zeigarnik effect would be to finish the tasks and meet the goals. However, Baumeister and E.J. Masicampo found that the Zeigarnik effect is your unconscious "asking the conscious mind to make a plan." It's not asking the conscious mind to get off its butt to complete some tasks.

In one of their experiments, they instructed a group of students to think about an important final exam while another group was told to create a specific study plan including details like what they would do, where, and when. Then, when given word fragments to complete, the students who'd been told merely to think about the upcoming test filled in exam-related words, while the study-plan group did not.

Even though the planners had put more effort thinking about their task and hadn't even made any actual progress on the task itself, as Baumeister and Tierney explain, "their minds had apparently been cleared by the act of writing down a plan."

Our to-do lists fail us when we don't think through steps and

plans. And when our lists grow long, it becomes impossible and ineffective to plan out everything. It's no wonder we don't complete tasks.

### Problem 3: We Give Ourselves Too Much Time

It makes sense, then, that our stats show that when people did complete tasks, they did them quickly. When goals are broken into actionable steps, it takes less effort, energy, and time to cross those smaller, manageable tasks off the list.

Generally though, we tend to be lenient on assigning ourselves deadlines, which means the chances increase that the task will never get done. Behavioral economist Dan Ariely found, for example, that students who had longer to finish three papers performed worse than those who had externally-imposed or self-imposed deadlines that were evenly spaced and earlier.

As many procrastinators know, the more time you give yourself, the less likely it is that you'll finish in that timeframe. And when to-do lists become a constant exercise in pushing things off to tomorrow and the next day, they're not effective.

### Problem 4: The Future is Full of Unknowns, Interruptions, and Change

Only 15% of our members' dones started out as to-do tasks. That's a staggeringly small correlation, and it's something that you probably notice happening all the time. You manage to get through the day, working the whole time, but fail to get to most of the tasks on your list.

Your dones won't match up with to-do's if you're not great at formulating well-planned to-do tasks to begin with. When you don't outline specific actions for your goals but do take some forward steps, that progress won't correlate with the original task. You can't sort of check or cross off a task as complete.

We also can't predict the many interruptions that happen in our day. One LinkedIn survey reported that the most common reason for failure to get through a to-do list was unplanned tasks such as unscheduled calls, e-mails, and meetings. Things pop up in our lives, in and out of the office, little and big fires to be put out — the kids need a ride to school when they miss the bus; this coworker is never going to stop talking to me; the budget is a mess and now I have to fix it.

The to-do list can't handle the changes that crop up because we can't tell the future.

### Productivity in Practice: 5 Ways to Make Your To-Do List More Effective

#### **Give yourself a pat on the back.**

Since our minds get overloaded to the point of distraction, forgive yourself for not getting to 150 tasks. Instead, be realistic about what you can do in a day and remember that accomplishments don't always start out as to-do's.

You're probably getting a lot done for which you're not giving yourself credit. Writing down what you get done regularly is a motivating, revealing and useful practice that balances out the to-do list's problems and shortcomings. Let the motivation you

get from seeing that visible record of accomplishment push you to tackle what's next.

**Make more specific, actionable plans.**

Make it easier to reach your goals by spending some time thinking about what that journey will look like. If I set out a vague task like “write blog post” instead of something specific like “do some research for a blog post about to-do lists”, I’ll be much less likely to reach my destination.

**Use implementation intentions in your planning.**

An implementation intention is a planning strategy that uses an “if-then” framework to push you toward a desired action. You put details describing a certain situation like when or where into the “if” part of the formula and then, specifics of how and what form the “then” part. For example, if you want to start exercising more regularly, an implementation intention could be: “If it is 6 p.m. on a weekday, I will head to the gym for at least half an hour after work.”

When you give yourself some specific cues in the play of your life, it turns out you’re more likely to follow them.

**Assign yourself deadlines, and make them earlier than you’d like.**

At its most basic, a to-do list is just a bunch of items. Try assigning due dates for your items or scheduling them into your calendar to provide some time-based context to them.

Then, make those deadlines earlier rather than later. As found in Ariely's study, even when earlier deadlines were self-imposed, students performed better.

**Prioritize.**

Look at those 150 tasks you have to do and pick three of the most important, pressing, or interesting ones to work on today. It's easier to focus on three things and get them out of the way.

*"Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task." – William James*

# The Antidote to Feeling unproductive

While to-do lists are useful for task organization, they're certainly not the magical solution to our productivity problems. Otherwise why would we get discouraged so often about how much we're getting done?

The satisfaction of crossing something off our list is fleeting, and no matter how much we finish, there's always more to tackle. Have you ever found yourself stressed out just looking at your to-do list? Viewing productivity as this ceaseless grind can cause anxiety and reduce motivation.

The danger of failing to recognize how much you actually accomplish is that it becomes easy to lose perspective, succumb to feelings of failure and guilt, and burn out. That all changes when you take a breather from the perpetual on-the-go approach and pay more attention to what you've achieved by keeping a done list.

The simple act of writing down and keeping track of what you accomplish is motivating and illuminating.

How do you keep a done list?

1. When you do anything you consider useful, however small a step it may be, write it down on your done list.

2. At the end of the day, look at your list. Reflect on and celebrate all the things you got done!

So why does this work? Here's a quick rundown of how this practice benefits your mindset:

Putting things on your done list is more than a simple self-pat on the back. Your done list gives you credit for the full breadth of your accomplishments, capturing everything that came up during the day that might not have been preordained by your to-do list or initial plans. Seeing your list at the end of the day gives you a chance to fully appreciate what you got done that day.

## Success is a series of small wins.

Taking a moment to stop and see the roses of your efforts offers powerful encouragement. Without these pauses, you lose opportunities to gain continual boosts of motivation and self-knowledge, because progress itself fuels your drive and engagement. Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile and psychologist Steven Kramer found that even small wins contribute to that progress power.

When you record your dones, you capture proof of progress, enabling you to see all the tiny triumphs that hold value in the long run rather than focusing too much on what's left on your plate. That plate is going to be full most of the time anyway. So it's ultimately more useful for you to accept that and learn from your

progress history to fill your plate in a happier, healthier, richer way.

There's wisdom and balance to be found in acknowledging the reality of accomplishments rather than spending too much precious time and brainpower on worrying about everything you should be doing. Keeping a done list encourages reflection and awareness of the hows and whys of where you are — which has value for your reality going forward, yielding patience and perspective and a better ability to plan.

### Productivity in Practice: Marc Andreessen's Trick to Feeling Marvelously Efficient

There's a funny mental trap many productive people fall into: they often overlook their own productivity. Sometimes the more productive you are, the more likely you are to beat yourself up at the end of the day, thinking "I wasn't very productive today." Ambitious people measure themselves by their progress towards achieving audacious goals, so they often can't appreciate a single day's worth of tiny, incremental advancements that they've made. Plus, the fuller your day is with activity, the harder it seems to pinpoint what exactly it is that you did at all.

Between starting Netscape, Opsware, Ning, and Andreessen Horowitz, Marc Andreessen has already done monumental work in his career. Yet he still seemed particularly at risk of falling into this familiar-sounding trap:

*[Y]ou know those days when you're running around all day and doing stuff and talking to people and making calls and responding to emails and filling out paperwork and you get*



*home and you're completely exhausted and you say to yourself, "What the hell did I actually get done today?"*

To arm himself against the daunting quest of making meaningful progress toward his big objectives, Marc came up with a system: the done list (which he called his "anti-todo list", a tongue-in-cheek contrast to the much more popular to-do list).

Every time he did something useful during the day, he wrote it down on his done list, which he kept on index cards. He explains:

*Each time you do something, you get to write it down and you get that little rush of endorphins that the mouse gets every time he presses the button in his cage and gets a food pellet.*

*And then at the end of the day... take a look at today's card and its Anti-Todo list and marvel at all the things you actually got done that day.*

Keeping a separate list of accomplishments means that when Marc takes stock of what he has achieved, he gets an unadulterated rush, free from the nagging and guilt of what's still left on his to-do list.

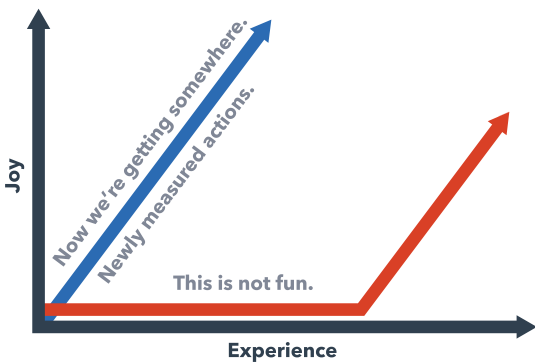
Rather than waiting for major milestones to celebrate achievements, recognize that tiny, wonderful triumphs happen every single day.

There's value in the act of slowing down to write down accomplishments that's inaccessible without acknowledgment. It turns out that "being able to put more notches on my accomplishment belt, so to speak, by writing down things on my Anti-*Todo* list as I accomplish them throughout the day makes me feel marvelously productive and efficient. Far more so than if I just did those things and didn't write them down."

Chris Savage, CEO of the video-marketing company Wistia, wrote about how magnifying your perspective on progress to look at the day-to-day is key to generating the momentum and joy to accomplish big things. He expressed this lesson concisely in two graphs:



versus this:



There's a hard road to travel to get to big-time achievements and reaching heady dreams, whether it's making your first million, mastering the piano, running a marathon, or building a successful company — and if you're too exhausted every day to take stock of your successes, you'll lose heart.

Your done list will energize you. Rather than waiting for major milestones to celebrate achievements, recognize that tiny, wonderful triumphs happen every single day. Turn that into a daily process of rejuvenation and inspiration after a hard-day's work, and you'll add a crucial ingredient to your day that maintains the positive emotional balance necessary to accomplish great things.

# The Motivating Power of Progress

Setting aside time on a daily or weekly basis to reflect is a powerful productivity hack.

It seems counterintuitive to spend extra time to do one more thing — but taking stock of what you've accomplished provides critical fuel. Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile and psychologist Steven Kramer, authors of the incisive *The Progress Principle*, pored over 12,000 daily work diary entries and were surprised to find out that making progress — even small wins — on meaningful work is the most powerful motivator.

Making progress — even small wins — on meaningful work is the most powerful motivator.

Key to fostering that progress is a positive “inner work life”, what Amabile and Kramer call the jumble of feelings, motivation, and realization that forms feedback loops in reaction to the workday that impacts your performance, creativity, and productivity. People with positive inner work lives are highly engaged in their work while those with negative inner work lives are less present and less productive.

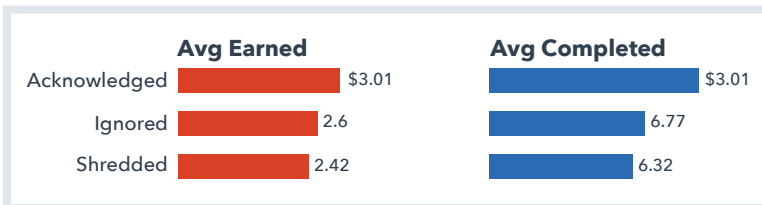
Keeping a done list, recording your observations and thoughts along with the tasks you accomplish, enables you to pay attention to your inner work life, ensuring better engagement with your work and sustainable progress.

### The Danger of Overlooking How Much You Get Done

There's a cost to ignoring your efforts and disregarding your inner work life. Dan Ariely did a study showing how people whose work was acknowledged outperformed others — even when the work itself wasn't particularly meaningful.

In the experiment, three groups had to finish a trivial task on a sheet of paper for a payment of 55 cents. After each page, they had the option to complete another page for 5 cents less or stop. People in the Acknowledged Group wrote their name on each sheet before submitting it to an experimenter who would look at it, nod, and place the page in a folder. Those in the Ignored Group didn't write their names on their completed pages, which the experimenter placed into a large stack of papers without any reaction. Those in the Shredded Group also didn't include their names, and their completed pages were fed straight into the shredder.

What happened? The Acknowledged Group earned more and completed more pages than the two other groups.



The startling result, though, was that the performance of the Ignored Group closely resembled that of the Shredded Group, suggesting that failing to acknowledge how much you get done is dangerously similar to actively destroying the fruits of your labor. If you let even that simple act of appreciation pass you by, you risk losing valuable boosts of motivation.

### **Can You See Your Progress? It Makes a Difference.**

The trouble with much of our work is that progress isn't always visible.

Another experiment by Ariely shows the benefits of setting up a work process to reveal your forward steps. In this study, students were paid to build Lego figurines called Bionicles. With every additional figurine, the student would earn a decreasing amount of money. Group A saw its Bionicles dismantled as soon as they were built. While told that their work would be disassembled at the end of the study, Group B students placed each completed Bionicle on a desk before continuing onto the next one.

Group B out-built Group A, eleven to seven. Seeing visible proof of progress in the accumulating Bionicles on the desk helped drive Group A to keep building, even with diminishing monetary returns and knowledge of their Bionicles' eventual disassembled fates.

While countless game, app, and website designers grasp the role visible progress plays in engagement, you too can harness that progress power by keeping a done list. All it takes is a reflective pause to get the satisfying sight of your own kind of accumulating

Bionicles rather than letting them slip past you, unrecognized sources of fuel.

### Productivity in Practice: Making Progress Visible with a Team Done List

Teams and organizations benefit from group recognition of their progress. In fact, team done lists make up one productivity system used by many successful startups, from Google to Foursquare to BuzzFeed.

During Google's growth stage, Larry Schwimmer, an early software engineer, stumbled upon a deceptively simple solution that persists to this day at Google and throughout Silicon Valley. In this system called Snippets, employees receive a weekly email asking them to write down what they did last week and what they plan to do in the upcoming week. Replies get compiled in a public space and distributed automatically the following day by email.

The Snippets process at any scale is a compelling productivity solution, and companies of all sizes have adopted it. Some, like SV Angel, rich in Google DNA, do daily snippets. The routine process encourages employees to reflect and jot down a forward-looking plan for getting stuff done, all while requiring a minimal disruption in the employee's actual work.

At BuzzFeed, employees send a weekly email to Jon Steinberg, president and COO, describing what they've been working on and what help they need. Everyone can also subscribe to each others' snippets. As for Jon, he reads his compiled snippets over the weekend and then responds with feedback and questions. This

makes it possible, as Jon explains, to “connect dots and people on things I wouldn’t otherwise know about.”

With Snippets showing Jon and the growing team at BuzzFeed where all the dots are, they gain a sense of the layers of individual details and multitudes of dots that create the big picture. The result is that:

*Snippets ... forces me to review my week and tell the whole company what my contributions and challenges were for the week. Some weeks it feels great, other weeks not so much. On the weeks it feels disappointing, it's a great forcing function to prioritize and focus.*

This kind of transparency may show you something wonderful or ugly, what’s working and what’s sticking out. Understanding the picture’s composition reveals details and provokes insight. As Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn, suggests with great wisdom — “if you don’t take the time to think proactively you will increasingly find yourself reacting to your environment rather than influencing it.”

In the workplace, even less than in our personal lives, we don’t take time to think, reflect, and situate ourselves because it often looks unproductive, like you’re not doing anything.

Maybe this explains people’s reluctance to put reflection and review into real, meaningful practice. Yet embracing that appearance of doing nothing and taking the time to think is integral to be creative, and psychiatrist T. Byram Karasu explains, “for previously unrelated thoughts and feelings



to interact, to regroup themselves into new formations and combinations, and thus to bring harmony to the mind.”

Tuning in, not just on an individual but team and company level, is how you connect, sync, and plan, enabling creativity and drive instead of waiting for lightning, influence rather than reaction.

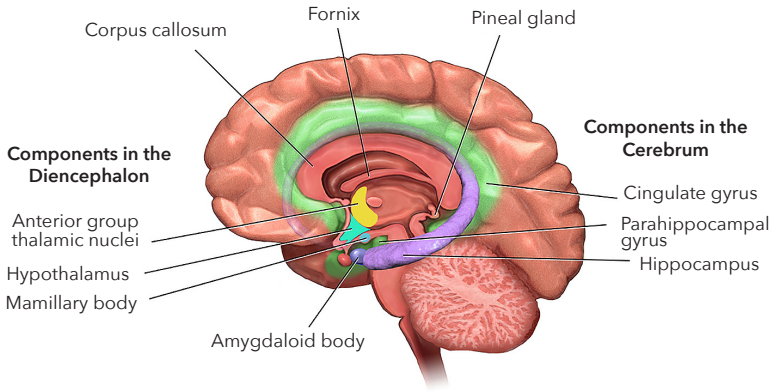
# The Surprising Impact of Emotion on How Your Brain Works

Emotions play an integral role in how we think and solve problems, but we still tend to hold up as ideal the cool, rational head, unclouded by something as fuzzy as feelings. Yet emotions and your inner work life have a real, practical impact on your motivation and productivity levels.

The parts of the brain that deal with emotions actually connect to those dealing with perception and cognition. Parts of the limbic system — once thought to be a separate emotional center in the brain — are involved in forming memories, learning, and attention. Emotions, then, are wired into cognitive functions and processes.

They're wired in more interesting ways than you might think, too. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in his book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, describes one of his patients, Elliot, whose damaged ventromedial frontal lobe had caused an inability to feel emotion. The interesting side effect? He also lost his ability to make decisions. The way our brains are built actually makes it impossible to prevent our emotions from clouding our judgment. Instead, we need our cloudy emotions to reason and to make decisions.

## The Limbic System



### **The Destructive Effect of Prolonged Negative Emotions**

If those emotions are negative, your motivation can take a substantial nosedive. Negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and sadness influence how creative and productive we are — narrowing our thought patterns to weaken memory, planning, and decision-making.

We also don't work well under stress, though it's a common misconception. Through their comprehensive study of work journal entries, the Progress Principle authors also disproved the pervasive idea of “no pressure, no diamonds” that infects people's understanding of what drives the best work.

Analyzing the language used in nearly 12,000 employee diary entries for accounts of progress and setbacks, Professor Amabile and Kramer correlated those events to self-reported levels of happiness and frustration. What they found was alarming. The

negative impact of setbacks on your inner work life is three times as powerful in affecting motivation than the positive power of progress. You probably know from experience that it's easier to remember the bad stuff that happens to you than the good.

Setbacks have 3x as powerful a negative impact on motivation than the positive effect of progress.

So why do our brains have a such a negativity bias? They're actually wired that way — to pay more attention to negative experiences as a self-protective measure. In a sense, we're still scanning for threats as a remnant of our hunter and gatherer brains, but this natural threat response is only meant to last for short-term situations.

The problem with prolonged stress is that stress hormones stick around and start meddling with the brain's wiring, affecting the actual structure of your prefrontal cortex and ultimately impairing cognitive function. Your language and math processing abilities, working memory, and attention regulation deteriorate.

At the same time, those stress hormones strengthen the fear conditioning and emotional memory connections in the amygdala. What happens then, as Dr. Amy Arnsten, professor of neurobiology at Yale, describes is that the “orchestration of the brain's response patterns switches from slow, thoughtful [prefrontal cortex] regulation to the reflexive and rapid emotional responses of the amygdala.”

In other words, we turn from thoughtful, smart human beings into anxious cats chasing laser pointers. Instead of your prefrontal cortex directing your attention to deal with the task in front of you, you're more likely to be diverted by something shiny and distracted by worry. In these modern times, the anxiety resulting from a persistent attention to setbacks and the constant squeeze of pressure can cause a downward spiral that eats away at focus, productivity, creativity, and optimal decision-making.

The more we realize which direction our emotion, inner work life, and motivation is headed, the more we can take control and break out of that negative feedback loop.

### **The Durability of Positivity**

Contrary to how negativity generally narrows thinking, positivity broadens in more ways than one. Positive moods facilitate problem-solving and improve cognitive flexibility, innovation, decision-making, and intrinsic motivation.

What's more, Amabile and Kramer discovered that positive emotions actually have a prolonged impact: "The more positive a person's mood on a given day, the more creative thinking he did the next day—and, to some extent, the day after that—even taking into account his moods on those later days."

That's where unleashing the power of the progress principle comes in. When you're able to review and reflect on your accomplishments and inner work life using your done list, you'll be able to recognize patterns, gain insight about your work and work relationships, and appreciate progress that would've

otherwise gone unrecognized. Not only will this engage you more meaningfully in your work, your emotions can gain a lift as well.

### Productivity in Practice: The 2-Step Formula to Battle Negativity

When you have a great day, it's easy to feel the stimulating power of progress. But what about your not so great days? How can you avoid the downward spiral when you're feeling negative?

Failures and holdups demotivate and sap the energy of even the most confident of people, especially when they don't receive any kind of positive feedback from their day. You know that old relationship cliché that you should never go to bed upset with your significant other? Waking up upset the next day just serves to reinforce negative feelings you have between each other.

Use this advice in your relationship with yourself!

A simple way to make sure you don't get too down and can bounce back sooner than later is to take time to create that positive feedback. You'll be much more likely to wake up the next day motivated, ready to be productive and tackle whatever life may throw at you.

#### **Step 1: Take time to analyze your losses.**

Just because negative emotions can diminish your productivity doesn't mean you should go out of your way to avoid thinking negative thoughts or addressing what went wrong. The key is to curb a chronic negative feedback loop. So take time to reflect on your errors and trials in addition to your progress. They're more valuable than you might think.

Let me explain: Errors are mistakes you make, poor decisions that you'd change if given a second chance. If you let those errors get to your head, they can have a greater cost than they need to.

Trials are more nuanced. They're poor results from good decisions that you've made that still feel like errors, but given a second chance, you'd make the same choice. For example, if I see an open Michael Jordan under the hoop, then I should pass it to him, because 99.9% of the time, he's going to put it into the basket when he's that close. But if for some reason, he misses the dunk, that doesn't invalidate the original correct decision to pass it to him. It wasn't an error, it was just a bad result. The thing is, emotionally, it still feels like a mistake which can lead you to be hesitant to make the better decision again.

When you notice errors and trials happening, take a break in order to de-stress and move onto step 2.

### **Step 2: Create positive feedback!**

Surprisingly, reframing your reaction to errors and trials to one of gratitude can be one of the most useful forms of positive feedback. We can flip our failures into strengths if we can learn from them.

Turning setbacks and losses into something to be grateful for is a powerful mental trick. Be grateful for your errors because errors provide insight. Be grateful for your trials because you're still in the game and have more chances to make the better decision in the future and reap the benefits.

The use of gratitude journals — where you write down what

you're grateful for every day — increases long-term happiness, personal growth, and your ability to cope with the difficulties that life throws at you. Research by psychologist Martin Seligman uncovered how people who wrote down three good things daily for just one week felt happier and less depressed, even after one month. And when Seligman did three-month and six-month follow-ups, the happiest participants were the ones who had continued the practice throughout.

When you create positive feedback, you'll also cultivate patience and resilience. With a done list, you can always look back and see how you persevered and survived much worse days or gain inspiration and strength from the wonderful days.

Carrying over a feeling of failure from one day to the next is a recipe for a string of unproductive days. So make sure to end the day not feeling like it was lost. Instead, take the time to be grateful to your past self for making errors you can learn from and for having the strength to carry on through trials so that your future self has a fighting chance to do better tomorrow. You're still in the game, and that's something to be thankful for!



# The Enlightening Habit of Reflection

The quiet yet powerful act of reflection is an often overlooked practice for productivity and happiness, because it often looks like you're not actually doing anything. Yet your brain needs time to contemplate and muse if you ever want to go beyond merely doing stuff to doing stuff really well or doing what matters most. Being great at what you do and making an impact takes time and thought.

A research review by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang uncovers how mental downtime — when the mind is not distracted and is free to wander — is necessary for introspection. Our habits of constant digital consumption and always-on work situations, which keep demanding externally-focused attention, are exhausting. They leave less time for what Immordino-Yang calls “constructive internal reflection.” Your brain needs its own “me-time” to process information and make sense of your life by recollecting memories, imagining the future, processing emotions, and figuring out meaning and moral judgments to lead to new insights and awareness.

## **Discover What's in Your Blind Spots**

Done lists are an easy way to carry out constructive internal reflection. This simple method captures details, progress, and

thoughts that otherwise can get lost in the stream of busy.

Sometimes you move and do so much that it's hard to remember what you did, even a day later. In fact, we have a lot of blind spots in life. Have you ever been so caught up in a task — having your nose in a book, or your eyes on your phone, or your energy on a basketball game — that you don't notice something in plain sight or sound? You walk into a pole, you don't hear what someone just said, you don't realize your dining companion has left the table.

There's actually a term for that — inattentional blindness — a state of unseeing that results from paying attention somewhere else.

The invisible gorilla experiment is a famous demonstration of inattentional blindness. People watched a video of two teams wearing white and black passing a basketball, instructed beforehand to carefully count the number of passes made by the team dressed in white. Halfway through the video, a woman in a gorilla suit walks through to the middle of the screen, beats her chest, and then walks offscreen.

About half the viewers fail to see the gorilla at all! Without the instruction to focus your attention on counting the passes, though, a gorilla on the basketball court would've been pretty hard to miss.

Inattentional blindness isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's the flipside of focus, an essential skill. What's funny about the invisible gorilla test, though, is how you think you would've totally

seen the gorilla. Other people would miss the gorilla but no, not us! As Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, the psychologists who conducted the invisible gorilla test, note, “We think we see ourselves and the world as they really are, but we’re actually missing a whole lot.”

The fact that humans tend to miss so much is what the world’s best professional pickpocket Apollo Robbins relies on. He choreographs the spotlight of your attention, creating blind spots, so that he can perform his craft. He told Adam Green of *The New Yorker* how he does this, “Attention is like water. It flows. It’s liquid. You create channels to divert it, and you hope that it flows the right way.”

In these days of screens and information streams and our busy lives of work, family, worries, and play — there certainly are a lot of diverting channels. How can you better choreograph your attention and see what you’re missing to understand whether you’re paying attention to the right things? What’s happening in different areas of your life? What do you want to spend more or less time doing?

Daily recording and reflection yields an honest overview of whether you’re missing things that matter or focusing your attention on the unimportant.

### **Connecting the Dots**

Take a step back to shine the spotlight on details that would normally melt away from your consciousness by the end of the day. Regular review helps increase your self-knowledge, which equips you to learn, grow, and get better at what’s important to

you. Attaining balance, meaning, health, happiness, or success doesn't happen by itself.

A bit of reflection gives you the ability to connect the dots — which leads to insight, an honest understanding of where you are, and a clearer picture of where you're headed.

*Coming back is the thing that enables you to see how all the dots in your life are connected, how one decision leads you to another, how one twist of fate, good or bad, brings you to a door that later takes you to another door, which aided by several detours – long hallways and unforeseen stairwells – eventually puts you in the place you are now. — Ann Patchett, What Now?*

Analyze setbacks and successes, learn from experiences, and connect the dots. Can you spot patterns in your reactions and behaviors? Are you more productive the next day when you go to sleep earlier? Does your exercise frequency drop during a meeting-heavy week?

When you recognize unconstructive patterns and think through them, you acquire knowledge, understanding, and motivation that leads to durable behavior and attitude adjustments. You can go back into your log and see where decisions, actions and efforts have led before. In short, you can pinpoint where things started

to go wrong or what helped make things right. Having such a record is like a map to give you better direction into the future. Look backward at any time to forge ahead more meaningfully and productively.

There's wisdom in the saying: "You can't really know where you're going until you know where you've been." With a more accurate picture of where you are and what you have done, you then hold the data and information that you can use to make stronger plans for your future.

### Productivity in Practice: The Key Reflective Question that Guided Benjamin Franklin

As an author, printer, politician, scientist, musician, politician, diplomat, and inventor — not to mention his role as one of the founding fathers of the United States — Benjamin Franklin was a man who got a lot done. But early in life, Franklin was just another guy who struggled with time management.

At age twenty in July of 1726, on a sea voyage home to Philadelphia from London, Franklin began to think more about what productivity really meant and how to achieve it. What was important to Franklin was not the external goals of making money or being famous. It was about the type of man he wanted to be.

Out of that thinking, Franklin developed a "plan for attaining moral perfection", a kind of revolutionary system of Getting (Moral) Things Done. He wanted to attain thirteen virtues, a list of character traits to live by that included lofty goals like justice to everyday aims like cleanliness.

Like the rest of us, Franklin still found it a huge challenge to practice his virtues, even expressing surprise that perhaps he bit off more than he could chew, noting in his autobiography, “I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined.” He delved into why changing for the better was so hard, arriving at the explanation that “habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason.”

When you ignore the journey and the process, you ignore yourself and you don’t know how to push against the pull of inclination away from reason and goals. Franklin, despite his insecurities, paid attention to his journey, understanding that inattention would not carry him where he wanted to go, toward positive growth.

He devised a scorecard and other techniques to keep himself on track, but one of the most powerful tricks he used was also his simplest. Every night before bed, as part of his “examination of the day”, Franklin would ask himself, “What good have I done today?”

While Franklin’s question focused on what “good” he did everyday because he was trying to become a more virtuous human being, the frame of reflecting on the good and the positive aspects of your day is a neat mental trick to better evaluate and understand whether you’re spending your time wisely. On days when he succeeded, the question would be a chance for him to recognize and acknowledge his wins. On days when he fell short, the question was a nudge to reflect on what’s important and how he could get back on the right path.

The morning question, What good shall I do this day?	5	Rise, wash, and address Power-
	6	ful Goodness; contrive day's busi-
	7	ness and take the resolution of
	8	the day; prosecute the present
		study; and breakfast.
	9	Work.
	10	
	11	
	12	Read or overlook my accounts,
	1	and dine.
	2	
	3	Work.
4		
5		
6	Put things in their places, sup-	
7	per, music, or diversion, or con-	
8	versation;	
9	examination of the day.	
Evening question, What good have I done today?	10	
	11	
	12	
	1	Sleep.
	2	
	3	
	4	

What this wasn't, though, was a way for Franklin to achieve perfection — and that wasn't the point. It was the process that made a difference. In his words, “[T]ho’ I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of attaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and happier man.”

Growth, in some sense, happens through a constant editing of our habits and our days. Whether as an individual, a group, or a huge company, you have to remember to look inward to figure out whether you're moving where you want to go. And in doing so, you might find yourself better and happier day to day, too.

# How to Make a Done List

Okay, so you've read about the benefits of reflection and that acknowledging how much you get done every day increases your motivation, insight, and perspective — and now you want to get started on your own done list. These are the simple, basic steps:

1. When you do anything you consider useful, however small a win it may be, write it down on your done list. (Or wait until the end of the day to write down your list.)
2. At the end of the day, look at your list. Reflect on and celebrate all the things you got done!
3. Review regularly — in the mornings to kickstart your day, every week, month, or year, or simply whenever you'd like a little boost or look back.

If you ever experience done list writer's block, these questions are a great way to get you going:

## **What did you get done today?**

Simply look back at your day through the lens of accomplishment. Answering this question is a quiet act of affirmation and celebration.



### **What did I make progress on today?**

Even on frustrating, seemingly unproductive days, you can almost always find one thing on which you made progress.

### **What impacted your progress?**

Is it something you can control and change so that you facilitate progress rather than hinder it? Do you notice patterns resulting from your environment or schedule that result in progress or setbacks?

### **What stood out today and how did that make you feel?**

Did your co-worker compliment you or did your kid say something hilarious? Was a task particularly frustrating or difficult to get through? Are you particularly proud or frustrated by something you did today? What was remarkable about the day?

### **What did you do today that you especially want to remember in the future?**

This question guides you to record and reflect on accomplishments that you can also pull up later for events like performance evaluations, reviews, or reflective times like a new year or your birthday. The proof of what worked well and what didn't is in your done list.

### **How can I turn negatives into progress tomorrow?**

Learn from your setbacks and errors. Can you think about ways to improve or make progress tomorrow based on what went wrong today? Address and flip negative feelings into positive fuel for your progress. We aren't perfect and every single day will not be a good day, but we can create better ones for ourselves in the future based

on how we think about the past.

### **What good have I done today?**

Follow Franklin's example and examine positively. On successful days, this question is a way to recognize your wins and balance out your natural negativity bias. On less successful days, the question nudges you to reflect on what's important and how to get back on the right path. Learn from negativity and gain strength from the good.

### **What are 3 good things about today?**

As you write down all the awesome things you accomplish, scan for three daily positives to include on your list. Be specific, and think through whether anything helped to make them happen. As you record your good things and exercise daily gratitude, you'll be better able to sustain a positive feedback loop.

Still need some guidance and advice on creating a great done list? Here are 8 helpful tips:

### **Figure out what done list schedule works best for you.**

Some people like to write their dones as a batch at the end of the day before they get ready for bed or when the workday draws to a close. Others prefer to write their dones down as they finish or switch tasks. If you do this, don't forget to take a look at the end of the day at how much your list has grown.

Either way, find which method works best for you! You might even find your memory improving as you get into a daily habit of recalling and recognizing your accomplishments.

### **Get into a habit.**

It's important to make your done list a habit for a regular lift in energy, inspiration, and motivation after a hard day's work and to sustain a positive feedback loop.

Think of your done list like a daily check-in with yourself for the sake of your productivity, wellness, and success. It's like taking a pause to digest your day rather than swimming full-speed ahead right after a meal.

Like any new good habit, it takes time to build up a regular routine. In the beginning of your practice especially, try not to miss any days. Done lists are much like going to the gym — once you get in a groove, it's easier to stay in it.

Don't use lack of time as an excuse to skip out on your done list practice. Amabile and Kramer recommend a mere 5 to 10 minutes a day. You're probably spending way more time on Facebook. But with a done list, you'll be adding great value to your day, maintaining the positive emotional balance necessary to accomplish great things.

### **Count your small wins.**

Count wins of all sizes. Don't wait until you've hit big goals like completing a project or getting a promotion — which happen only occasionally and make it difficult to appreciate small but important advancements. Don't dismiss all the smaller things that fill out your days and are building up in the long run.

So even if you don't finish a whole project or hit a major milestone, you've likely made progress on some aspect, whether it's a super

rough draft or sketching out a plan. Record that and give small steps their due.

**Be guided by what matters.**

While you can certainly be over-inclusive about what you get done during the day to get the ball rolling, remember that the resulting lists should ultimately provide some value to you.

What matters to you? Unlike to-do lists which can fill up with all sorts of tasks, done lists are most useful when populated by notes that carry some significance. While one person may want to avoid recording household chores like “paid the bills” or “did the laundry”, another person might gain value from seeing those tasks on their done list at the end of the day.

**Express yourself, provide context, and experiment as you go.**

Unlike the checklists and itemization of to-do lists, you have more freedom in how you choose to write down your dones. The beauty of the done list is that you can make it up as you go.

You can jot down whatever you find interesting and notable about what you get done during the day, as well as any thoughts and observations. Done lists are like bite-size diaries, so don't be afraid to get personal and express yourself. Emotional context and commentary will add value as you reflect and review. Maybe you can puzzle out why your afternoon was unproductive or savor the pleasure of figuring out a bug.

Use whatever methods and styles you prefer. Write in short fragments, bullet points, full paragraphs, or poetry. Build your

done list in whatever way works best for you, and be patient. Figuring out what to write down and how in a way that's effective for you takes time and experimentation — and the way you reflect and grow may also change.

A done list is a great way to transform your mindset into action mode so that you're making progress toward your goals and priorities. You'll know when you receive helpful boosts of motivation or insight as you go whether your done list style is working well or not.

**Review regularly to gather self-intelligence.**

Review your done list regularly to gain the maximum benefits. Reviewing what you got done doesn't take a lot of time, but in return, you'll start to be more aware of your achievements. A done list helps you acknowledge how you deal with what life brings your way, the planned and the unexpected.

Note any productivity patterns, your level of engagement, and your moods. Having written proof grants you stronger footing to implement change by providing information about how to improve — and importantly — how you're doing well.

Are you spending time on things that aren't on your to-do list? Do you get more writing done after dinner? Is there a time of day or week that you're most productive? That means you can schedule more smartly.

Eventually you'll be able to see whether you're spending time and energy on what really matters to you, whether you're confusing

busywork for actual progress, and proof of how you're actually prioritizing your day. Learn about yourself and where you're expending your energy, improve your planning, and feel happier about what you got and will get done.

**Balance your to-do lists.**

Don't just make your done list a "done" version of your to-do list. The value of the done list is its responsiveness to you and the reality of your day rather than reflecting a pre-conceived list of tasks. This way, you control your lists instead of the other way around.

You'll probably still use to-do lists, but now you can get a balanced perspective. Pay attention to the journey of how your tasks turn into dones. How much of your to-do list is getting to your done list? As you go along, you might even find that both lists start working in concert. From the knowledge you gain from keeping a done list, you'll improve your planning ability and understanding of what's more realistic and important to tackle next.

**Keep a done list with your team for group productivity.**

Show and tell what you get done with your team. Just as you miss out on details of your life unless you're mindful and reflect regularly, other people can't know about all your great work unless you find a way to communicate that fact. It also makes everyone's job easier when there's an accessible high-level view of all the moving parts.

A team done list is also a form of communication. For example, at I Done This, we keep a team done list and recently my co-worker

included this entry: “we were in The Economist, which is pretty sweet”. It’s not necessarily something she did, but it’s a memorable accomplishment for our team that she wanted to put on the record and celebrate — without sending a whole separate email about it.

While our suggested done list questions for individuals are great for teams as well, here are a few more that account for the collaboration and cooperation that happen in the workplace:

Can you identify barriers to your progress or other people’s and address them?

Can you identify facilitators to progress, such as points where you can improve communication or save time?

Do you need help with anything? How can you help your teammates?

Is there an individual, team, or company-wide accomplishment you want to point out and celebrate?

Is there anyone you want to thank or encourage for supporting you and/or for doing a great job?

# 'Til Next Time!

A done list prods you to shift your focus to acknowledge what you accomplish and take stock rather than stress about what hasn't happened yet.

Stay positive through exhaustion, frenzy, and discouragement, and gain momentum from your small wins to pave the way to achieving great things and living happily ever after, day by day.

Still have questions about done lists?

Feel free to email [bailey@idonethis.com](mailto:bailey@idonethis.com), and she'll personally reply.

You can also find us at:

[idonethis.com](http://idonethis.com)

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# Thank you!

Thanks so much for reading our book! Now you can add it to your done list.

What did you get done today?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Finished reading <i>The Busy Person's Guide to the Done List</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Share your wins and what you got done on social media using the hashtag #idonethis. If you enjoyed our book, tell your friends about it!

*"Instructions for living a life: Pay attention.  
Be astonished. Tell about it." — Mary Oliver*

Making progress – **even small wins** – on meaningful work is the **most powerful motivator**.



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