

The Little Handbook for Getting Stuff Done

There's a ton to be gained by getting good at Getting Stuff Done (GSD).

While I don't think that productivity and efficiency is the answer to life, nor should it be your only focus ... there are still a ton of benefits from Getting Stuff Done. A ton.

Some of the benefits:

- You start accomplishing more
- You begin to believe in yourself more
- You waste less time procrastinating and distracting yourself
- You become more trustable — when you tell people you're going to get stuff done, they believe you
- You become more hireable, as people love to hire someone who gets stuff done
- You are less held back by this dimension of your life, which will allow you to go deeper in other areas — understanding what's important, being curious, playing, learning, making deep connections with people, retraining old mental patterns that are getting in the way, and more
- You start earning more
- You might be able to found a successful startup or create a great organization
- You might be able to spread your ideas further, as you prove yourself worthy of listening to (because you've accomplished something) and as you get the things done that need to be done to spread ideas, like writing a book or blog or giving a talk

And on and on. You get the benefits — you just want to know how to get better at Getting Stuff Done.

This is the guide for you. First we'll look at the stuff that gets in the way. Then the skills you need to get good at to Get Stuff Done. Then how to get good at Getting Stuff Done.

Stuff That Gets in the Way

Executing is not difficult, if there are no obstacles. Just like moving great distances isn't difficult if you don't have gravity or things in the way.

So let's look at the obstacles, before we look at how to get good at the skills.

These are the most common obstacles to Getting Stuff Done (with some recommended fixes):

1. **Habit of putting off starting, because it's uncomfortable.** This is procrastination

— you putt off starting a task because it's hard or you're feeling overwhelmed or uncertain about the task. The fix is to make the start as small as possible, create conditions that make you more likely to start, and then to practice starting over and over until you get good.

2. **The switching habit.** Maybe you get started, but then constantly switch to other tasks. This is for the same reasons as procrastination — discomfort and uncertainty make you want to do something else, so you go to an easier task or your favorite distractions. Switching, switching, switching, leads to a lack of focus and constant busyness. The fix: create focus sessions, where you practice staying focused on one task for a short period of time (10 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.) until you get better at staying, at least for a little while.
3. **Perfectionism.** You put off starting (or finishing) because conditions aren't perfect, or the work isn't perfect. For example, you want to start a blog but can't until you find the perfect platform, perfect theme, perfect schedule, and have all the time you want, a list of great ideas, and a perfect understanding of how to be a great blogger. Good luck with that! Or you write a blog post or article but don't publish it because it's not perfect yet (hint: you're just experiencing uncertainty). The fix: commit to starting imperfectly, just starting even if things are messy, creating that shitty first draft, and cleaning things up later. You might need some accountability to commit to this.
4. **Other people.** Other people frustrate you, holding things up with their delays, making things more complicated, complaining, messing things up, being irritating. In truth, it can be hard to get things done when you rely on other people. But this is often a rationalization. The fix: take complete responsibility for your part, get good at doing your part, and step into a bigger leadership role where you help the whole team succeed, stretching yourself to be positive and whole-hearted with other people despite their shortcomings.
5. **Distractions & interruptions.** You get pulled away by constant distractions and interruptions. Some of those are under your control, others aren't. The fix: create focus sessions of distraction-free time, where you turn off the Internet or get a site blocker and commit to just focusing on one thing for a short while. Talk to others about interruptions during this time (tell them if you have headphones on, they shouldn't interrupt you). Turn off notifications during this time (it might only be for 20 minutes at a time). Finally, practice dealing with interruptions (that you can't control) by letting go of what you were doing, turning mindfully and gratefully to the person interrupting you and giving them your full attention, then returning to your task and giving it your full attention again. This takes practice.
6. **Being tired.** You're tired, hungry, low on energy, frustrated, lonely. These kinds of difficulties can make it hard to focus and get things done. Fix: Recognize when you're in one of these states, and do what you need to get recharged (a short nap, walk, or meditation might help). Or do tasks that don't require great energy and focus (answering emails, doing routine admin tasks, etc.). If it's a long-term problem, fix your

sleep and eating.

7. **Fear, uncertainty, feeling overwhelmed & self-doubt.** Lying at the heart of most of the obstacles above are these mental conditions — fear and uncertainty, which are really the same thing. Fix: Getting good at staying in fear and uncertainty without needing to shut down, run, avoid, get in control or lash out (the usual responses), is a key skill. More on this below.

This might feel like an overwhelming list of obstacles. But the fixes are relatively simple, and I'll talk more about how to put together a simple program for getting good at overcoming these obstacles, and getting good at Getting Stuff Done in the process.

First, let's look more at the skills you want to get better at.

10 Skills to Get Good At

With our list of obstacles, we started to come up with some fixes ... and they mostly have to do with skills that we want to get better at. Let's look at those here:

1. **Picking one important thing (prioritization).** If you focus on important tasks a majority of the time, you'll be getting stuff done. If you focus on getting the small stuff done but not the big stuff, or switch between tasks all the time, you'll be less effective. It's useful to pick one important thing to focus on at a time, learning over time what tasks and projects are of higher value to you than others. Is answering this email more important than writing that article? What would move the needle more, for your career, your team, your happiness and health?
2. **Starting.** Procrastination is one of the most common obstacles to Getting Stuff Done ... so if we get good at starting, we'll have conquered a huge obstacle. Starting is best done by focusing on the smallest first step, and practicing just launching into that. When I wanted to form the habit of running, I focused on just getting my shoes on and getting out the door. An art teacher I know tells students to just focus on getting the pencil to paper. Meditation teachers say to just get your butt on the cushion. Pick the tiniest first step, and launch into it.
3. **Focus sessions.** Switching to other things is also very common, so I've found huge value in focus sessions (also called the Pomodoro method by some). Basically, you pick a short interval (10 minutes, 15, 20, or 25) and practice focusing on one task during that session, until the timer goes off. Then take a break, and try another focus session. I recommend just doing a couple focus sessions a day for a week, and expand from there.
4. **Managing task list.** Choosing a todo program, finding the perfect system for it, and managing all your tasks and projects ... it can be overwhelming. I know a lot of people who don't even bother. But it's a great skill for keeping yourself focused and Getting Stuff Done, and if you keep it simple, it doesn't have to be overwhelming. I recommend

picking just a simple todo program (lately I've been using Todoist, but I switch every now and then) and not overthinking it. The real skill is throwing all your tasks into your todo program (into the Inbox), and every day just picking a few tasks to focus on — I recommend 3 important tasks and 3 smaller ones per day. Your exact number will vary on how long you work, how hard the tasks are, how fast you are, etc. Once you have your tasks picked for the day, simply pick the first one and do a focus session with that task. It might take several focus sessions to get a task done.

5. **Shitty first draft.** Perfectionism gets in the way of Getting Stuff Done. So adopt the attitude of the Shitty First Draft, not worrying about perfection but just getting it out. Then go back and revise. But don't overthink it, just focus on doing.
6. **Being in uncertainty.** There will be fear, uncertainty and discomfort in all of your work, and it's a great skill to learn to be in uncertainty without running, avoiding, complaining, lashing out, hiding. The practice is to notice when you're in uncertainty, when you're feeling insecurity ... and to just stop and be with it. Notice how it feels, physically, and be present with the feeling. Be gentle with the feeling, even friendly with it. Notice that you're OK even when you're in uncertainty and discomfort, and find gratitude for being in this moment. Love it just as it is, even with the feeling of insecurity. It takes practice!
7. **Stepping back into the big picture.** It's one thing to be deeply focused on a task, but it's another to step back and taking a look at the overall picture. I advocate doing that at the beginning and end of each day (a morning planning session and a brief evening review of your day) but also checking in during the day with how things are going and how you might need to adjust your plan and refocus yourself. We all get distracted, interrupted, waylaid by unforeseen difficulties. And those are all fine, if we can refocus ourselves as needed.
8. **Taking full responsibility & leadership.** This would be more of an advanced practice, but taking full responsibility means not blaming others for your difficulties in getting things done. Recognizing the obstacles but taking responsibility for finding a way, or accepting what needs to be accepted, or recognizing your part in the dynamic you've created. Taking leadership is taking responsibility for creating a better dynamic, creating structure if needed, even if you are the subordinate or not the official leader of the team.
9. **Communicating.** Another advanced skill — this is about communicating clearly and honestly, so that everyone is clear on responsibilities and boundaries and consequences of not honoring those responsibilities and boundaries. This kind of communication is leadership and structure, that helps everyone function better.
10. **Creating structure.** I do not advocate rigid structure and overplanning. It's not conducive to Getting Stuff Done, and rigidly planned days are just a fantasy anyway. Instead, having a minimal structure is good: how will you start your day so that you'll work on the important stuff? How will you do your focus sessions so you won't be too distracted? How will you review your day so that you'll learn from what happened? How

will you create accountability? When will you get email done, and have meetings? Some simple answers to these kinds of questions helps you create structure. But don't worry about getting structure perfect — if you have reviews, you can adjust and get better at creating structure over time.

It might feel overwhelming that there are 10 skills on this list — but you don't have to get good at all of them at the same time. I would focus on the first four first, then expand slowly to practicing the others.

A Simple Program to Get Good at GSD

With all of the above in mind, let's simplify things and create a five-step program for getting good at Getting Things Done:

1. **Create a daily practice structure.** Have a simple plan for practicing Getting Things Done — 1) a morning prioritization session; 2) a couple of daily focus sessions; 3) uncertainty meditation when you're feeling fear, doubt, uncertainty and discomfort; and 4) a review at the end of the day to iterate and improve. Give this plan to someone else, and commit to reporting to them every day for a week. Then commit to updating them weekly after that, telling them your successes, obstacles and how you'll adjust for the coming week. This daily structure plus accountability will help you get better over the coming weeks.
2. **A morning task list session.** This is part of your daily practice structure mentioned above, as are all of the items below. Basically, just spend 5-10 minutes going over your task list, and picking the tasks you want to focus on today. Keep it short, so you aren't tempted to skip it. Look over what tasks are on your list, and move 3 important tasks and 3 admin tasks to your Today list (or whatever number works for you). This is the time to check your calendar to see if there are any appointments to account for. Basically, it's a short planning and prioritization session, so you know what to focus on for today. **Related skill:** add things to your task list and calendar when you think of them!
3. **Focus sessions.** Use this to tackle the items on your Today list. Three important tasks on your today list? Pick the first one first (no putting it off!), and do a focus session with it. It might be a tough task, so just do 10-20 minutes of the task, as tiny a start as you can. In this way, you're practicing starting and staying focused. Take a break when your timer goes off (after 15 minutes, let's say), walk around, stretch. Then do another focus session, finishing the task if you can, or moving on to the next one if you are done with the first task. You can do the same kind of thing for less important tasks — a focus session for processing your email inbox or paying bills, for example.
4. **Uncertainty meditation.** This is a bit trickier to remember, but I believe you can do it if you put a visual reminder around you (like a little note to yourself) ... basically, any

time you're feeling like shutting down, procrastinating, distracting yourself, etc. ... notice that you're feeling uncertainty. Then pause and do a meditation for just a few moments: drop your awareness into your body, notice the physical feelings of the uncertainty, open your heart to feeling it, notice that you're OK in the middle of uncertainty, and stay with it with gentleness and friendliness for just a little longer. This kind of practice will transform your relationship with uncertainty, fear and discomfort — you won't get rid of them (that's not the goal), but will train yourself to be OK in the middle of them, without needing to run, avoid, shut down, control, exit or complain. That's huge, and worth a little practice

5. **Review: To iterate & improve.** Each day, take 10 minutes to review how your day went. How did you do with your structure? Did you do your morning task list session? Your focus sessions? Your uncertainty meditation? Make a few notes, about what victories you had, what got in the way, how you can adjust going forward. If you have an accountability partner, send them a few lines with that review. Doing a short weekly review is a good idea too. These reviews serve as a way to understand what works for you and what patterns get in the way, and to adjust so that you're constantly getting better and better over time.

Expand: Over time, the focus sessions, uncertainty meditation and other structure will get easier. Then try practicing some of the other skills above, including embracing the Shitty First Draft, taking full responsibility, working and communicating open-heartedly with others, improving your structure as needed.

OK! This little handbook, if put into practice, will take you a long way to getting better at Getting Stuff Done. But you have to put it into practice. Get an accountability partner so you don't neglect the practice.

Take action. Enjoy the process. Be mindful in the middle of the chaos of your day. And don't forget to appreciate the miracle of the day you've been given.