



How many items are on your to-do list that are not yet crossed off, but have been there for more than a month?

Between emails marked as “to read,” items marked as “to do,” and phone calls and appointments you have to make, it’s often stressful to consider all of the unfinished business that follows you around every day. It’s stressful because our brains have a tendency to get stuck on uncompleted tasks. A famous study from 1927 called the “Zeigarnick Effect” cites this phenomenon, and notes that the brain simply wants us to finish what we started, and when we leave tasks unfinished, the brain won’t forget – and will nag us with intrusive thoughts until we complete the task at hand.

So how DO you finish your unfinished business? The truth is you may not ever get everything done. What you may not realize is – that may be OK. Perhaps deciding not to do the thing that’s on your list is the way to cross it off – and allow your brain to get off your back about it. What’s NOT ok is that these to-do items are taking up space in your mind and pestering you that there are still uncompleted tasks – each time you look at your to-do list. That is stressful – unnecessarily stressful.

Ready to put your brain at ease and once-and-for-all focus your energy on the most important things you have to get done? Follow these seven steps to cross off those items and find relief from the shackles of your to-do list.

## **Step 1: Brain Dump**

Schedule 20 – 30 minutes and to do a brain dump of every single task that requires your attention. Add everything from your daily errands, meetings, classes, and workouts to those one-off projects and tasks like writing your book, studying for your boards, launching your website, scheduling a dentist appointment, or cleaning out your closet.

## **Step 2: Mark Your High Priorities**

Review your list and make a note beside any items that need to be done in the next week. Also, write down an estimate of how long that task will take you (be truthful and realistic here.)

## **Step 3: Mark Your Second-Tier Priorities**

What needs to get done in the next few weeks to a month? Make note of those, too, along with time estimate as you did in step 2.

## **Step 4: Choose Items to Ditch**

We consider this to be the most important step of the process – and possibly the most difficult. Have some of these items been haunting you for too long? Comb through your list and consciously decide which items no longer feel important, given how many other high-priority items there are.

Take them off your calendar and cross them off your list entirely. If that feels too difficult or aggressive, create a list of things that you decided to remove, but may want to revisit down the road. Put that list completely out of sight since you know you're not planning to tackle them anytime soon.

Don't take this step lightly – the more items you can place in this category, the more bandwidth you will have for your other to-dos and the more weight can be removed from your shoulders.

## **Step 5: Review the Remaining Items**

What's left? Does anything need to get started in the next month? If not, make yourself a note on your calendar to re-assess that item in a month—at which point you can decide to remove the item or schedule it for a later time. Either way, it's coming off of your current to-do list and away from your thoughts for at least a month.

## **Step 6: Task Stack**

Can any of your to-dos get stacked or be completed simultaneously? For example, can you pay your bills while you're waiting for your daughter at her ballet class? Can you go grocery shopping on the way home from the dentist? Can you listen to the audiobook you need to read for class while working out? Stack and group tasks according to what makes them most efficient.

## **Step 7: Schedule It**

Now that you have your tasks prioritized and stacked together, go ahead and plug into your calendar when you plan to complete each task. Make sure to pad a little bit of time to complete and transition between items.

Bottom line: if you have too many items on your to-do list, nothing will get done. Not only that, you are at risk for feeling constant guilt for not completing these items, and a constant sense of "I have a lot to do." We don't want that.

So go ahead and give yourself permission to cross the things off your list. Your mind will thank you for the sense of relief and ability to rest.