

How to get things done

• DR. BATYA L. LUDMAN

I recently recounted a recurrent dream to a friend. I've dreamt I'm having a bubble bath on a Friday afternoon and suddenly there's a knock on the apartment door. In walk my Shabbat guests. I'm horrified to discover that while relaxing in my bathtub, without a care in the world, I've yet to begin my cooking. On awakening, the dream feels very real, until I remind myself that I typically shower and do most of my Shabbat cooking on Thursday, though there's still lots to do on Friday. I typically don't procrastinate, so while realizing that the dream could not possibly be real, it strikes me as somewhat funny.

Years ago, walking into my neighbor's apartment on a Friday afternoon, I'd watch her looking into her cupboard, contemplating what to make for Shabbat only a few hours away. While I found this stressful, she calmly served a delicious, fresh meal to her family. Likewise, on a Wednesday afternoon, she would be shocked to discover me peeling veggies, preparing for Shabbat. Things have averaged out: now we both cook on Thursday, each making it work, laughing about those days. While there's always the worry that one might be caught unprepared, discover their guests have dietary restrictions, or find themselves with additional last-minute guests, most women I know could feed an IDF battalion on short notice.

Many people dream of being unprepared – being late for class, forgetting to study for a test, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or being hopelessly lost. I don't put a lot of emphasis on dreams in my practice, though I do help people with motivation, organization, procrastination, anxiety and fear, all underpinnings of these dreams and very much connected.

It seems to be that time of year when many referrals have focused on stress and anxiety. These are often easy to treat because you can't feel calm and anxious simultaneously, and it's quite easy to teach someone how to become calm. Stressed about your "New Year's resolutions" or lack thereof? Here are some suggestions for restoring calm, getting motivated and working towards sweet dreams!

1. Identify your potential stressors – large and small. Be very specific and notice how they make you feel.
2. Get started. Decide what needs to be done, visualize it and devise an action plan.
3. Make a "to do" list. List anything and everything. Use paper and pen so your brain fully appreciates crossing out completed items. Prioritize what must be completed first. Your immediate goal is to focus on the first three items. Put the rest of the list away



(Rob and Stephanie Levy/Flickr)

until these are finished. If you're feeling motivated, start with a more difficult item that you want to get out of the way. Then reward your productivity with something easier on your list. If that feels overwhelming, or you find yourself procrastinating, pick an easy item and enjoy a quick success. Then tackle the harder items.

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4. Reward yourself for any and every task completed. Often, we notice only the big things. The small steps that went into the process are just as important. Appreciate the positives and literally pat yourself on the back, for example, because on a busy day, the laundry was gathered, loaded into the machine, dried and sorted. Don't wait until it's put away. Children, too, benefit from being praised for the small things. While you're at it, find ways to outsource tasks to others when relevant.

5. Whether cooking, preparing for an exam or cleaning the house, break each project down into small manageable components and you'll be amazed by what you can accomplish. If you enter a room and see it as overwhelmingly messy, you'll walk back out, having given up. But if you decide that you'll realistically tackle half a bookshelf you'll be more enthusiastic about organizing the other half, even if you choose to wait until tomorrow.

6. Put cellphones and other distractions into a drawer and use them as a reward after a predetermined amount of work is completed.

7. Designate a time to look at, and respond to, emails, mail, phone calls and texts. Try to handle each message only once to save time. The Internet takes up more time than you think.

8. Fake it 'till you make it. Sure, you may not feel like doing something, but sometimes you just have to, and not doing it may exact a greater cost. I had a client who was putting off opening a letter, yet carrying it around made her anxious. I told her that together we'd handle her worst-case scenario. Reluctantly opening it, she discovered it was such a nothing, and then opened the second letter that had also been causing her much distress. What we imagine is often so much worse than the reality. Putting things off only increases our stress. Feeling so pleased that this was behind her, it strengthened her desire to stop procrastinating, and greatly reduced her anxiety.

9. If you wake at night with lists in your head, write your concerns on a notepad kept by the bed and let them go until morning. With nothing else to do about them in the middle of the night, they'll feel less significant tomorrow.

10. Since you can't be relaxed and anxious simultaneously, learn calming techniques. They're easy and will enhance your concentration, help you get things accomplished, will improve your relationship with others, and are critical to better physical and emotional well-being.

11. Maintain a work-friendly environment. This literally allows you to breathe, have more energy and be focused. A neat play area for children, a well-organized desk that makes it easier to do homework, and a clutter-free workspace make it easier to accomplish tasks. Put one set of toys away before another comes out, keep small pieces together, and teach your children to clean up after themselves.

12. Make your bed as soon as you get out of it and teach your children to do the same. Reward them for their little successes and praise them for "trying." Enlist the kids to get involved by not doing for them what they're able to do themselves. Their pride in their accomplishments will be enormous.

Take a step toward change: Use organization and motivation to better enjoy how you use your time. These are minutes or hours that you will never get back. Do you really want to waste them? ■

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