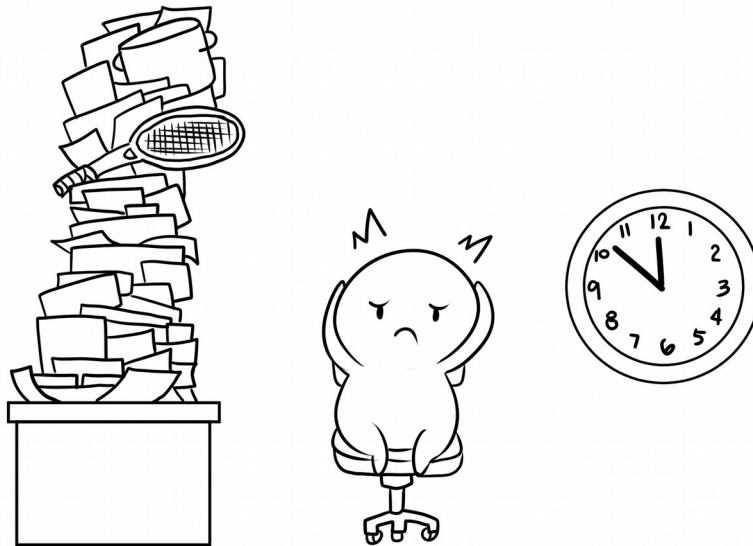




How to Do
THE MOST IMPORTANT THING
Right Now

for a more meaningful,
stress-free life



We are all living in an increasingly busy world. Unfortunately, time is a finite resource. There are only 24 hours in each day and there are only so many things that you can get done in those 24 hours. That's true – even if you work very hard, deep into the night, every day. When you do work that hard, you will soon feel how limited time actually is.

Unfortunately, the number of tasks on our to-do lists seem pretty much infinite. When you've completed one thing, another five things come along in quick succession. And when you start to think about it carefully, often lying in bed at three a.m. in the morning, there are many things that you would like to accomplish but never get around to. There are those friends you keep meaning to visit, that broken shelf that needs fixing, and those contracts that need sending out. And that's just on your immediate to-do list! Whatever happened to Spanish lessons, or that new business venture, or learning to play the piano, or escaping on a romantic weekend to Paris?

Our lives today are often dominated by these two opposing forces: finite time vs. infinite tasks. This combination leads to unhappy, stressful lives with little sense of purpose. If you want to get off that treadmill, then it's time to make a change!

I have a question for you.

What is more important to you in the long run: Finishing your never-ending to-do list, or living a full, meaningful life where you get time to meet friends, start a new business, or develop things that are important to you?

Start making a change

Start by looking at yourself in the mirror, or sitting somewhere quietly, or just phasing out at your desk for a bit. Now take a deeeep breath, and repeat after me:

You will NEVER get everything done!

That's right.

Repeat this for a while until it starts to sink in. Breathe a sigh of relief; you can take that pressure off your shoulders. Your brain and the brains of the people around you can conjure up new tasks, ideas, and projects at lightning speed. New tasks will appear on your to-do list much faster than you can finish them. However hard you work, you will never be able to finish or accomplish everything on your to-do list. You are welcome to spend the rest of your life trying. But is that really how you want to use the precious time you have on this planet?

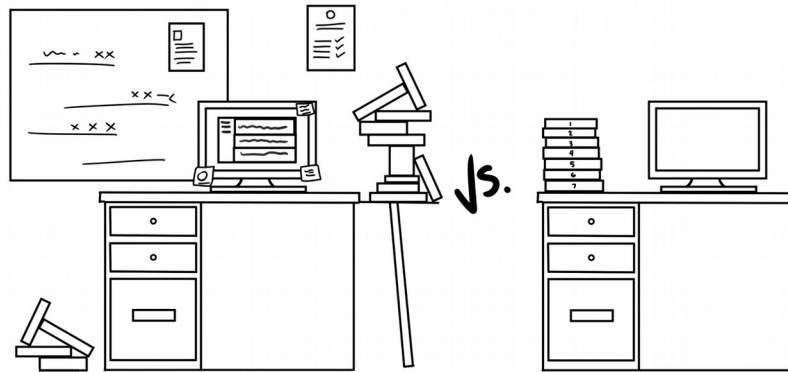
So how can you overcome this problem? It requires a small change to your approach: Your job is NOT to get everything done. Getting everything done is impossible and you will waste your life trying. Instead, at every point in your life, aim to do the one MOST IMPORTANT THING right now.

When you always do the MOST IMPORTANT THING right now (and we'll show you how), then you can leave work at the end of the day in the knowledge that you've done enough. And you can rest easy at the end of the week in the knowledge that you have put your time to good use. As you continue working in this way, you will notice that your life takes on new meaning and direction as you start to accomplish the goals that really matter to you.

Has the thought ever occurred to you, when you were working on something: This really isn't important right now? I'm sure it has happened more than once. And did you act on that thought or carry on regardless?

In this book, we invite you to change the way you work. Before you start the next task on your to-do list, pause for a moment . Make a very conscious decision to work on the MOST IMPORTANT THING right now.

Step 1: Get organised



Start off by getting organised. Collect all your to-do items in a single place. You don't need a new tool to do it; use something you are already comfortable with. The trick is to be consistent and add all your to-do items to the same place. Only when you have all your tasks in one place can you go through all of them and decide with clarity which one is the MOST IMPORTANT THING right now.

Don't get too hung up about the choice of to-do list technology at this point. Anything and everything will work. What is most important is your own consistency. Make it easy for yourself by using something that you are already familiar with.

Here are some tools that have worked for people in the past -- and you will see that I use the word 'tool' very loosely!

- Online tools like Trello, Asana, Evernote
- Apps like Wunderlist, Google Keep, Remember the Milk, Todoist
- A spreadsheet
- A to-do list in Outlook
- A notebook and pen (yes, people still use these!)
- Post-it notes on a wall
- A filofax
- A chalkboard or dry-erase wall
- A roll of toilet paper (ok, I just made that one up, but it could work!)

Some tough love: If you spend the next 3 weeks researching to-do list apps, then you are not actually moving forward!

Okay, so you've chosen your tool, what do you do next?

It's very simple: Sit down for a while and write down everything that is on your current to do lists – be they in your head or in any other place. Collect all those scribbled pieces of paper off your desk and collect those half-finished to-do lists on your computer. Compile a single super to-do list that includes everything that comes to mind.

From this point onward, whenever you have a new idea, or a new request comes in, or a phone call results in a new task, that task goes on to your single to-do list, your single point of truth. If it's not on there, it is not going to get done!

Step 2: Pick the MOST IMPORTANT THING



It's time for you and your super-to do list to become best of friends. At the end of each day*, before you head home, sit down with your list. Make yourself a cup of tea and review what you accomplished that day. Add anything that is still buzzing through your mind to the list. And then prioritise the list so that the MOST IMPORTANT THING is sitting right at the top. Keep going until you feel that the top priority items are at the top of the list. This is going to become your next day's workload, so continue until it feels right. Then pat yourself on the back and go home.

**I say every single day because that seems to work well for most people juggling busy lives. If you deal with longer running tasks or simply don't have as much activity going on, then weekly reviews or even longer breaks can also work. If you have new tasks coming in constantly, then you might have to review more often. It largely depends on how many tasks are added to your to do list during a normal day. Experiment to find your own personal sweet spot!*

Feel your way forward

Feelings are key to the review process because choosing the MOST IMPORTANT THING is subjective. What is important to you is perhaps not very important to your boss. Try to stay in touch with your emotions while going through each task. Sometimes you might feel resistance – ask yourself why that is. Are you reacting to other people's priorities rather than your own? Are you postponing something that you've wanted to achieve for a long time? This is an opportunity to be honest. Where are you spending your time? What is behind your choices?

Detect patterns

As you go through your list day after day, you will start to notice certain patterns.

Those Spanish lessons you've been meaning to take keep cropping up untouched. *Is it finally time to book your place or should you say a gentle goodbye to that plan?*

Or that sales contract that keeps sitting near the top of the list but never gets actioned. *Perhaps it's time to delegate to a colleague or pay for a contractor to handle it?*

It is in your conscious dealing with these patterns, and in the habits that form out of the decisions you make, that real change will start to take place.

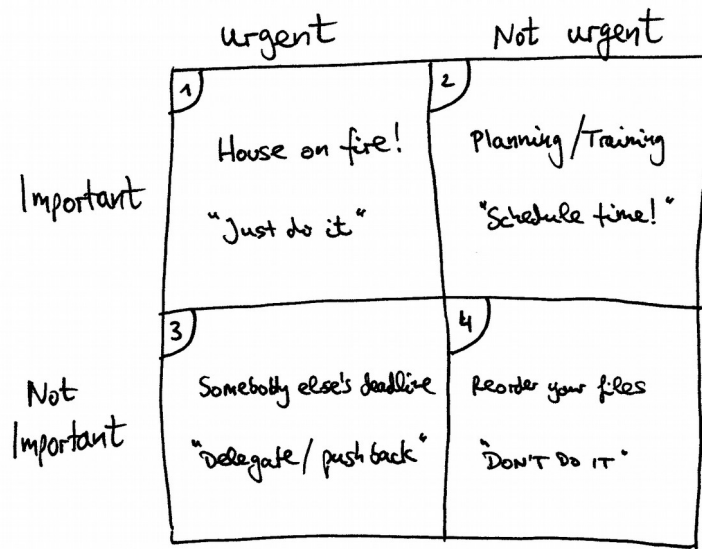
Regain control

With your super to-do list at your side as your new best friend, your working day becomes a breeze. When you finish a task, just pick the next one from the top of your list. You've prioritised it carefully, so you will always be working on the MOST IMPORTANT THING. At the end of the day, when you review progress and plan the day ahead, you will soon feel a surge of accomplishment. It may seem like a small change, but that feeling of productivity and empowerment can have a dramatic effect on your life. Small steps lead to big changes.

Picking from your prioritised super to-do list stands in stark contrast to how many people work. Many of us react almost entirely to outside stimulus. We let the ping of the inbox or the ring-ring of the telephone govern what we do next. Our own priorities (or those of the business we work for) are left by the roadside. More importantly, we as people don't feel that we are in control of our own lives. That's the real tragedy and leads to stressful existences where you never really get done what you set out to accomplish. It's time to regain control and move towards a happier, more fulfilled life!

A helping hand – the priority matrix

During your regular reviews, you will need to prioritise the tasks in your to-do list. This is easier said than done. To give you a helping hand, we'd like to share this famous productivity matrix with you. Keep this at hand during your review sessions and categorise each task.



If you haven't seen it before, the matrix helps you categorise tasks into one of four groups:

1. **The urgent AND important tasks.** These are 'house on fire' type tasks that simply need to get done, no matter what. When I say 'house on fire', I really mean '**your** house on fire'. If somebody else's house is on fire, then it's up to you how 'important' you deem that to be.

Strategy: Once you've decided that something is urgent and important, then you have no choice but to get it done as quickly as possible.

If your entire day is spent dealing with these types of tasks, then you need to start spending time in Quadrant 2 to come up with systems or processes to reduce the amount of urgent + important tasks that come your way. If you're always fire-fighting you'll never get anything else done!

2. **The not urgent BUT important tasks.** This is where the good stuff happens. Spending time in this quadrant can lead to positive changes in your life. We like to think of this as time invested in your future. As such, it's where you should ideally spend a lot of your time -- but it's also the quadrant that comes under most pressure from the other three.

An example: Imagine you spend a lot of time each day sending out quotes to customers. That is clearly an urgent + important task and therefore lives in Quadrant 1. During your daily reviews of your to-do list, you realise that you send out so many quotes each day that you barely have time for anything else. You decide to spend some time refining the quotation process -- perhaps creating a few template emails will save you 50% of the time. This refinement task is very important but not urgent. It lives in Quadrant 2. You share the results with your colleagues, so they don't bother you as much to help with their own quotes. This is a typical example of how spending some time in Quadrant 2 can change all other quadrants for the better.

Strategy: Schedule in specific, protected, undisturbed time for not urgent BUT important tasks. This is the cornerstone of moving forward with your own life and changing it for the better.

3. **The urgent BUT not important tasks.** I should say here that these tasks are not important **to you**. They are very important to somebody else and unfortunately that person decided to try and make them important to you. The result: A task that is now urgent for you but not actually important as far as you are concerned.

An example: A colleague comes to you at four p.m. and hands you a folder. A quote needs to go out that day but unfortunately they have to leave early to go to the dentist. *Can you quickly pick it up please?* Or your boss suddenly rushes in to your office -- she forgot to get the presentation ready for the day ahead. It needs to be finished by ten a.m. the next day before she leaves for the airport. I'm not saying that these are easy to refuse. They are both examples of other people's priorities that have suddenly become urgent tasks for you.

Strategy: These are the sort of tasks that need to be pushed back or delegated. They have a tendency to multiply because people start to see you as a reliable ally who can pick up work that they themselves weren't able to finish.

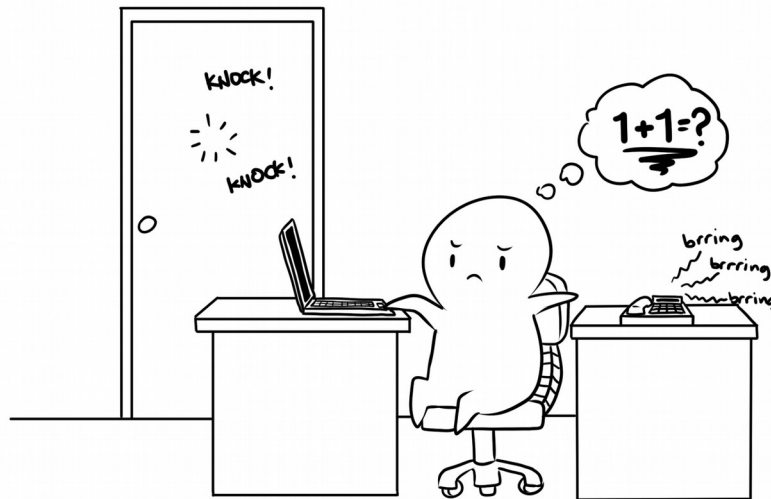
If you find that a majority of your work falls into the category of urgent BUT not important, then it's worth scheduling time in Quadrant 2 to look at your relationships and the expectations others have developed of you. Perhaps it's time to say 'No' a bit more often? Or perhaps thirty minutes spent training your colleagues on how to use a particular piece of software could save you all sorts of grief in the future.

4. **The not urgent AND not important tasks.** This is perhaps the most human category in the matrix. It collects all the tasks that we conjure up to fill our time when we could be working on something much more important. Facebook browsing falls into this category; but it's also other things, like meetings with no particular purpose, checking email constantly during the day, researching to-do list apps when you already have all the correct tools at your disposal. As the famous song says, "A little less conversation, a little more action please."

Strategy: It's simple: Don't do it! Time spent in Quadrant 4 is generally a waste of your time. If you feel that you need a break, then go for a walk, meditate, read a book or go home early. Don't fill those precious hours with not urgent AND not important tasks.

If you feel that you're spending most of your time in this quadrant, and also feel frustrated that you don't seem to be achieving the things you set out to achieve, then it's worth taking a closer look at your motivations and goals in life. Nobody is going to judge your life choices but why be frustrated by something unnecessarily? A conscious look at how you spend your time can change things for the better.

Step 3: Dealing with interruptions



I know what you're thinking: You've shown me how to prioritise my to-do list but I don't live in isolation on top of a mountain! I get 100 emails per day, the phone rings off the hook and colleagues can't tie their own shoelaces without my help. How can I cope?

Luckily, deep down, you already know what the answer is:

1. Deal with the interruption as quickly as possible.
2. Add the resulting task to your to-do list.
3. Continue working on the MOST IMPORTANT THING.

(And, a tough love #4: Don't create your own interruptions by checking emails constantly or leaving your phone on when you want to concentrate on something else.)

Let's go through each step.

Deal with the interruption as quickly as possible

It's really important not to let the interruption derail what you are working on right now. It doesn't mean you need to be rude, just deal with it as quickly as possible under the circumstances.

When you delegate or push back on a task, the key question to ask is:

“What time do you need it by?”

You can ask this question when speaking to a colleague, or via email or on the phone. And of course you can ask yourself that same question when a new task pops into your head. After all, not all interruptions come from the outside!

The answer will help you decide very quickly where to add the task in your to-do list. (Because of course, by now, you will add things to your to-do list and not start working on them immediately, right?)

Add the resulting task to your to do list

By asking “What time do you need it by?”, you can decide very quickly where the task goes on your to-do list:

Tasks that need doing TODAY go to the top of your to-do list. Once you've finished what you're working on, the new task becomes the MOST IMPORTANT THING.

Tasks that can wait at least until TOMORROW go to the bottom of your to-do list, along with a note of their due date. They will be picked up in your daily review.

Continue working on the MOST IMPORTANT THING

You have dealt with the interruption in the best way possible -- well done. Your to-do list system will make sure that the task is not lost. Now forget all about it, take a deep breath, and launch back into the task that you were already working on. It's your MOST IMPORTANT THING after all!

Now it's YOUR turn...

Reading an ebook is one thing; taking action is a different matter.

To take the next step, print out this page and the next page. Fill in the gaps and work through each step. Good luck!

Be sure to share your experiences and questions with us! We're here to help and look forward to hearing from you. Just send an email to bernie@berniejmitchell.com, we'd love to hear from you.

Preparation

1. I will keep my single to do list using this tool:

2. Sit down and compile your first to do list in your chosen tool.

DONE

3. Print out the next page and fill in the gaps. Keep it by your desk to keep you on the right track and to help you make quick decisions.

Your Action Plan

Do THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Review and Prioritise

I will review my to-do list:

Daily Weekly _____

at/on _____

eg: Daily at 4:45pm, before going home from work, with a cup of tea.

Priority Matrix

	urgent	not urgent
important	less of this	more of this
not important	delegate, say 'No'	avoid

Dealing with Interruptions

