

How To Only Do Things You Actually Want To Do by Christine Carter

Can you remember the last time your to-do list was short enough to be, well, do-able? How about the last time you looked at your list and actually wanted to do everything on it?

Earlier this spring, I started getting loads of requests for help managing too-long task lists, and so I published this process for organizing them. Ineffective task lists make us feel like we have too much to do in too little time, which makes us feel overwhelmed. Ironically, this makes us worse at planning and managing our time.

You might have a perfectly organized task list, though, that is still triggering overwhelm—I just went through one with a client, and frankly I was exhausted just looking at it. If your task list is sending you into an “I don’t have enough time to do all this” tailspin, it’s time to whittle that puppy down into something more manageable.

This is a different process than organizing your to-do list, or formatting it in a more effective way. This is about shortening that list—dumping the stuff you dread—without suffering the consequences of not doing what you actually have to do to get done.

In an ideal world, we would all be able to apply Marie Kondo’s world-famous principles for cleaning out our closet to our to-do list: Anything that doesn’t “spark joy” we put in the trash (delete) or give away (delegate). Most of my clients start off with very little on their task list that they look forward to doing; one recently declared that she only puts stuff on her to-do list that she doesn’t want to do, because she remembers to do what she actually wants to do.

So here’s how to transform a too-long to-do list into a list of only the things that you actually want to do:

1. Highlight all the items on your to-do list that you dread doing

Hold each task list item in your mind’s eye, and notice how it feels to think about doing that item in your body. Do you lean forward a little, feeling a longing to get right to that task? (Don’t highlight items that feel like that.) Or do you get a sinking feeling in your stomach, with a corresponding desire to put the task off as long as possible? Highlight anything that makes you feel anything akin to aversion.

Highlight all the things that you’ve been procrastinating on because you simply don’t want to do them. And highlight the things that are on your list because you feel like you “should” do them, or because you feel like you have to do them, but that you

don't want to do or wouldn't say you are choosing to do (or wouldn't say with some delight that you "get" to do).

In other words, highlight the things you plan to do simply because someone expects you to do them, or because you've always expected yourself to do those things, or because doing them would bring you status or power (but no actual joy in the process).

2. Delete or delegate as many highlighted items as you possibly can

Start by deleting, then move on to delegating. Be truthful here; if you know in your heart of hearts that you'll probably never do a task item anyway, or that there will be little consequence if you don't do a highlighted item on your list, just scratch it off the list and be done with it.

You may feel relieved, or even accomplished (given that your list is getting shorter so quickly!). Or, you may feel anxious or even sad while doing this. Acknowledge your emotions, whatever they may be, as you madly delete items from your task list. Be curious about whatever you are feeling, and accepting of your emotions—but no need to get involved in them.

Maybe you need to mourn (a little tiny bit) the fact that you are never going to make those photo albums (that you hate making but really felt like you should make). It's normal to feel sad, or a sense of regret—but also, be real: You aren't grieving anything tangible; you're grieving the loss of a fantasy. For example, you're giving up the fantasy that you are the type of person who makes photo albums. Or who writes strategic plans. Or who answers every single email. Oh, well. Let yourself feel what you feel, and move on. This is a process of letting go.

If a highlighted task is something that absolutely does need to be done and thus can't just be deleted, try to think of someone else who'd actually enjoy doing it, and make a plan for how you can delegate it to that person. If you don't have an assistant or employees or children to delegate to, consider neighborhood teens and retirees who'd like experience, your company, or a little extra cash. Or, think of people who need help with something you enjoy doing, and negotiate a trade with them.

All of this may seem like a lot more work than just doing the task yourself, but I promise, you will thank me later. Having a task list that is both short enough to not be overwhelming and that is loaded with things you'll enjoy doing is worth the initial inefficiency.

3. Transform anything left on your list that is highlighted into something that you actually want to do

If you can't delete or delegate tasks that you dread, then you'll have to make them better. Be creative. My favorite way to do this is to pair a not-fun task item with something you want to do more of. I've been known to sit on the lawn in the sun and make doctor appointments, and I listen to fun audiobooks while driving to pick up kids and while cleaning the house (I just listened to *A Year of Yes* by Shonda Rhimes and I highly recommend it). My co-worker and I have been putting off reviewing our financial systems for, oh, years, but we just made a plan to do it together this summer poolside. There will be margaritas involved, and, needless to say, we aren't dreading the task anymore!

Understanding the value a task has for other people is another good way to make it more

fulfilling (thus decreasing the dread factor). In a stunning series of studies, Adam Grant found that briefly showing people how their work helps others increases not only how happy people are on the job but also how much they work and accomplish.

Grant's most famous series of studies were conducted at a call center with paid fundraisers tasked with phoning potential donors to a public university. As anyone who's ever dreaded making a cold call knows, these people probably did not have the to-do list of their dreams. People receiving cold calls from solicitors are often annoyed and can be downright rude. Employees must endure frequent rejection on the phone and low morale at the office—all in exchange for relatively low pay. Not surprisingly, call center jobs often have a high staff turnover rate.

In an effort to see if he could motivate call center fundraisers to stay on the job longer, Grant brought in a few scholarship students (who presumably had benefited from the fundraisers' work) for a five-minute meeting where callers could ask them questions about their classes and experience at the university. In the next month, that quick conversation yielded unbelievable results. Callers who had met the scholarship students spent twice as long on the phone as the fundraisers who had not met any students. They accomplished far more, bringing in an average of 171 percent more money.

What made the difference? What, essentially, shifted the task of making cold calls from one people didn't enjoy to one that they did? A shift in the callers' beliefs about the meaning of their work for other people, and an increased sense of their purpose, value, and impact. So find out what value your work has for other people. How are you making their lives or jobs better?

Voila!

You've just Marie Kondo-ed your task list! Everything left on it is now the stuff you actually want to do, the tasks that "spark joy." If you're like my client who doesn't need to keep a list of the things she wants to do, you no longer need to keep a to-do list at all—you just need to remember to delete, delegate, or transform the things you don't want to do.