

# Do One Thing

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Everywhere I look, my women friends seem to have the same expressions on their faces—harried, worn down, exhausted. They all tell me the same things—they have no time for themselves or for the things they love to do. I feel the same, and I've been writing about it here in this magazine, trying to figure out—essay by essay—how to set better boundaries, set better goals and create more space for myself.

As I wrote in my column last month, "Something incredible has been happening on the pages of this magazine lately, a small revolution, if you've been paying attention. We have been fighting—for women's right to their own time." I've written about striving for the middle lane (instead of the fast lane), and about resisting the urge to save everyone around us like some kind of superhero. Editor Kelly J. Baker wrote about embracing the concept of slack and giving ourselves a break. And I wrote about guarding an empty piece of your life's pie chart, the space that belongs to you and you alone, the one that allows you to thrive.

## Ignoring Makes It Worse

Lately, and not just because of the holidays and the aftermath, I have found it very difficult to get things done. My to-do list, I joke, is trying to kill me. But as someone who suffers from depression, that kind of joke takes on a morbid cast. Sometimes when I look at my to-do list I just want to sink back into bed and stay there. At that point, I've thought, I'm going to relax today and not work. I'm going to take a break from this pile of to-dos, even the ones with deadlines.

But I've found that if I ignore my list of things I need to do, by, say, binge-reading my favorite books, I don't feel better at the end of the day. I feel far worse. What I'm doing, of course, is procrastinating. As a person prone to anxiety and depression, the technical term is "avoidance coping"—burying my face in a book to distract me from the world.

And avoidance coping isn't great for you, even if you think you're relaxing. In "Avoidance Coping and Why It Creates Additional Stress," Elizabeth Scott writes that "it often exacerbates stress without helping us deal with the things that are stressing us. Procrastination, for example, is an avoidance coping mechanism: we feel stressed when we think about what we have to do, so we avoid doing it and try to avoid thinking about it."

## The Breakdown Lane

When I emerge from my binge read, is my life any better? Do I feel any more relaxed or mindful? No, not really. I haven't mindfully decided to not work. I've *avoided* my work by ignoring it. And when I come out of this period of avoidance, the work I need to do is even more late. There are even more things that need doing.

More laundry and more dishes. More articles to write. More chapters to revise. The hole is even deeper than before.

Sometimes when you're buried under work, you might think you need to be more productive. The thing is, when you're productive, you don't have less work. You have more. I used to be productive. I got a hell of a lot done in a day, week, and month. But that just meant more work came my way. How does the saying go? When you want something done, ask a busy person?

I'd run myself into the ground—into the breakdown lane. I couldn't do anything at all. But not doing anything at all meant that my responsibilities piled up and made me feel worse.

## Only One Thing

So, I tried something new. I cut myself some slack. I looked at my to-do list and said, "Just choose one thing. Do that one thing. Then you can be done for the whole day."

And I did one thing. One draft of one essay or chapter. One task. One thing. It sounds unsustainable; I realize that. But what was worse was doing absolutely nothing, which was where I was at before.

So, I did one thing. And I felt a lot better. Then, I played with my kids, and I read a novel.

Then I looked at my to-do list. And I picked one more thing. And I did that.

That first day, I only did two things, which was two more things than I'd done the day before.

More important, when I feel overwhelmed and beat down by the work in

front of me, or by the news, or by the particular challenges in my life (which are beyond the scope of this column), I don't have to let all the work go. I can pick one single thing to do. I can do that one thing, and that one thing holds the avalanche at bay.

When my motivation has abandoned me because I'm in a low mood, I can do one thing. Sometimes doing the one thing will help my mood and sometimes it won't, but that's actually irrelevant. The point is, things won't get worse. Because I've done *something*.

One webpage revision. One client proposal. One invoice.

If I can heave the boulder forward just one inch, then I've done something. Tomorrow, the boulder might be a pebble I can put in my pocket and run with—I can't know that today. But on a boulder day, I don't have to lift. I don't ignore it either. Just one inch.

Just one thing. Today. 📖

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