

How to Finish

by Alan Brown

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE ADAGE: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, of course!” It’s true, and it’s simple—a big endeavor is intimidating, but tackling it one step at a time helps you realize progress and ultimately cross that finish line.

I’d always felt this advice lacked some nuance that would give it some emotional life for me. (I’m big on firing up emotion to compensate for my ADHD-related, skimpy motivational fuel.) I could never turn the saying into a powerful mental habit. Then I found a “brain hack” that makes it work almost every time.

Before I get into my enhanced twist on the elephant maxim, let’s briefly review why we who have ADHD need to heed the advice:

- First, we are the chronic non-starters of things. You could say that our to-do lists are more like to-don’t-do lists, given our proclivity to procrastinate.
- We tend to pacify ourselves with the illusion of taking action when we’re really just shuffling tasks around between to-do lists, sticky notes, and napkin scribbles.
- We’re also the chronic non-finishers of things. Even once legitimate work has begun, we lack the motivational fuel to see projects through to completion (a subject on which Dr. Russell Barkley waxes poetic and scientific).
- We are intimidated—paralyzed at times—by the mere *thought* of what’s involved in finishing a big project.

That last bullet is the key. For years I’ve been a student of my own psychological and physiological reactions to daunting tasks—the ones that require linear planning (yuck!), lots of deep, uninterrupted thought (who can do *that!*), or have multiple moving parts, both seen and unseen (now I just want to cry).

Just thinking about these kinds of to-dos sets off psychological defenses (“Maybe I’ll just do something

easier first... like check my emails... again”), and physiological conspirators (increased stress and cortisol production, reduction of oxygen to the brain). A perfect recipe for procrastination—the very thought of *having to finish* triggers paralysis.

Then I heard psychologist Neil Fiore wrap the whole thing up so neatly, if brutally, that my brain jumped for joy. In his book, *The Now Habit*, Dr. Fiore says, “Worrying about finishing is a form of perfectionism. Your failed attempts at finishing when you do take up the task *reinforce* your belief that the task is *unfinishable*.”

Wow. That nuance took the elephant thing to a new level of clarity for me. And my “brain hack” is simply this: Don’t even *think* about finishing. In fact, intentionally give yourself permission NOT to finish. Tell yourself, I will NOT finish this, and that is okay.

Psychologically, this frees you up to start. Why? Because you’ve re-characterized the project from an unfinishable monster to a small bite that even you, of the non-finishing tribe, can take on with confidence and even post a small victory. A thing of joy rather than a thing of “Oy!”

Every time you do start, *get excited and be happy* that you’ve moved from paralysis to action. That alone is awesome; not just because you’ve taken charge, but also because the insights required to actually *finish* a complex task only come into view when the doing has begun.

Go forth and do—by starting. **A**

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ADDITIONAL READING

Neil Fiore, PhD, *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play*, Tarcher, 2007.

a Task *(Hint: Don't Even Think About It)*

AN EXERCISE IN DOING

I've covered the emotional piece of getting things done. Now let me profess my evangelism for DOING. When you learn something new (hopefully something you're reading right now is resonating), it's useless until you begin the *doing* of it. So here's your first exercise in *doing*:

1. Identify one of the biggest, baddest, ugliest to-dos on your to-don't-do list.
2. Rewrite that to-do on one clean sticky note, and get everything else off your working surface. It's just you and that one to-do right now (and maybe a laptop or notebook).
3. Get in the now—acknowledge there is no immediate pressing problem that needs your attention (because if there were, you'd already be attending to it rather than reading this).
4. Look at that to-do and tell yourself, "I do NOT have to finish anything. All I have to do is start. And in fact, if I just start, I'll call that a victory."
5. Set a timer for twenty minutes and START. If you can stay on that task for the full twenty, great. If you can't, you still score yourself a success.

Dr. Neil Fiore says, "Keep starting—finishing will take care of itself.
If you must worry, worry about starting,
never worry about finishing."

