

## Suggestions for Focusing in a Chaotic Environment

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This document is intended for my coaching clients who are struggling to work on multiple projects in an environment full of distractions, making it difficult to get work done. This document contains a collection of suggestions from coaches and notes from the relevant sections of two books, David Allen's Getting Things Done and Julie Morgenstern's Never Check E-Mail in the Morning.

Suggestions from coaches:

1. Schedule two hours per day for heads-down time to get things done, perhaps first thing in the morning. Try to schedule it for the same time every day so that others can know what to expect.
2. Schedule some weekly quiet time as well. Perhaps work from home one day per week. Or skip the group lunch and work while your co-workers are at lunch.
3. Use a block calendar . Schedule blocks of your time for things that you need to get done. This includes scheduling "responsiveness" time, when you will follow up with people who may have previously distracted you with a request for your time.
4. To handle distractions, let calls go to voice mail, close the door, delegate, think about what is urgent versus what is important (Stephen Covey), and ask yourself "What is the single most important and valuable use of my time right now?"
5. Study and practice mindfulness (living in the moment).
6. Practice stress management techniques such as meditation, stretching, aroma or sound therapy.
7. Set and communicate limits about your workload. For example, if you've found that your performance significantly decreases when you take on more than X projects, communicate this and negotiate to keep your number of projects down to an acceptable level. Identify how many meetings per day you can reasonably attend and still get your work done, and use this information to help determine which meetings to attend and when to schedule them.
8. Monitor where your time is really going, you may be surprised.
9. Some resources: Getting Things Done by David Allen (more below), Never Check E-mail in the Morning by Julie Morgenstern (more below), Productivity Pro daytimer and books, Get Organized by Chris Crouch, [prioritymanagement.com](http://prioritymanagement.com) (like Franklin Covey but less expensive),

Resonant Leadership by Boyatzis and McKee (includes mindfulness discussion).

From Getting Things Done (GTD) by David Allen:

1. Have a trusted system to keep track of everything that you need to do, so that you don't have to keep this in your head. (Have each thought once, rather than reminding yourself that you need to do something later.) If you have a trusted system, you're less stressed.
2. For each thing that you are working on, use your system to record the next step and when you'll do it.
3. Perform regularly scheduled (daily, weekly) maintenance on your system to keep it up to date and handle quick items that aren't worth putting into the system. For every item, either do it, delegate it, or defer the identified next step to the scheduled time. (p. 32)
4. There are three kinds of work: predefined work (in the system), defining your work (system maintenance), and doing work as it shows up. When you do work as it shows up, you're deciding that it's more important than anything else you have to do. (p. 50)
5. For managing email, try having two email folders "WAITING FOR" and "ACTION", the first for tracking pending items that require someone else to act, and the second for tracking things that you need to do something about. (p. 152)
6. For handling interruptions, from pages 199-200:

You can only do one of these work activities at a time. If you stop to talk to someone in his or her office, you're not working off your lists or processing incoming stuff. The challenge is to feel confident about what you have decided to do.

So how do you decide? This again will involve your intuitive judgments - how important is the unexpected work, against the rest? How long can you let your in-basket go unprocessed and all your stuff unreviewed and trust that you're making good decisions about what to do?

People often complain about the interruptions that prevent them from doing their work. ... you must learn to dance among many tasks to keep a healthy balance of your workflow. Your choices will still have to be calibrated against your own clarity about the nature and goals of your work.

Your ability to deal with surprise is your competitive edge. But at a certain point, if you're not catching up and getting things under control, staying busy with only the work at hand will undermine your effectiveness. And ultimately, in order to know whether you should stop what you're doing and do something else, you'll need to have a

good sense of what your job requires and how that fits into the other contexts of your life. The only way you can have that is to evaluate your life and work appropriately at multiple horizons.

7. He has a model for reviewing your work at six levels: life, 3-to-5 year vision, 1-to-2 year goals, areas of responsibility, current projects, and current actions. (page 200 ff) Start with current actions and work backward (upward).
8. He talks about the source of negative feelings about getting things done. "The sense of anxiety and guilt doesn't come from having too much to do; it's the automatic result of breaking agreements with yourself." [p. 227] To avoid this, you can 1) not make the agreement, 2) complete the agreement, or 3) renegotiate the agreement.
9. Bright people procrastinate most because they "have the capability of freaking out faster and more dramatically than anyone else." [p. 240] His system is meant to avoid this by "dumbing down" what needs to be done so that you don't stress about it.

From Never Check E-Mail in the Morning, by Julie Morgenstern:

1. Prioritize your projects/tasks by figuring out how close they are to the revenue stream. Put them into three buckets: 1 step to revenue (eg customer service and product design), 2 steps to revenue (eg proposals, conferences, meetings), and 3 steps to revenue (paperwork, reading, updating files). Start with the most important tasks, those closest to the revenue line. Once you have accomplished some 1 step work, you will feel some relief and accomplishment and less stress. (p. 73)
2. For dealing with unpredictability, pages 75-76:

Keeping up with the pace and unpredictability of the workplace is a dance - it has a rhythm and a shape. Create a rhythm to your day by doing mostly ones, and then pepper it at certain points with a handful of twos and threes so that you can jump ahead on some deadlines and prime the pump for longer-range payoffs. Figure out which tasks take you the longest and which are the quick hitters.

For some people the ones take the most time, for others it's the twos and threes. ...

You can texture your days or weeks however it makes sense for the seasons of your business and for your work style. You can spend part of each day on some ones, twos, and threes. Or you can go in cycles - spending several weeks just on one-steppers, and the last week of the month on the two- and three-steppers that have been waiting for you.

But no matter what the cycles of your work, starting each day at the top and working your way out of every stressful moment will leave you feeling accomplished and centered instead of harried and downtrodden. The energy and relief that you will get from getting these things crossed off your to-do list will fuel you, boosting your productivity for the rest of the day.

Can we eliminate the amount of decisions? No! Can you calm yourself by knowing you are always making the right choice? Yes. Dance close to the revenue line and you will always be secure.

3. Chapter 4 is about creating the time to get things done. Think of the time in your day as if it is Morse code, with longer periods of work (dashes) interspersed with shorter periods (dots). For some work items, you will need longer periods of time. You will find that there is a pattern to your day, perhaps with short work periods available between meetings, and longer periods toward the beginning and end of the day. Identify the pattern and try to schedule your tasks to match it. You may need to restructure your day to make time for the dashes. Know how long you can concentrate - it doesn't make sense to create a dash longer than that.
4. "It takes a conscious effort to create the time for dash work in a dot-defined world. You need to pull away, close your door, and protect the space." (p. 96) She gives 4 techniques for doing this. The first is to avoid e-mail for the first hour of the day. At the end of each day, identify what you want to do for the first hour of the next day, then come in and do it. Read your email after that. Other strategies are to pay attention to your natural energy cycles, beware of the inefficiency of multi-tasking (try grouping similar tasks together to help with this), and make your time more effective by planning it out.
5. Regarding the time drain due to multi-tasking on page 102:

*The Journal of Experimental Psychology* found that it takes your brain four times longer to recognize and process each thing you're working on when you switch back and forth among tasks. This means that if your day is a random free-for-all, in which you hop from task to task in no particular order, your work will literally take much longer because of the real time you lose switching gears.

... Severe multi-taskers experience a variety of symptoms, including short-term memory loss, gaps in their attentiveness, and a general inability to concentrate.
6. Chapter 5 is about controlling things that sap your time (perfectionism, procrastination, interruptions, meetings). Her 17th strategy is to anticipate surprises (pages 128-133). She suggests calculating your daily interruption ratio, choose two or three people who can interrupt you any time and defer everyone else to a better time, rehearse a few comfortable

- catchphrases, ask how long it will take, and begin the conversation with "What can I do for you?" rather than "How are you?"
7. Controlling your time in this way may make you feel less accessible. She provides some tips for accessibility (p. 202):
    - a. Give yourself a 24-hour response policy.
    - b. Establish and stick with daily huddles or weekly meetings with key team members.
    - c. Let people know the most efficient way to reach you.
    - d. Create open-door times.