

Taking Control of Your Life by Creating Structure

In this time of so much uncertainty, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, defeated and anxious. Left to our human tendencies, we typically focus on the worst-case-scenario and our minds can begin dwelling on what is beyond our control to the point of exhaustion. When we feel this sense of helplessness, we can give into allowing our emotions to dictate our thoughts and actions. When we give into this, it most often results in our actions being dictated by how we feel at a given moment, which starts us on a downward spiral of feeling out of control.

One important way of getting a handle on your emotions and sense of control is by creating structure in each day. By implementing routines to help manage your activities, you can make them more manageable and accomplishing those tasks are more easily done on your terms. You are better able to take on your challenges at your own pace by taking the initiative to anticipate what's coming next and plan for it, rather than procrastinate, ignore it and feel victimized by it. Establishing structure empowers you to set the time, the circumstances and the attitude to face unpleasant activities more confidently.

By incorporating many of your daily activities into routines, you are able to make better choices and more easily face any challenges that occur. Routines help you focus on what you need to accomplish and minimize distractions, such as distracting thoughts, self-defeating actions and mental or emotional barriers. Specifically, a routine helps eliminate the "But, I don't feel like it!" argument we sometimes have with ourselves.

Once you have a structured timeframe built around the activities you want to accomplish, break those activities you most deplore into small, non-intimidating steps. Rather than contemplating the entire goal you need to accomplish, focus simply on the one single step you will do next, such as getting dressed, driving to the place you need to go, opening your computer to the document you need to work on, turning off the TV, etc.

One positive decision sets up the next positive decision. Taking one small step at a time can help you feel more in control of your decisions and minimizes the unnecessary questions we use to procrastinate. Sometimes, making a list of the tasks you need to accomplish and beginning with one of the easier tasks on your list helps build momentum. This forward momentum builds confidence as more is achieved. The sense of accomplishment becomes a growing snowball, as long as you stick to your routine and don't allow your old behaviors and thoughts to creep back in and slow you down.

This approach also lessens the stress of tasks that have to be done every day, as each item has its place and time and is not allowed to cast a cloud on the rest of your day. This reduces anxious or self-defeating thoughts before and during the activity (e.g., "Maybe I'll just skip this today.", "I hate doing this.", "I just want to escape!"). Here are just a few of the activities around which you can create a routine:

- ◆ Preparing for sleep, going to sleep and waking up at the same time every day
- ◆ Setting aside time each night to plan for tomorrow's events
- ◆ Daily exercise, meditation, or inspirational reading

- ◆ Household chores and meal preparation
- ◆ Time for unwinding after work or before bed
- ◆ Wrapping up your day and planning for tomorrow before leaving work

By adding more structure to your day, your mind is free to think more clearly, you eliminate clutter from your mind, you more easily adjust to unexpected events, and you are more focused and certain about each activity.

During this time of uncertainty, there may be a number of unexpected stressors come up. Stick to your schedule and your routine as much as possible, but be flexible when something unexpected arises. If something unexpected arises most days, then you either need to re-think your routine or re-think what importance you are assigning to the things you allow to intrude on your routine. If you are experiencing several legitimate interruptions to your schedule, then you may need to allow more time for the unexpected, or budget time for some duty you may have omitted.

Adding structure to your day increases your motivation, confidence and sense of accomplishment. You will achieve more and feel more in control of your life!



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