

Ten Tools for Embracing Your Finitude

In this book (*Four Thousand Weeks*), I've made the case for embracing the truth about your limited time and limited control over that time—not simply because it's the truth, so you might as well face it, but because it's actively empowering to do so. By stepping more fully into reality as it actually is, you get to accomplish more of what matters, and feel more fulfilled about it. Here, in addition to the suggestions throughout the text, are ten further techniques for implementing this limit-embracing philosophy in daily life.

1. Adopt a “fixed volume” approach to productivity.

Much advice on getting things done implicitly promises that it'll help you get *everything* important done—but that's impossible, and struggling to get there will only make you busier (see chapter 2). It's better to begin from the assumption that tough choices are inevitable and to focus on making them consciously and well. Any strategy for limiting your work in progress will help here (page 75), but perhaps the simplest is to **keep two to-do lists, one “open” and one “closed.”** The open list is for everything that's on your plate and will doubtless be nightmarishly long. Fortunately, it's not your job to tackle it: instead, feed tasks from the open list to the closed one—that is, a list with a fixed number of entries, ten at most. The rule is that you can't add a new task until one's completed. (You may also require a third list, for tasks that are “on hold” until someone else gets back to you.) You'll never get through all the tasks on the open list—but you were never going to in any case, and at least this way you'll complete plenty of things you genuinely care about.

A complementary strategy is to establish **predetermined time boundaries for your daily work.** To whatever extent your job situation permits, decide in advance how much time you'll dedicate to work—you might resolve to start by 8:30 a.m., and finish no later than 5:30 p.m., say—then make all other time-related decisions in light of those predetermined limits. “You could fill any arbitrary number of hours with what feels to be productive work,” writes Cal Newport, who explores this approach in his book *Deep Work*. But if your primary goal is to do what's required in order to be finished by 5:30, you'll be aware of the constraints on your time, and more motivated to use it wisely.

2. Serialize, serialize, serialize.

Following the same logic, **focus on one big project at a time** (or at most, one work project and one nonwork project) and see it to completion before moving on to what's next. It's alluring to try to alleviate the anxiety of having too many responsibilities or ambitions by getting started on them all at once, but you'll make little progress that way; instead, train yourself to get incrementally better at *tolerating* that anxiety, by consciously postponing everything you possibly can, except for one thing. Soon, the satisfaction of completing important projects will make the anxiety seem worthwhile—and since you'll be finishing more and more of them, you'll have less to feel anxious about anyway. Naturally, it won't be possible to postpone absolutely everything—you can't stop paying the bills, or answering email, or taking the kids to school—but this approach will ensure that the only tasks you don't postpone, while addressing your current handful of big projects, are the truly essential ones, rather than those you're dipping into solely to quell your anxiety.

3. Decide in advance what to fail at.

You'll inevitably end up underachieving at something, simply because your time and energy are finite. But the great benefit of **strategic underachievement**—that is, nominating in advance whole areas of life in which you won't expect excellence of yourself—is that you focus that time and energy more effectively. Nor will you be dismayed when you fail at what you'd planned to fail at all along. “When you can't do it all, you feel ashamed and give up,” notes the author Jon Acuff, but when you “decide in advance what things you're going to bomb . . . you remove the sting of shame.” A poorly kept lawn or a cluttered kitchen are less troubling when you've preselected “lawn care” or “kitchen tidiness” as goals to which you'll devote zero energy.

As with serializing your projects, there'll be plenty you can't choose to “bomb” if you're to earn a living, stay healthy, be a decent partner and parent, and so forth. But even in these essential domains, there's scope to **fail on a cyclical basis**: to aim to do the bare minimum at work for the next two months, for example, while you focus on your children, or let your fitness goals temporarily lapse while you apply yourself to election canvassing. Then switch your energies to whatever you were neglecting. To live this way is to replace the high-pressure quest for “work-life balance” with a conscious form of *imbalance*, backed by your confidence that the roles in which you're underperforming right now will get their moment in the spotlight soon.

4. Focus on what you've already completed, not just on what's left to complete.

Since the quest to get everything done is interminable by definition (pages 39–44), it's easy to grow despondent and self-reproachful: you can't feel good about yourself until it's all finished—but it's never finished, so you never get to feel good about yourself. Part of the problem here is an unhelpful assumption that you begin each morning in a sort of “productivity debt,” which you must struggle to pay off through hard work, in the hope that you might reach a zero balance by the evening. As a counterstrategy, **keep a “done list,”** which starts empty first thing in the morning, and which you then gradually fill with whatever you accomplish through the day. Each entry is another cheering reminder that you *could*, after all, have spent the day doing nothing remotely constructive—and look what you did instead! (If you're in a serious psychological rut, lower the bar for what gets to count as an accomplishment: nobody else need ever know that you added “brushed teeth” or “made coffee” to the list.) Yet this is no mere exercise in consolation: there's good evidence for the motivating power of “small wins,” so the likely consequence of commemorating your minor achievements in this fashion is that you'll achieve more of them, and less-minor ones besides.

5. Consolidate your caring.

Social media is a giant machine for getting you to spend your time caring about the wrong things (pages 94–99), but for the same reason, it's also a machine for getting you to care about *too many* things, even if they're each indisputably worthwhile. We're exposed, these days, to an unending stream of atrocities and injustice—each of which might have a legitimate claim on our time and our charitable donations, but which in aggregate are more than any one human could ever effectively address. (Worse, the logic of the attention economy obliges campaigners to present whatever crisis they're addressing as uniquely urgent. No modern fundraising organization would dream of describing its cause as the fourth- or fifth-most important of the day.)

Once you grasp the mechanisms operating here, it becomes easier to **consciously pick your battles in charity, activism, and politics**: to decide that *your* spare time, for the next couple of years, will be spent lobbying for prison reform and helping at a local food pantry—not because fires in the Amazon or the fate of refugees don't matter, but because you understand that to make a difference, you must focus your finite capacity for care.

6. Embrace boring and single-purpose technology.

Digital distractions are so seductive because they seem to offer the chance of escape to a realm where painful human limitations don't apply: you need never feel bored or constrained in your freedom of action, which isn't the case when it comes to work that matters (pages 105–109). You can combat this problem by making your devices as boring as possible—first by removing social media apps, even email if you dare, and then by **switching the screen from color to grayscale**. (At the time of writing, on the iPhone, this option can be found under Settings > Accessibility > Accessibility Shortcut > Color Filters.) “After going to grayscale, I’m not a different person all of a sudden, but I feel more in control of my phone, which now looks like a tool rather than a toy,” the technology journalist Nellie Bowles writes in *The New York Times*. Meanwhile, as far as possible, **choose devices with only one purpose**, such as the Kindle ereader, on which it’s tedious and awkward to do anything but read. If streaming music and social media lurk only a click or swipe away, they’ll prove impossible to resist when the first twinge of boredom or difficulty arises in the activity on which you’re attempting to focus.

7. Seek out novelty in the mundane.

It turns out that there may be a way to lessen, or even reverse, the dispiriting manner in which time seems to speed up as we age, so that the fewer weeks we have left, the faster we seem to lose them (page 7). The likeliest explanation for this phenomenon is that our brains encode the passage of years on the basis of how much information we process in any given interval. Childhood involves plentiful novel experiences, so we remember it as having lasted forever; but as we get older, life gets routinized—we stick to the same few places of residence, the same few relationships and jobs—and the novelty tapers off. “As each passing year converts . . . experience into automatic routine,” wrote William James, soon “the days and the weeks smooth themselves out in recollection to contentless units, and the years grow hollow and collapse.”

The standard advice for counteracting this is to cram your life with novel experiences, and this does work. But it’s liable to worsen another problem, “existential overwhelm” (pages 44–47). Moreover, it’s impractical: if you have a job or children, much of life will necessarily be somewhat routine, and opportunities for exotic travel may be limited. An alternative, Shinzen Young explains, is to **pay more attention to every moment, however mundane**: to find novelty not by doing radically different things but by plunging more deeply into the life you already have. Experience life with

twice the usual intensity, and “your experience of life would be *twice as full* as it currently is”—and any period of life would be remembered as having lasted twice as long. Meditation helps here. But so does going on unplanned walks to see where they lead you, using a different route to get to work, taking up photography or birdwatching or nature drawing or journaling, playing “I Spy” with a child: anything that draws your attention more fully into what you’re doing in the present.

8. Be a “researcher” in relationships.

The desire to feel securely in control of how our time unfolds causes numerous problems in relationships, where it manifests not just in overtly “controlling” behavior but in commitment-phobia, the inability to listen, boredom, and the desire for so much personal sovereignty over your time that you miss out on enriching experiences of communality (chapter 12). One useful approach for loosening your grip comes from the pre-school education expert Tom Hobson, though, as he points out, its value is hardly limited to interactions with small children: when presented with a challenging or boring moment, try **deliberately adopting an attitude of curiosity**, in which your goal isn’t to achieve any particular outcome, or successfully explain your position, but, as Hobson puts it, “to figure out who this human being is that we’re with.” Curiosity is a stance well suited to the inherent unpredictability of life with others, because it can be satisfied by their behaving in ways you like *or* dislike—whereas the stance of demanding a certain result is frustrated each time things fail to go your way.

Indeed, you could try taking this attitude toward everything, as the self-help writer Susan Jeffers suggests in her book *Embracing Uncertainty*. Not knowing what’s coming next—which is the situation you’re always in, with regard to the future—presents an ideal opportunity for choosing curiosity (*wondering* what might happen next) over worry (*hoping* that a certain specific thing will happen next, and fearing it might not) whenever you can.

9. Cultivate instantaneous generosity.

I’m definitely still working on the habit proposed (and practiced) by the meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein: whenever a generous impulse arises in your mind—to give money, check in on a friend, send an email praising someone’s work—**act on the impulse right away**, rather than putting it off until later. When we fail to act on such urges, it’s rarely out of mean-spiritedness, or because we have second thoughts about whether the prospective recipient deserves it. More often, it’s because of

some attitude stemming from our efforts to feel in control of our time. We tell ourselves we'll turn to it when our urgent work is out of the way, or when we have enough spare time to do it really well; or that we ought first to spend a bit longer researching the best recipients for our charitable donations before making any, et cetera. But the only donations that count are the ones you actually get around to making. And while your colleague might appreciate a nicely worded message of praise more than a hastily worded one, the latter is vastly preferable to what's truly most likely to happen if you put it off, which is that you'll never get around to sending that message. All this takes some initial effort, but as Goldstein observes, the more selfish rewards are immediate, because generous action reliably makes you feel much happier.

10. Practice doing nothing.

"I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber," Blaise Pascal wrote. When it comes to the challenge of using your four thousand weeks well, the capacity to do nothing is indispensable, because if you can't bear the discomfort of *not* acting, you're far more likely to make poor choices with your time, simply to feel as if you're acting—choices such as stressfully trying to hurry activities that won't be rushed (chapter 10) or feeling you ought to spend every moment being productive in the service of future goals, thereby postponing fulfillment to a time that never arrives (chapter 8). Technically, it's impossible to do nothing at all: as long as you remain alive, you're always breathing, adopting some physical posture, and so forth. So training yourself to "do nothing" really means training yourself to resist the urge to manipulate your experience or the people and things in the world around you—to let things be as they are. Shinzen Young teaches "**Do Nothing**" meditation, for which the instructions are to simply set a timer, probably only for five or ten minutes at first; sit down in a chair; and then stop trying to do anything. Every time you notice you're doing something—including thinking, or focusing on your breathing, or anything else—stop doing it. (If you notice you're criticizing yourself inwardly for doing things, well, that's a thought, too, so stop doing that.) Keep on stopping until the timer goes off. "Nothing is harder to do than nothing," remarks the author and artist Jenny Odell. But to get better at it is to begin to regain your autonomy—to stop being motivated by the attempt to evade how reality feels here and now, to calm down, and to make better choices with your brief allotment of life.