

SMARTER LIVING

This Is How You Get Stuff Done

By TIM HERRERA JULY 10, 2017

Welcome to the Smarter Living newsletter. Editor Tim Herrera emails readers once a week with tips and advice for living a better, more fulfilling life. Sign up here to get it in your inbox every Monday morning.

We're all a little lazy sometimes. If you're anything like me, you're reading this on your phone in bed 20 minutes after you were supposed to start getting ready for work.

But surrendering to sloth doesn't have to be the end of the story. We can inadvertently train ourselves to be lazy by rewarding that behavior, but with a little effort we can do the opposite — rewire our brains to actually *crave* better habits.

This is a concept my colleague Charles Duhigg has explored at length, and I'll let him take it from here: "At the core of every habit," he writes, "is a neurological loop with three parts: A cue, a routine and a reward. To understand how to create habits — such as exercise habits — you must learn to establish the right cues and rewards."

To break out of a bad-habit loop, we need to change the routine that follows the cue, then reward ourselves for the routine. So instead of looking at Instagram for a half-hour when I hear my alarm (cue), I can hop out of bed (routine), which will make me feel superaccomplished (reward) for being on time.

But what if our problem isn't the cue-routine-reward loop, but our inability to even get to that cue because we procrastinate so much?

Tim Urban of the Wait But Why blog explored this idea a few years ago. His main idea was this: Instant gratification gets in the way of our doing the things we need to do. When we procrastinate, the negative feelings snowball until we're paralyzed, and only at the very last minute, when panic sets in and we're at the do-this-or-lose-my-job stage, do we perform the task.

The trick, Tim writes, is to begin with forgiving ourselves for screwing up. From there, we can break the things we have to do down into tiny, easily tackled mini-tasks; seek external support for our goals; minimize distractions; and aim for steady, incremental accomplishments instead of huge, goliath-size ones. ("Write the intro to your presentation" as opposed to "Write your presentation.")

And in the midst of your newfound productivity, don't forget to take lots of breaks, use negative thinking to your benefit, and work smarter, not just more.

What's your trick for defeating procrastination? Email me at tim@nytimes.com or tweet me @timherrera and we may feature your response in an upcoming story.

Have a cool week!

-Tim

Best of Smarter Living

- **How to Pack an Emergency Kit for Any Disaster:** It is never too early to talk with friends and family about emergency plans — and about how to build the perfect go-bag in case disaster strikes.
- **What to Bring to a Summer Potluck Picnic:** Dishes that travel well and please all kinds of palates.
- **How to Pull Off Rainbow Hair and Still Look Like an Adult:** For a prettier, more wearable version of multicolored hair, the colorist Rachel Bodt suggests a sophisticated alternative: seashell pastels.
- **You Know You Should Use Sunscreen. But Are You Using It Right?:** Expert tips on skin-cancer prevention and sunscreen use that you may not have heard.

- **What to Blame for Your Stomach Bug? Not Always the Last Thing You Ate:** Most of us experience an “acute gastrointestinal event” at least once a year. Reading the clues might reduce your risk in the future.

- **The Right Way to Pack for Travel:** Here’s our shortcut to packing the right way: how to find the best suitcase, minimize your load, pack what you need for a beach trip or a business trip and reduce wrinkles in your clothes.

What We’re Reading

- These five tips can aid in your **quest to shed weight.**
- Everyone has a “**junk drawer.**” Un-junk it.
- Pick the right **mentor.**
- Don’t complain when your **co-workers go on vacation.**
- You’re not the only one **who gets emotional on airplanes.**
- A guide to understanding **Blockchain.**
- Remember when **your phone was fast?** Here’s why that speed was fleeting.
- The **surfaces at the grocery stores** are gross.
- Going to a **farmer’s market?** Do your research ahead of time.
- Confront the friend that always **Cancels plans at the last minute.**