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Home

Owning Your Time

Affording Your Life

DISCOVER:

Bright Sparks



By Rhea Wessel
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Your to-do list should be your friend and not your judge.

If "to-do list Enlightenment" were an official state of consciousness, it might be the one Elena Kupchik is striving for.

For starters Kupchik, the newly-appointed chief financial officer of the YWCA in Delaware in the US, said her handwriting must be uniform and she insists on using parallel nouns and verbs to describe her tasks. If she messes up, Kupchik won't rub it out. Instead, she'll throw out the piece of paper and start over from the top.

Sound a little extreme for a jot-it-down to-do list? Kupchik might not be your typical to-do lister. For many people, to-do lists apply structure on time demands, whether they are self-devised or related to a job, child, partner or family member.

The way people track to-dos varies, but goals are typically the same: to gain an overview, to prioritise, to keep from forgetting something and to clear the mind to focus on the now.

"List-making makes me feel confident and prepared. I've got a nagging feeling that I'm going to forget something. I don't want to forget. I don't want to be a flake," Kupchik said.

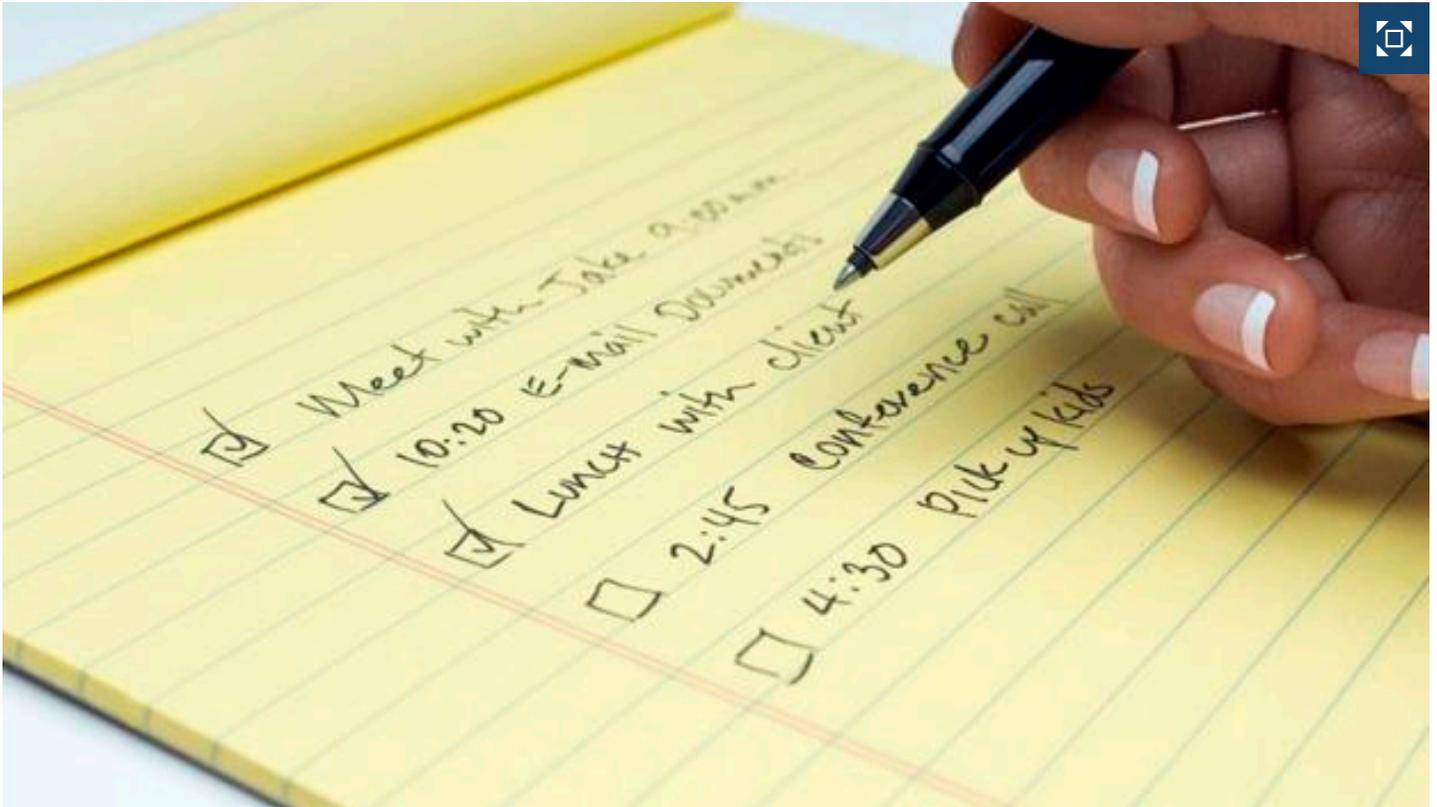
Time-management experts like David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, say effective to-do lists are those that help a person feel confident that he or she is doing the right thing right now.

In societies that exalt the idea that doing more means living more, this confidence can help people spend their time as they'd like to, as opposed to always having their time dictated by outside forces.

The psychology of lists

Of course, a list isn't just a list, and some lists can actually create anxiety. What's the secret to a useful to-do list?

"Your to-do list should be your friend and not your judge," said Vanessa Bolton, who works as a stress consultant with the **Stress Management Society**, a nonprofit that helps businesses and individuals cope with stress.



(Thinkstock)

The first step for applying order to chaos is typically getting everything down in one spot. But then what? How do you make lists manageable?

Experts say keep it short. Sevil Turker, an executive at a consulting firm in Frankfurt, says she gets satisfaction from earning check marks each day and she'll do small tasks on her list to get a few quick wins. She's careful not to make the list artificially long to get more rewards for checking items off. "I still love a short list above anything," Turker said.

When lists are too long

Michael Linenberger, the author of *The One Minute To-Do List*, proposes an approach to managing lists that helps people de-prioritize — and therefore shorten — their lists. As the saying goes, if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

Focus on what must get done today before you can leave the office, Linenberger said, and not on what would be nice to get done.

The tasks that have to be done are your "critical now" items. These are the things that you "absolutely, positively must do now," he said. "When the most critical and important things are at the top, then you can aggressively push things down so they don't clog your focus and don't freak you out."

Attending to emails that arrive at the top of your inbox is a classic example of how we end up working on things that are low priority simply because they pop up in front of us.

Linenberger recommends categorising less important things that may keep getting pushed aside into "opportunity now" tasks that need to be done in the next 10 days or "over the horizon" tasks that can get done later than 10 days from now, a long enough time to keep from worrying about the task.

The feel-good factor

For Andrea Wetzler in Toulouse, France, to-do lists are about setting boundaries. When her children were born, she continued to work full time as a management consultant, yet Wetzler found her new life situation "destabilising."

"I didn't have the structure of the office to-do lists when I was running around with diapers," she said. Now that Wetzler has settled in with her new role, she mixes both personal and professional to-do items in a spiral notebook she swears by, leafing through the pages and crossing off tasks on a daily basis.

Perhaps that's why, as a feel-good factor, Wetzler may fudge the list retroactively. She said, "I confess. I'll add things back into my list just to cross them off."

Some people believe that when you check an item off your to-do list, your body releases a dose of endorphins — those same chemicals that lead to happiness and even euphoria, Linenberger said. It's deep relief of lingering guilt associated with incomplete to-dos or a sense that we're letting ourselves or others down.

"Checking even one item off your list relieves that guilt a little, and leads to that short but sweet high," Linenberger said. "It's almost like taking a drug."

How do you tackle and tame your to-do lists? To comment on this story or anything else you have