You're listening to You've Got This, episode 416.

Welcome to You've Got This, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day-to-day demands of an academic life.

I'm your host, Dr.

Katie Linder.

On this episode, I want to share some ideas for navigating an overwhelming to-do list.

Now if you are anything like me, now that we are well into January and heading toward February very quickly, your to-do list and pile of projects has probably grown.

And maybe it feels even a little bit out of control.

I am definitely in that boat right now, so I've been thinking very carefully about how I want to manage my list.

I have definitely found myself rearranging things on my to-do list, adjusting timelines, rethinking priorities on almost a daily basis, and sometimes even in the middle of the day.

When I have urgent things come up and it requires me to reevaluate my original plans.

So if you are also with me on this, I want to offer some tangible things that I have found to be really helpful in managing my feelings of overwhelm and just moving things forward and getting them off the list so that I can just get them checked off and done.

So the first thing is that I will often try to chunk my tasks into meaningful themes.

So this might be writing or admin or personal, whatever those things are.

And then I can break things down into categories and it helps me to start to wrap my head around the bigger picture of all that I have going on.

And you might think that this could cause even more overwhelm, but for me what I find is it actually helps me to have more self-compassion when I see that I'm actually juggling quite a bit.

So I like to try to get like the full map of all the different things that are coming into the list.

I also find it helpful to pick a timeline for my list and you may say like, Oh, I've got like all these different lists.

And that's kind of what I'm talking about is sometimes I might have a list for the day, but I might also make a list for the week or the month, depending on where I need to kind of look in terms of scale.

So I will often use the notes app on my phone to create lists that I can refer to, you know, throughout the day or the week or the weekend, if I'm really tightly scheduled and I'm trying to fit in tasks like in between meetings.

Now some people use their calendars for this.

You might have like a task integration into your calendar.

I personally don't have that.

And so the notes app just has these like check mark options with allow me to put each task and check it off.

And that's just incredibly satisfying, but it also allows it to be kind of contained because it's in kind of the shorter list within the app.

And now there are apps that are definitely for this purpose.

I just tend to use the notes app myself.

Now when my list is really long or if I'm feeling especially overwhelmed, I do a bit of a triage and I basically do the triage that's based on urgency where I choose like up next or not yet for every task.

So this just gives me two categories to choose between.

And then the category of up next is the one that I actually focus on.

And that's where the timing piece is really important.

So if you're just looking for a list for today, for example, if it doesn't fit into today, it goes into not yet.

And so you're just trying to kind of like narrow in on what are the immediate things that you need to focus on.

Now when I'm doing this, if I'm doing this kind of triage, I will also assess whether I have what I call aspirational tasks that can be deleted or moved with no consequences.

So it may not surprise you that I often add things to my list that are not imperative to do.

So for example, I might want to like watch a training video on something or read a chapter of my book or do dishes or something like that.

Maybe even things I just don't want to forget to do, I'll put on my list.

And these kinds of tasks can start to add a little bit of clutter, but they can also be really easily moved to another time without being a big deal.

So when things are overwhelming, this is a really simple way that I'll kind of start to just like trim down my list.

Now whenever I have a long list of to-dos, I always try to break it down even further by putting time to work on tasks directly into my calendar.

And I had mentioned that sometimes this is like an integration that people already have.

I tend to do this more manually with my calendar, and this is really just to ensure that it can all get done.

So adding my tasks to a calendar also allows me to see if my deadlines and timelines are reasonable.

I may have a certain amount of things I'm trying to get done.

And if I know generally how long they're going to take, I try to plug them in to see like, am I just completely nuts that I think I'm going to do all of this in this time period?

Or is it kind of possible, given the free time that I have available, that I can work through this?

Now once I start to do that, then I get really granular about the tasks on my list.

And sometimes they really need to be broken into smaller pieces to make them easier to get done.

So one quick test of this for me is whether my task has a verb at the beginning and if it has sufficient detail for me to know exactly what I need to work on.

So let me give a very concrete example of this that was actually on my list for like this upcoming week.

So instead of like a task that says review final chapters from authors as they are submitted, which is something that I put on my list because of the edited collection that I'm currently working on.

We have the deadline from the chapters and all these kind of final versions are coming in.

I actually think that I need to make a task for each chapter that I'm responsible for in the volume and this is also like clarifying for me that I'm not entirely sure what review means when I say like review all these chapters.

So I might adjust it to read most recent version of like Jones chapter and make notes on any final revisions needed.

So I'm getting more concrete about the specific thing that I need to get done and the specific way in which I need to do it.

And if I have that task for each chapter that I need to review, I can then add that into my schedule more easily than the broader task of like review all the chapters as they're submitted because that's going to take a lot more time if I did them all at once.

So I have like six of these tasks instead of one, but I can plug it into my calendar in a much more easy way.

Now I also think it's really important for me to reprioritize when needed.

So I will often look at my list at the end of each day or even in the middle of the day to see what is actually getting done and then adjust tasks to different days accordingly.

Now this is also part of how I manage my tasks in Asana, which is the task management system I use.

And it has a basically like columned weekly view where it's really easy for me to like drag and drop tasks into different days.

So if I'm looking at something and thinking, I'm really not going to be able to do this today, I can decide when exactly am I going to do it and I can move it to another day.

Now, I also think it's really important to note that even when things get really busy, I do try to allow tasks to take the time that they need to take.

And I try not to stress if my time estimates aren't matching the actual timing of what's happening with the task.

This is not necessarily an easy thing to do.

And I know this is really challenging for people who struggle with time estimations, but I think that I also want to not rush through things that need their own time.

So a good example of this is the videos I've been editing for YouTube recently, which I've talked about in a couple of other episodes.

These typically take between three to four hours for like a six to eight minute video.

Like it takes a really long time.

And if it goes longer than that and the video isn't done yet, I have to build in more time to complete it.

It's not like I can like partially do this thing and send it out into the world.

Like I've got to really build in more time so I can do my best with time estimation, but I know that I'm just not always perfect with that.

And so I need to adjust along the way.

And since I don't always know just exactly how long something's going to take me, I will often build in buffer in case something takes more time than I had originally estimated.

Now another strategy that has worked really well for me is to try to batch tasks in ways that things can feel completed and not just partially done and hanging out there.

And when I have an overwhelming task list and like it feels like nothing is ever getting checked off, I just continue to feel stressed and overwhelmed.

And I feel like part of the reason this happens is because I like partially complete a task, but it has to stay on the list because it's not completely done.

So I might try to focus on several tasks from one project in a particular time window, rather than letting those drag out across a week or longer, or I will break down a medium or large task into smaller ones.

So one example of this is rather than have like a do laundry task on my weekend list, which is like a very common thing I do on the weekends, I often break it down into wash the sheets, a separate task for wash the hang dry clothes, a separate task for like wash the regular laundry, and then separate tasks for hanging up the clothes and then folding and putting away the clothes.

If I just have do laundry, I can't really check that off until everything is like washed, folded, put away.

And it takes, you know, a couple of days typically to get that done.

But if I want to have incremental things that I can check off along the way to show myself that I'm making progress, that's really helpful for me.

So I can also break down each of those items and then put them into my schedule where they fit.

Now, another example of this might be when I'm recording a podcast episode, like the one I'm doing right now, I have different tasks where I outline the episode, I actually record the episode, then I edit the episode, and then I schedule the episode.

And for each of those things, if I want to spread them out over the course of a period of time, I can do that, but the episode is not done until all of those tasks are completed.

And so sometimes I will just block out part of a day to say, you're going to outline, record, edit, and schedule this so that you can just cross it off your list and call that done.

So I think that we can also consider how do we batch tasks in ways that they feel done versus they're just kind of hanging out on our list forever.

Now of course, when possible, delegating tasks can be really helpful.

And recently I realized that my partner and I had expired passports and rather than take on the tasks associated with renewing them, I asked if he could just manage moving that forward so I could take it off my list.

So when I have certain things that I can try to offload or delegate, whether that's personally or in the workplace, I do try to do that if it feels appropriate.

So in this case, I found the link of the information of like what we needed to do, but I didn't do a deep dive on the actual like steps.

I just like forwarded it to him and say, can you put this on your list?

So it's not on mine.

So if you are dealing with an overwhelming to do list, I hear you.

I'm right there with you.

And I hope that some of these tips might be useful for you.

And of course I would love to hear what you do when you start to feel overwhelmed by your tasks or if you decide to try one of these strategies, you can always email me at hello@drkati litter.com.

I always love to hear from you.

Thanks for listening.

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