

Not Enough Time to Get Things Done? Make a “To-Don’t” List

By Jill Smolinski

Is your daily To-Do List so packed with work, errands and obligations that you barely have a moment to breathe? It doesn't have to be that way. No matter how busy you are—and how many things you think you have to do—you can free-up time. Imagine getting enough sleep...a few minutes to yourself to relax...or even the seemingly impossible: going after your life's dreams?

Just make a To-Don't List

You have a To-Do List, and it's no doubt filled with things like “grocery shop,” “pick up the kids from soccer practice,” “dinner at Mom's.” You probably think there's not a thing you can squeeze from it. But there is: It's simply a matter of identifying what you can let go...for a day, for a while, or forever. That's what you put on a To-Don't List.

Some perspective

You've probably had the experience where your life was maxed-out time-wise—and then you got the flu, or a broken leg, or some other crisis that put you out of commission. And what happened? All those things you thought had to get done simply didn't get done. You missed the “can't miss” meeting. You delayed grocery shopping and everyone made do on leftovers. Your child caught a ride to school. The earth continued rotating—even though you weren't there making it happen.

Consider that your dry run for a To-Don't List.

Getting started

The easiest way to start a To-Don't list is to take a look at your current To-Dos (your date book, the calendar on the refrigerator, etc.). What could you skip, delegate or postpone? Pick that, and put it on your To-Don't list.

If that's too hard—it's all critical, you say—try this exercise:

1. On a piece of paper, write the top three goals for your life. If you were on your deathbed, what would make you feel your life was a success? It might be “raising loving, independent children,” “starting a company,” “making a million dollars,” “getting a novel published,” “feeling inner peace,” “helping AIDS babies,” etc.
2. Now pull out your day planner, calendar or To-Do list. Take a look at it: how many of the things on it actually drive you closer to the three goals you listed? (If you're like

most people, it's probably very few to none.)

3. Consider transferring any that don't from To-Do to To-Don't.

Still not sure? Some possibilities for your To-Don't List:

DON'T do everything yourself. Identify what you can delegate to friends or family or hire out.

DON'T re-do other people's work. Women are notorious for this: Your husband folded the towels, but he didn't do it "right," so you refold them. This is not only a time-sucker the one time you do it, but also in the long run since your husband is unlikely to pitch in again. Let the towels—or whatever other contributions come your way—stay as they are.

DON'T answer the phone every time it rings. That's why we have answering machines and caller ID. Not only will you be able to field calls that aren't necessary, but you'll have a "heads up" if someone is calling with yet another task they're hoping you'll take on. Which leads to the next point...

DON'T always say yes. Try one of these instead: "I can't," "Maybe another time," "It won't work for me," or if you're feeling especially brave, "No."

DON'T put off things that bring you joy until your life is perfect—until you've lost 10 pounds, your house is clean, the bills are filed. It never works. Life is messy. A dusted table gets dusty again, more bills arrive, and diets get broken. In the words of John Lennon, "Life happens when you're busy making other plans." Let life happen.

DON'T put yourself last. Making yourself #1 isn't selfish, it's self-preservation. There's a reason why airlines advise you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others in an emergency. When you take care of yourself—whether it's a regular night out, a hobby, or even five minutes to wash up in privacy—you're a stronger, healthier person who ultimately has more to give.

Reproduction of this information is encouraged with the following credit:

Jill Smolinski is the author of the novels *Objects of My Affection* and *The Next Thing on My List*; visit her at jillsmolinski.com