

The hassles pile

Some evidence suggests that an accumulation of small-scale “hassles” can be as stressful as major life events. If major life events hit you like an avalanche, then these smaller problems build up like nighttime snowfall. One morning you awaken to find the pile of demands has drifted over your head. You try to handle one of them only to get distracted by the others, and you become overwhelmed by the sheer number of minor problems. All may be solvable, but taken together their bulk is simply too great.

“I owe birthday cards to three people, emails to ten, phone calls to five; I have to return Frank’s pie plate, replace the downstairs light bulb, fill out three government forms, do the laundry, find out where that smell of cat urine is coming from, visit Joan in the hospital, change the sheets, mail Juanita’s package, book a dental appointment, buy a new bicycle chain, return the moldy cheese to the store, and get a plumber for the sink. Then there’s that stack of paper I’ve been trying not to look at....”

Sound familiar? You know what that stack of paper is, don’t you? Unopened mail, unpaid bills, unfiled papers, bits and pieces you need to sort through, and somewhere buried in the middle is something important that you’ve forgotten to do. Got a pile like this? Many people do. Having such a pile gives you a wonderful opportunity to beat up on yourself. *“After all, none of those tasks is very difficult. If I was a capable, efficient human being I wouldn’t get overwhelmed by such trivialities.”*

Now for the truth: Having to cope with an accumulation of small, seemingly unimportant tasks may be among the most difficult aspects of your life situation. So how do you cope?

First, recognize that each of the small tasks facing you (for example, making your dental appointment) brings with it two burdens: *effort* and *pressure*.

- The effort is the amount of energy it takes to do the task. This is pretty much the same regardless of when you get the task done. The phone call, for example, will take a few minutes when you finally get around to making it.
- The pressure is the sense of guilt and obligation you experience every time you think about having to do the task. The amount of pressure you experience depends on how long you put it off and how often you think about it.

You may not be able to reduce much of the *effort* in your life. But you can absolutely reduce the *pressure*.

Here are some suggestions to help reduce the pressure from minor hassles:

- **Make a list.** Give up on actually getting any of your small tasks done for a bit. Just write them down in point form. Keep the list handy and add new items to it as you think of them. When you accomplish a task, put a checkmark beside it. Dwell on the fact that you completed it – just as much as you dwelt on it when it still had to be done.
- **Don't obsess about your list.** Remember, you have limited energy. Don't spend it all making huge, elaborate, categorized lists in multiple colors of ink; don't rewrite your list if it looks messy; and don't list every scrap of paper that you need to deal with (*"Throw out drug store flyer, Throw out grocery flyer, Throw out..."*). If the pile of random papers is the problem, don't list them all. Just set concrete and measurable goals to accomplish a certain amount: Spend 10 minutes working on it, deal with the two items on the top of the pile, get through ½ inch of the pile, whatever.
- **Give up.** Acknowledge that you aren't going to get everything done at once. Give yourself permission not to do everything on your list. You might even pick a few items and promise yourself that you *won't* work on them today.
- **Schedule time off.** One of the tiring things about the pile of small tasks is that it's ever-present. Any hour of the day or night you can make yourself feel guilty for not getting them done. Schedule times to deliberately give yourself permission not to work on *any* of them.
- **Be efficient.** During times of difficulty you have limited energy, so you need to conserve it. If you notice that there are several items you could do at the same time (for example, two errands that you could run on the same trip), do so. It'll be easier than making two trips.
- **Don't be too efficient.** You might be tempted to pile up too many things at once. *"I could run these six errands the same morning if I just map my route right..."* If these great ideas don't seem to translate into action, give up. Scale back to one or two goals at a time.
- **Finish tasks.** Try to stay focused long enough to complete a task, rather than moving multiple tasks along a step at a time. For example, it might be tempting to open all of your old mail at once, with the idea that you'll go back later to deal with it. The problem with this approach is that it leaves all the opened mail hanging over your head. A better plan is to open just a few pieces and get them out of your life: check written, stub filed, reply sent, *done*. A sense of progress and relief comes from getting things dealt with and *finished*.

- **Narrow your focus.** Some of your small tasks may involve household chores or cleanup. Try not to wander from room to room doing a bit here and a bit there. You won't see the improvement, so you won't have a sense of having accomplished anything. Instead, focus your efforts on one area (dust the bookcase, put away the things on the coffee table, clean the kitchen counters). Don't allow yourself to get too obsessed (if you're sterilizing the coffee table or scrubbing the counters with a toothbrush, you're going too far). Just bring that area up to a moderate standard, *then* move on.
- **Don't leave things hanging.** Should you get more or less caught up, avoid letting things pile up again. For example, you might adopt a personal policy of opening and dealing with the mail as it arrives. This reduces the pressure experienced every time you look at the pile of unopened mail.

Do you have a big pile of little tasks facing you? Would you be willing to give up on getting all this stuff done at once and take another approach? After all, it isn't going to get done all at once anyway, so you might as well try something else.

Identify two of the suggestions above that seem to apply to your situation and that you could make work for you. Which ones?

1.

2.

What's the first step you could take in dealing with these small tasks?
