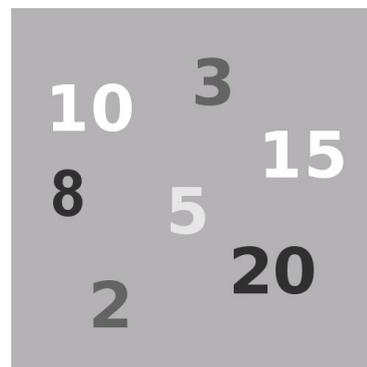


Tool #1: Use a Whole Number

Any time you set out to accomplish something, decide how much you want to achieve in each session. Use whole numbers to set up goals for yourself, for example: I'm going to pay 5 bills; or I'm going to declutter for 15 minutes; or I'm going to read 3 pages of that chapter that I'm dreading reading. When you decide on a specific amount that you are going to do, it makes the task closed-ended, which is less overwhelming. You can pick a number – no matter how small – that you feel comfortable doing. That way, you set yourself up for success and that's very motivating!



Sometimes, the easiest way to assign a whole number to an activity is to set a simple kitchen timer for a specific number of minutes. If you are procrastinating, the timer can help you get going by making the activity time-limited. Setting your timer for a specific amount of time can make the activity feel less daunting. Even if it is something distasteful that you hate, you know that the timer will go off and you can stop. "I'm going to update my résumé" can feel overwhelming. "I'm going to spend 20 minutes working on my résumé" can feel doable.

You don't have to use a timer. You can use any unit, like writing 2 pages of a report or entering 10 clients into a database. The point is to set an objective that is *specific and measurable*. It makes your goal SMART.

When you get to your goal, you can quit for now, knowing you have reached your objective for today. Or, if you feel like it, you can set another goal and keep going. There are times that I spend several hours on a project by working in 20-minute chunks and continually resetting the timer. Having a time-limited goal makes it easier to get started. Knowing that I can quit

when the timer goes off keeps me productive. Sometimes I get so involved in my task that when the timer beeps, I just turn it off and keep going.

Creating a New Routine

Using whole numbers can help you introduce new routines into your life, like:

- Walking 30 minutes 5 times a week; or
- Following up with 3 clients each morning; or
- Processing half an inch of paper each evening.

Remember, when you set an objective, it's really important to pick an amount that's palatable to you. *If you find that you're avoiding doing something, you've probably planned to do more than you're comfortable doing, so scale it back.*



Using Whole Numbers for Tasks You Avoid

When you use whole numbers to set a goal, it helps you focus on the task at hand even when you don't enjoy it because you know there's an end in sight.



Decide On How Much to Do in One Sitting

Once again (and I can't say it enough), pick a number or an amount that is doable and not daunting. There's a much better chance you'll start, instead of procrastinating, if you're not overwhelmed by the amount you're planning to do.

No Interruptions until Finished

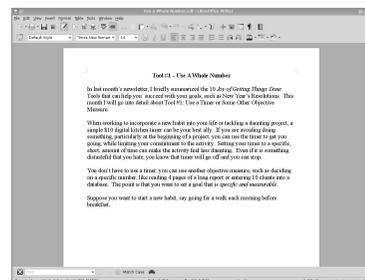
Once you get started, vow not to let anything distract you. Instead, focus completely on the task. Don't check email, don't answer the phone, don't stop to get a cup of coffee. Those things that are trying to distract you will still be there when you get done.

Visualize a Barrier

Before you start, think of some sort of imaginary barrier that will remain in place until you're done. For example, if you are working at your desk, think about how your body feels where it contacts the chair, and imagine that this contact can't be broken until you get to your goal.

Example: *The Joy of Getting Things Done* Newsletter

When I sit down to start writing my monthly newsletter, it can be quite intimidating to stare at a blank page. I'm tempted to let anything distract me. But setting the timer for 20 minutes, and knowing that I can quit when it beeps, both gets me going and keeps me focused.



Usually by the time an uninterrupted 20 minutes is up, I'm tooling along and I continue writing until I've finished the first draft. But if the timer goes off and the words just aren't flowing, I'll call it quits and try again tomorrow.

Tackling an Overwhelming Project



Using a whole number for tackling a large job is really effective at taking the overwhelm out of it. Again, the most important thing is to decide on an amount that is not intimidating. There are some tasks that are just so onerous that working on them for just 20 minutes is too much; in fact even 10 minutes can feel like too much.

In those cases, it's fine to work away at a project for just five or three or if it's really awful, even one minute at a time. Obviously you won't get much done, but at least you'll be making some forward motion. Choosing a tiny goal can help you feel less anxious about the project. It often happens that when you're working on a project for just a couple of minutes at a time, you start to realize that it's not as bad as you thought it was. Then you can start doing larger chunks.

Example 1: Cleaning Out the Attic

My attic had done what attics tend to do – that is, become full of stuff. Every time I thought about cleaning it out, I just couldn't face it, so I procrastinated. Well, one Saturday I decided to take my own advice. I set the timer for 20 minutes and got to work. When the timer went off, I was surprised at the dent I'd made!

My timer and I continued to work on the attic almost every weekend. When it went off, I either stopped for the day or I set it again. Occasionally, when it went off, I put it away and finished up the section I was working on. But mostly when I wanted to keep going, I kept resetting the timer. The project just felt too big not to have that crutch. It took several months, but I got it cleaned out.



Example 2: Weeding the Garden



Here's an example of a different way of using whole numbers. We have a large garden in our yard, and in the spring, the weeds can take over. If I just go out and start weeding I end up feeling that it's hopeless. Then when I get tired, I don't have much sense of satisfaction since all I can see are the parts that I didn't get to. So instead, I mentally choose a 10-12 square foot area and concentrate on that. It's a very manageable amount, and when I'm finished, I can look at that weed-free area and feel a lot of satisfaction. Then if I'm up for it, I can do another section.

You can get quite creative in finding ways to use whole numbers to help you get things done. Beverly spent some time each weekend cleaning out a room. She'd put on a favorite music CD and get to work. When the CD was done, so was she!

Limiting an Activity

You can also use a whole number to limit activities that you tend to spend too much time on.

Taking Breaks

When you're working on something that's intense or tiring, it's important to take breaks. However, it can be easy to get distracted during a break, especially if the job is something you don't particularly enjoy doing. By setting a timer to limit the break, you can keep it from expanding into wasted time.



Losing Yourself

Most of us have activities that we need to do, but that suck us in. Before we know it, hours have gone by.

Take email for example. We all have to check it occasionally, but if we're not careful, we can waste a lot of time reading and passing along those funny emails that people send, or clicking on links that we don't even care about. Beatrice had this problem until she started setting the timer. That made her focus on the important emails and skip the time wasters.



Taking Too Long on a Task

Sometimes it's easy to spend more time on a task than it really deserves. Setting a timer to limit the time you spend on it can help you work quickly and efficiently without getting bogged down with unimportant details.

Make It a Race



Finally, using the timer to make a task into a race can turn an otherwise boring activity into something that can actually be kind of fun. Now maybe I have a low standard for what fun is, but for those of us with a little bit – or even a lot – of ADHD, racing against the timer can provide just enough stimulation to make a task that is deadly dull more interesting.

Summary

Using a whole number, either in the form of a number of minutes or as a specific number of units to do (e.g. 3 pages), can make a task or routine you are avoiding a lot easier to face. It can make your goals SMART. Always pick a number that feels comfortable to do, no matter how small. If you start feeling resistance, scale back.

You can also use whole numbers to limit an activity that you tend to get lost in or that you generally spend too much time doing. If you set a timer, then find that you hit the “off” button subconsciously when it buzzes, set it far enough away that you have to get up to turn it off.

Exercises

New Routines

For each of the routines you identified as a goal (p. 6), how could you break it down into a whole number? Some examples – number of pieces accomplished, a specific space or area, a distance or a specific amount of time.

Routine	Whole Number Goal

Tasks You Avoid

How could you break down the tasks that you regularly avoid (p. 8) into a whole number?

Task	Whole Number Goal

Overwhelming Projects

Think of the projects you identified (p. 10) and assign a whole number goal to each one.

Project	Whole Number Goal

Limiting Activities

The following questions are designed to make you more aware of how you may be wasting time, and help you use whole numbers to come up with a plan to use your time better.

Taking breaks:

1. Do you find that after working intensely for a while, you need to take a break?

Yes No (skip to “Losing Yourself”) Occasionally

2. Which statement is most accurate for you?

I take a brief break, then get back to work (skip to “Losing Yourself”).

I plan to take a brief break, but it always ends up being longer.

3. How many minutes would you consider to be an appropriate amount for a break?

5 minutes

10 minutes

15 minutes

20+ minutes

Losing Yourself

In the first column, name up to three activities that you need to do but that suck you in (email, internet, etc.).

In the second column, map out a specific plan for limiting those activities when you find that you are wasting time with them.

Activity	How will you limit it?

Tasks That Take Too Long

In the first column, identify up to three tasks that you often spend too much time completing.

In the second column, write the amount of time that you often spend on these tasks.

In the third column, write down an amount of time that would be more appropriate for each of these tasks.

Task	How much time do you usually spend doing it?	How much time would be appropriate to spend on it?

Racing with the Timer

Name some tasks that are boring that might be a little more interesting in a race with a timer, then write the number of minutes you could set on the timer when you do this task.

Task	Timer Setting

In the next chapter, we'll explore how starting with a small change and increasing slowly can be the most effective way to succeed for the long haul.



If you are stopping now, write down the date and time of your next session on the calendar.