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## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# How to BELIEVE in Yourself More (Hint: Start Small)

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**M**y father was a perfectionist. There was a right way to do things and a wrong way. Of course, his way was right; most everyone else's wrong. That belief had pernicious effects.

The logical consequence of having a parent with perfectionist tendencies is it's difficult to satisfy them. For instance, when I was 7 years old, my dad grabbed a broom out of my hands and bellowed, "You're not sweeping the sidewalk the right way."

Even at such a young age, I imagined myself rolling my eyes and saying something like this to him, "Hey, give me a me a break. You told me to remove the leaves; how I do it doesn't matter. And since this isn't a race, let's not worry about whether Superman could do it faster."

Another example is when my dad once became frustrated at how I was washing the dinner dishes. "You're doing it the wrong way," he roared, when I was a teenager. "Go do something you're good at, like reading a book." My dad tapped my younger sister to take my place, since he believed she was "good with her hands." In the meantime, I escaped to my room to read *Madame Bovary*, while my sister probably harbored thoughts of asphyxiating me.

Sure, it's easy to see how my dad's actions could have undermined my confidence. Yet his perfectionism might have affected his views of himself in a far worse way.

Fifty years ago, my parents moved into what they affectionately called "the new house." It hadn't been recently built, yet the dwelling was brand new to them. My father was a plasterer by trade, so he considered himself handy. Hence, it might have seemed unremarkable when he decided to turn the attic into two bedrooms plus bath. The bedrooms went fine, but my dad ran into difficulties installing a bright red basin in the bathroom sink. He didn't want to ask for help. Or didn't know

whom to ask. So he stopped cold. When he died in 2007, said bathroom was in the same unfinished state.

What do you suppose my father said to himself every time he saw the undone work during the 40 years he lived in that house? Do you think it was complimentary? Or might he have berated himself? Could he even have used swear words?

Let's look at what research suggests about getting gnarly things done and then consider ways my father could have handled the situation differently.

### WHAT STEPS FACILITATE GETTING THINGS DONE?

Tim Herrera, editor of the "Smarter Living" column in *The New York Times* offers readers tips and advice about living better, more fulfilling lives. He claims that out of all the articles and books he's read about productivity and getting things done, "the only trick that has ever truly and consistently worked" for him is "just getting started."<sup>1</sup>

### What Does "Getting Started" Mean?

According to Herrera, getting started means doing a two-minute task. It could be as simple as logging onto your computer, placing the cursor on the toolbar, opening up a new document, naming it and writing a sole sentence. Voilà! That's it. Success.

### WHY DO A SMALL TASK?

James Clear provides self-improvement tips to hundreds of thousands of people around the world. His advice is based on scientific research. He offers one of Newton's laws of motion as the rationale for starting a two-minute task. Rule No. 1 states: "Objects in motion tend to stay in motion." Hence, "find a way to get started in less than two minutes. Because once you start, it's much more likely that you'll continue."<sup>2</sup>

The same holds true for objects at rest. They tend to stay that way unless something jolts them out of their inertia. That's why procrastination is so deadly. Unless something jars us, we tend to stay stopped. Beginning is the push most of us need.

The second reason starting is so effective is that our brains abhor unfinished projects. In fact, undone tasks create unresolved tension. In psychology this is called the Zeigarnik effect. It states that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks more than completed ones.<sup>3</sup> So when we start something, we yearn to finish it. If we have only a small task to accomplish, we're much more likely to keep going.

A third benefit of starting small is that doing so stimulates the release of a chemical called dopamine in our brains and bodies. This neurotransmitter helps us see possible rewards and take focused action toward them. "Dopamine will flow as a result of



your brain’s positive reinforcement every time you complete a step and meet a challenge,” says neurologist Judy Willis.<sup>4</sup> It also triggers a feeling of deep satisfaction and pleasure.

Finally, researchers have found that “ordinary, incremental progress can increase people’s engagement in their work and happiness during the workday.”<sup>5</sup> This means that when you have a PowerPoint presentation to create, something as easy as tapping the “P” on your toolbar, choosing a slide theme, and then putting a title plus your name on the first slide can make you feel happier.

### HOW COULD STARTING SMALL HAVE HELPED MY FATHER?

There are at least three ways my dad could have restarted the sink project once he got stuck. He could have picked up the installation manual and read the directions out loud. No sweat, right? He could have gone back to the plumbing store where he bought the sink, told the person at the counter he’d run into difficulties, and ask if there was someone who could give him advice about the problem he’d encountered. And he certainly could have phoned a plumber and paid that person to dig him out of his dilemma. Then my dad wouldn’t have had to stare at an unfinished bathroom.

### WHAT’S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN STARTING AND BELIEVING IN YOURSELF?

Dr. Daryl Bem is a social psychologist and professor emeritus at Cornell University. He’s the originator of the self-perception

theory of attitude formation and change. Rather than espousing the view that our early experiences determine who we become, Bem maintains that we are what we do. In short, he claims that our brains observe our actions and make judgments about who we are based on the behaviors we exhibit, just as it would about our co-worker, neighbor or physician. “We are strangers to ourselves,” he says.<sup>6</sup> We know only what we see. Hundreds of experiments have confirmed this theory.

Following Bem’s line of reasoning, if a person wants to view her- or himself as a wine connoisseur, they might regularly attend wine tastings, read *Wine Spectator* and ask questions of sommeliers. Similarly, those of us who want to think of ourselves as reliable might pay our bills before they’re due, finish assignments in a timely manner, and appear at meetings early. Ergo, by watching ourselves complete important projects, we’ll believe in ourselves more. Much more, according to Bem’s self-perception theory.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TODAY?

The incontrovertible fact is the only way anything will get done is if we begin. Thus, I invite you to consider three questions:

- What project will you start today?
- What two-minute task will you do?
- When will you email me to say what you’ve done (considering there could be an even larger dopamine rush when you tell somebody about your accomplishment)? ■



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### ENDNOTES

- 1 Herrera, Tim. 2018. Micro-Progress and the Magic of Just Getting Started. *The New York Times*. Jan. 22, <https://nyti.ms/2F3KVpV> (accessed Jan. 24, 2018).
- 2 Clear, James. 2018. The Physics of Productivity: Newton’s Laws of Getting Stuff Done. <https://jamesclear.com/physics-productivity> (accessed May 18, 2018).
- 3 Wikipedia. Zeigarnik Effect, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeigarnik\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeigarnik_effect) (accessed May 18, 2018).
- 4 Lee, Kevan. 2014. How to Harness Your Brain’s Dopamine Supply and Increase Motivation. *Life Hacker*. Jan. 8, <https://lifelifehacker.com/how-to-harness-your-brains-dopamine-supply-and-increas-1496989326> (accessed May 18, 2018).
- 5 Supra, note 1.
- 6 Wilson, Timothy D. 2012. We Are What We Do. *Psychology Today*. Jan. 17, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/redirect/201201/we-are-what-we-do> (accessed May 18, 2018).