

6 Rules for Dealing With Habits vs. Tasks

If you've been working on a [simplified to-do list](#), you may have your tasks whittled down to the essential. But what about the daily and weekly things you need to do every day: exercise, cleaning, errands, making a to-do list ... as those are things you need to do, do they go on your to-do list?



Photo by [paulworthington](#)

How do you deal with habits on your to-do list?

Recently reader [William Mize](#) asked:

I'm working on implementing ZTD into my life, and I'm having a hard time building my trusted system due to the fact that so many systems don't make a distinction between "habits" and "tasks".

My brain sometimes confuses the two, and it hurts. Ow!

I see habits as something we want to do/perform on a daily basis, whereas tasks are something that are one time only, or perhaps once a week, once a month, etc.

I'd love to hear your take on this distinction, if it indeed exists, or what.

After a few seconds' thought, I was about to refer them to the Productivity 501 blog's excellent [Habit List post](#). In that post, [Mark Shead](#) suggested making a lists of habits that you'd like to practice, and checking them off each day that you do them.

This is an excellent suggestion, and I recommend it. However, I took a couple of minutes to think about how I deal with my own habits. They certainly don't go on my to-do list, and yet I still do them. And then I realized that there's more to this than a list, and that I should go into a little more detail.

The Anatomy of Remembering Habits

So, how do I deal with my own habits? The same way most people do, I suspect. I do them without thinking. That's what makes them habits. Of course, in order for them to become habits, I have to concentrate on them and be reminded of them.

Let's take my habit of putting things away when I'm done with them. I don't have that on a to-do list. When I finish

with something, I pause and look at my mess, and clean it up, mostly without thinking.

However, I wasn't born with that habit. I learned it, and had to focus on it for at least a month before it became something I didn't have to think about.

That's the same with any of our habits: brushing our teeth, getting dressed, taking a shower, eating, smoking ... we don't think about them. It took awhile for them to become ingrained habits, though.

The key to not having to remember habits: a trigger. Habits are triggered by an external event. That event could be a habit list (although you'd first have to develop the habit of checking the list), but more often it's something we do every day. For example, I wake up at 4 a.m., after being triggered by an alarm clock. My getting up triggers my habit of starting my coffee and drinking water. Now, I'm using the drinking water as a trigger to exercise. Each thing triggers something after it. The same is true of any ingrained habit: there's an external trigger.

The 6 Rules of Remembering Habits

So, after examining the above reflections, here are the rules for remembering habits each day (or each week):

1. Identify a trigger. In order for a habit to be a habit, you need to have a trigger. For example, you might brush your teeth after showering — the shower is the trigger for the brushing. And you know you're going to shower each day, so you know you will brush your teeth.

When do you want to do your habit? What do you do at that time of day, every day? If you want to do something weekly, is there a weekly trigger that could precede it?

2. Focus on developing the habit. Once you've identified the trigger, you have to do the habit every single time you do the trigger, without exception, in order for it to become deeply ingrained. Focus on developing that habit for one month. Make it something easy, as you are more likely to not do the habit if it is difficult.

3. Only focus on that one habit. I've said this many times before, but if you are trying to establish more than one habit at a time, your focus will be diluted. It's much harder. If you're good at developing habits, you can get away with 2 or 3 at a time. But most of us aren't good at it, so focus on that one habit, for a month. After the month, you can work on a new habit. This may seem difficult, as you probably have a bunch of habits you'd like to adopt, but think long term: after a year, you'll have 12 great new habits.

4. Log it. If the habit is important, you should log it. Make the logging easy, and do it immediately after the activity. Don't put it off. This will make the habit more deeply ingrained. Read more on [the logging habit](#).

5. Report it to others. Tell others you are going to do this habit for a month, and then report to them daily. If others are expecting your report, you will be more likely to stick to it. The more public pressure you put on yourself, the better. Put it on your blog, or join an online forum or some other group, have a coach, or email all your friends and family each day.

6. Once it's ingrained, you don't need a list. If a habit is firmly ingrained, and strongly attached to its trigger, you won't need to put it on your task list or any other list. You will just do it once the trigger goes off. And that's the payoff: good habits, without any of the thinking.

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