If You Dread Deadlines, You’re Thinking About Them All Wrong

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As a time management coach, I work with many individuals who dread deadlines. Some of them meet their deadlines but only by becoming enormously frazzled and working late, which compromises their peace of mind and their work-life balance. Others end up missing deadlines entirely. This makes them feel guilty for the negative impact not only on themselves but also on their team members and projects. Deadlines can be a struggle — but they don’t have to be.

Deadlines can be energizing and help you to sharpen your focus, set priorities, collaborate effectively with a team, and get work done, all while keeping projects on track and on schedule. Think of it this way. Deadlines are a done-for-you prioritization tool that tells you a given project is important to focus on since its deadline is earlier. Deadlines can also make it easier to honestly assess your workload. If you have something due on Friday and you’re aware that it will take all your available time between now and then, it’s easier to decline extra projects or meetings. Finally, when you know you have a chance of meeting the deadline, these sorts of hard dates can be downright fun. They can give you a thrill by completing a piece of work and finishing it on time. Victory is sweet.

With the right strategies in place, you can get a productivity boost out of deadlines without taking on the stress. Here are a few best practices:
Assign deadlines to the work that matters. Part of what holds us back when it comes to deadlines is the promises we make to others. We feel pressured to assign a timeline for a project or task, even when we don't need to. If something isn’t a high priority for you to complete, don’t set a deadline for it. When others ask, simply say, “I’ve added it to my to-do list.” That way you have the ability to keep it on your radar for a while without feeling pressured by an artificial deadline. Also, avoid giving unnecessarily specific deadlines. For example, you can tell someone that you’ll get an item to them “soon,” “sometime next week,” or “in the near future” instead of “by Friday at noon.” That gives you a little more breathing room without making you feel that you're breaking any promises.

On the other hand, if an activity is a high priority and you have a sense that it may get pushed aside by other less important items, set a deadline. This will provide just enough urgency and pressure to ensure you get it done. Make that deadline public by sharing it with a colleague or your manager or by setting up a meeting to report on progress.

Then pace yourself. Instead of setting one final completion date, like a final exam at the end of the semester in college, create mini-deadlines for pieces of larger projects. This strategy can work especially well if you have team members to help you refine your work prior to presenting it to a larger audience. Set a deadline for an initial draft, a run through, a revised draft, etc. The smaller and shorter your deadlines, the less room you have to procrastinate — and procrastinating often leads to extra stress.

Plan for contingencies. Prior to becoming a time coach, I struggled with turning in work very late in the day on the day it was due. One small shift made a big difference: setting a personal deadline for myself a day or two before the actual deadline. That way if anything took longer than expected, I could still wrap it up the next morning, submit the project on time, and not have to work late or feel stressed.

It also helps to assume others will be late. When I worked in journalism, one of the tricks I learned to meet my deadlines was to assume other people wouldn't meet theirs. I would set a deadline for when I needed information back from interviewees that was a day or two before when I absolutely needed it. I had the time to follow up with them if I hadn't received the information I needed, without feeling like I was behind schedule. When possible, ask for items 24-48 hours in advance so that there’s buffer time for lateness. If you’re coordinating a larger group with four or more people, add in even more time to account for potential follow-up and the need for approvals.

Keep stakeholders informed. Finally, any time you hit an issue that could significantly impact your ability to meet a milestone, communicate. That means letting others know when something is taking longer than expected, when a delivery didn't come in, when you have a staffing issue, when a client is not providing the necessary information, etc. Depending on the project, you may have a wide degree of latitude to adjust deadlines as long as you keep all of the key stakeholders updated. For others, particularly with external clients, you can set expectations that if others don’t meet their deadlines it will lead to an adjustment of the overall timeline. In many situations you don't have to force yourself or your team to make up time lost due to circumstances outside of your control if you communicate when the timeline needs to be adjusted and why.

If at some point you realize that you will not meet a deadline or that an item is no longer a priority, be up front with the person who made the request. This could be as simple as resetting expectations by saying, “I know we discussed my getting this to you by Friday, but due to XYZ it looks like the earliest I can get this to you is next week.” Or if you don't know when you can get the work done, say so. That gives your colleagues the ability to find other solutions if necessary. Although it may feel awkward or embarrassing to admit that everything is not on schedule, being transparent is much better for your stress level and the client relationship.

With the right strategies, deadlines can help you get more of the right work done. Start setting more deadlines for the work that matters — and fewer deadlines for the nonessential. Then use the above strategies to make each day an opportunity to revel in the ability to accomplish your time-bound goals without stress.
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