

How to Save Yourself from ‘Task Paralysis’

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Why is it that when you have the most to do you feel the least able to act? This sense of helplessness — also called “overwhelm freeze” — always seems to set in when you have a dozen things on your list, all equally pressing. Or it shows up when you have one huge thing to accomplish that really matters, and you’re stumped on how to even begin.

Instead of logically working through your list or slowly chipping away at that behemoth task, your brain acts like it’s a rabbit that’s just sensed a dog in the yard — it stops dead in its tracks.

Ellen Hendriksen, a clinical assistant professor at Boston University’s Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, says the freeze response — of “fight, flight or freeze” fame — arises when we view the task (or many tasks) in front of us as a threat. “Our bodies react to threat the same way, whether the threat is external, like the proverbial saber-toothed tiger, or the threat is internal,” she said. “With a big overwhelming task list, that threat could be the threat of failure, or it could be the threat of letting others down. It could be the threat of feeling stupid or incompetent because we don’t know where to start or how to do things.”

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