

# Six Playfully Mindful Strategies to BEAT PROCRASTINATION AND BOOST PRODUCTIVITY

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## Are you a procrastinator?

When there's something you know you have to do, do you feel overwhelmed instead of motivated?

How often do you think to yourself, "I can't deal with this right now. I'll start later today. Or maybe tomorrow."

Those words pop into my own head just about every day at some point or another.

Having struggled with attention deficit tendencies my entire life, I'm a master at putting things off, or not finishing the things I do manage to start.

If you're like me, as soon as something—especially something you're not getting paid for—feels like work, you'll look for an out.

Exacerbating our desire to avoid work is that most of us have a warped sense of time. Our estimation of how long something will take to finish is often as distorted as our reflection in a fun house mirror.

With a few strategies enhanced by mindfulness practice, I've learned how to trick myself into productivity by turning perceived work into play and keeping myself grounded in real time.

I hope you'll find these games as helpful as I have!



# 1. Write a list—starting with things you’ve already done.

I know, I know. Everyone tells you to write a list. But if list-making feels like work, you can turn it into a game. For instance, on those days when you’re feeling particularly unmotivated, start your list with things you’ve already done.

## Example:

1. Make coffee
2. Take a shower
3. Get dressed

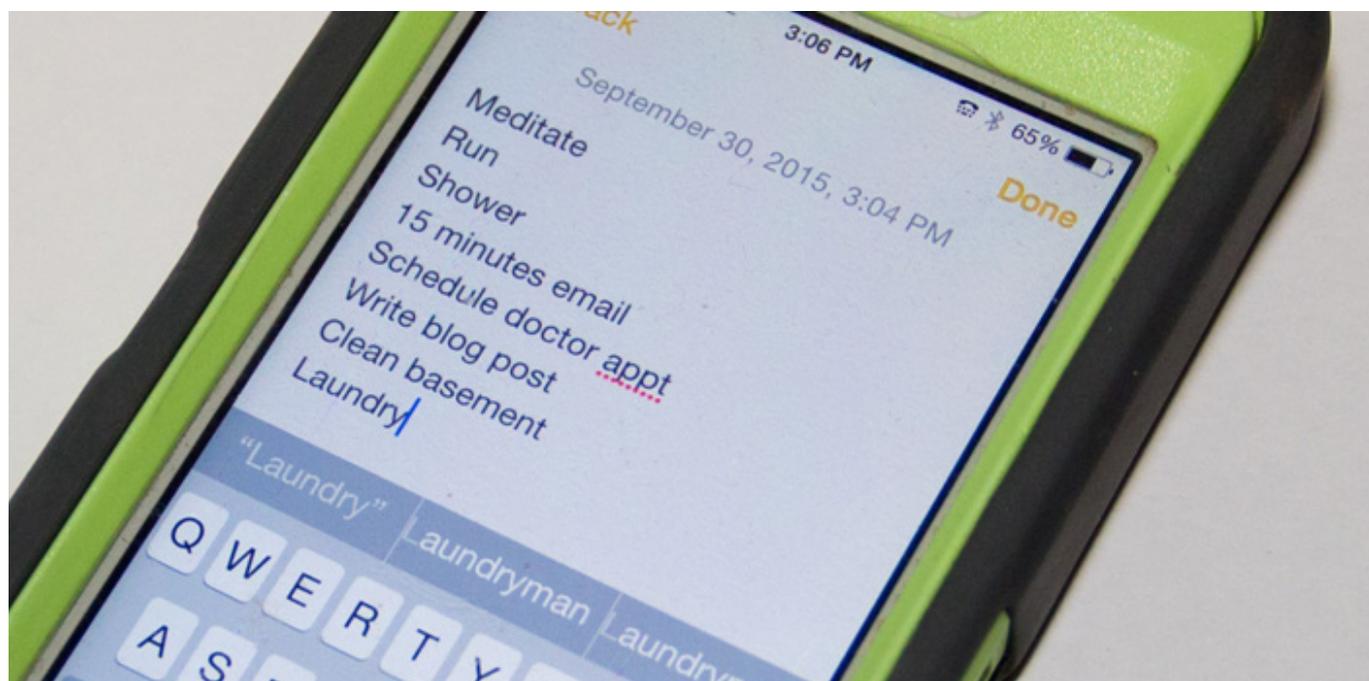
Mindfulness teaches us to be kind to ourselves, so give yourself credit where credit is due.

If you can’t muster the energy to take a shower, go even smaller. “Brush teeth” warrants its own line item on some days. If that’s even too much, start with “Breathe.” Try getting out of that one! (Wait... maybe not. Please keep breathing.)

Checking off tasks on to-do lists triggers a shot of dopamine in our brains. Free and legal alternatives to drugs are always good, right?

Once you’ve had the satisfaction of checking off a few items right off the bat, you’ll be spurred on to add to your to-do list.

I’ve been making lists for decades now. Until recently, I jotted them down in little notebooks or on random slips of paper. My old lists serve as a quirky kind of journal.



These days I often compile lists on my phone, which allows me to immediately add a task without having to search for a pen and a scrap of paper.

OK, so you’ve got your list in front of you. How do you decide what to do first?

## 2. Can't prioritize? Let scissors and fate decide!

You may have dutifully made your to-do list, but you either can't muster an ounce of motivation or you are so overwhelmed that you are simply paralyzed with indecision about where to begin. On days like this, let fate decide for you with this game:

**Example:** You've got family coming to town and you want everything to look perfect. But every room in your house or apartment is a wreck, with no easy starting point.

Start by writing down—on paper this time—a list of every room. I actually keep my list of rooms stored on my computer and print it out each time I have to clean the house. Along with the rooms, "laundry" is also listed since dirty clothes are usually part of the mess.

Now, cut up the list so that you have just one room on each slip of paper. Fold these all up and put them in a bowl.



Pick out one slip of paper and head to the listed room. Forget about the rest of the bowl and give that single room 100 percent of your attention.

This is the mindfulness equivalent of staying present, only focusing on where you can take action this very moment. With all of your energy channeled into a single task, the work gets done much more efficiently.

Thinking about the whole bowl of rooms leads to stress (another word for suffering). Thinking about just a single room is usually pretty manageable.

If you've got kids, they can join the game by picking a task out of the bowl and helping out.

When you've finished the task, throw the slip of paper in the trash with a flourish and pluck your next assignment from the bowl.

Some days, even a single task may feel overwhelming—so how do you make it manageable?

### 3. Divide big jobs into smaller pieces—with a creative kick.

Big tasks are really just a collection of small tasks. Your game strategy is to divide that overwhelming task into bite-sized portions. You can really have fun with this if you think creatively!

**Example:** You've drawn "office" from your task bowl, but your desk alone looks like it's been hit by a hurricane. Whatever neat piles may have been there earlier in the week (month, year) have merged into one big terrifying mess. You start to hyperventilate just looking at it.

Your first reaction is, "That's too big a job to finish today, so I won't even start."

Take a breath, then turn it into a game by visualizing a grid on top of the desk (or floor, or other area that's plaguing you). I've even used string or ribbon to create a real grid when I'm too overwhelmed to visualize.

The size of your grid squares will depend on your motivation level. The less motivated you feel, the smaller your squares should be.



Just look at the job one square at a time, without feeling like you have to complete all of the squares in one day. Your to-do list should state your goal: "clear three grid squares on desk." Or, if you don't need quite that much structure, "clear upper right corner of desk."

Then, like a horse with blinders on, focus all your attention on that little area. Starting at the top of the pile within that grid square, take it one piece of paper, one file folder at a time. No pushing papers to another square. That single square gets 100 percent of your effort.

This is also one of my favorite ways to approach mindfulness meditation. Rather than thinking, "Ugh. I'm supposed to meditate for twenty whole minutes," I take it half a breath at a time. One in-breath is a task (or grid square) completed. One out-breath is another task (or grid square) completed.

Simply tackle one piece of paper from the pile at a time, one grid square at a time, one breath at a time. Stop when you've reached your to-do list goal.

You may be so pumped up with your progress that you want to keep going. Leave 'em wanting more, as they say. Take care of some of your other list items before coming back to the desk.

OK, so you've sliced and diced your tasks into tiny pieces—but what if you think you don't have time to get any real work done?

## 4. Make it a race against the clock!

Even if you've divided your tasks into small bites, there are days when you believe that you don't have time for even a single bite. This game involves setting a timer and only spending a few minutes on a given task, since simply starting is the hardest part of all. There's no right or wrong amount of time. Some days twenty minutes or longer will be palpable. Other days you might only be able to handle five or ten minute stretches.

**Example:** Let's stick with the impending family visit and the mess in the office. Even though you've divided cleaning the office (and desk) into smaller task segments, you think it will all just take too long to complete, so why even start?

Ask yourself how many minutes of full attention you think you could manage. Let's say it's a ten-minute kind of day.

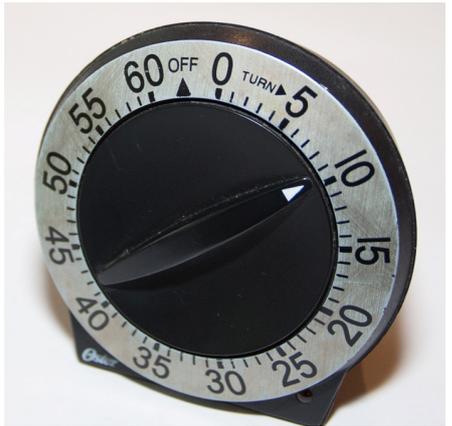
Set your timer for ten minutes (or whatever amount of time feels doable for you). Now see how much you can accomplish in that amount of time.

You may not finish the job, but that doesn't matter. At least you started, thereby breaking the inertia. If the task isn't finished when the timer goes off, put the slip of paper back into your task bowl and come back to it later.

No matter how daunting a job is, I can usually convince myself to start if I know I'm only doing it for a limited amount of time.

You'll be amazed at just how much you can accomplish in a ten- or fifteen-minute stretch. I've had plenty of days when I could only handle five-minute stretches of focused attention, but was still able to feel productive at the end of the day. And over time, those tiny bites add up.

The same holds true for meditation practice. Sitting in silence for a mere ten minutes a day has been proven to reduce stress and anxiety, boost creativity, enhance focus, and improve relationships. That's a lot of bang for your buck.



For years I used a simple kitchen timer for my race-the-clock productivity game. Now I use a timer on my phone with a nice zen-inspired chime that makes me happy each time I hear it.

But what if being on the clock doesn't motivate you?

## 5. Count to ten (or twenty or whatever number works for you).

This game works on the same principle as the timer, but you're counting objects instead of minutes. Defining a start and end point makes it easier to begin something you're not looking forward to doing and gives you yet another strategy to turn work into play.

**Example:** You've got a mountain of dishes piled in the drier rack next to the sink (or a mountain of laundry that needs to be folded...you get the idea). You tell yourself you don't have time right now to deal with it. You've been telling yourself that for days now. The mountain just keeps getting bigger.



Start with ten. Tell yourself, "I will just put ten dishes away (or fold ten items of clothing, etc.) as a start." Then do it. You realize that only took a minute or so. Maybe you have time for ten more. If not, that's OK too. At least you started.

It's as easy as counting your breaths in cycles of ten during a meditation session.

If you're open to a little woo woo, go for the number twenty-seven, which is used in feng shui practice to help you move forward if you're stuck. I don't know why, but there's just something fun about putting away twenty-seven things.

If you combine counting items with the timer strategy, you'll see that you can really accomplish quite a lot in just a few minutes. You can clear ten things from the drier rack in just a minute or two. You can fold twenty items of clothing in less than five minutes.

So how do you put all of this together?

## 6. Mix up the games—and sprinkle in rewards!

On any given day, your motivation level will determine just how many of these games you'll need to keep moving forward with your to-do list. Mix and match the strategies, and don't forget to reward yourself!

Example: You make your list over breakfast, including the morning run and/or shower you may have already taken. You're already on a productivity roll!

You decide today's the day to tackle cleaning your basement. You divide the task into smaller segments by area, either via the grid visualization or writing down the various areas from which to randomly choose. Set your timer for thirty minutes (or some other number that won't feel overwhelming) and get to work.

When your timer chimes, REWARD yourself! Timed breaks or a few minutes spent on an enjoyable and/or fulfilling task are recommended over martinis and bonbons (save those to celebrate the completion of your whole list).



After your break, get back to your list, perhaps taking care of a couple of quickie to-do's by racing against the clock or counting items as you put them away. Then get back to the basement, taking it just one area at a time. Keep up your rhythm—timing, counting, checking off list items, rewarding yourself as each tiny bite of time and task is completed. At the end of the day, you'll be astonished by what you've accomplished!

## So Put on Your Game Face!

Now that you've got a basket of mindful games from which to choose, you can redefine your notions of work and play.

You can turn even the most mundane of tasks into something playful and fun (remember the dopamine response of checking off your to-do list items).

With a more realistic sense of time that comes with present moment awareness, you'll be more likely to dive right in rather than not starting at all.

At the end of the day, when your bowl of tasks is empty and your to-do list items are all crossed off, you'll be the high scorer!



## Bio

*Martha Brettschneider is a writer, blogger, and award-winning photographer with a passion for inspiring mindfulness, the practice of finding beauty in the present moment.*

*She stumbled upon mindfulness teachings in 2010 after breast cancer forced a reorientation of every aspect of her life—body, mind, and spirit.*

*Her upcoming book, Blooming into Mindfulness: How the Universe Used a Garden, Cancer, and Carpools to Teach Me That Calm Is the New Happy, chronicles her journey.*

*Visit [www.marthabrettschneider.com](http://www.marthabrettschneider.com) for book updates, blog posts, and photo meditations.*

