

How to Turn Around an Unproductive Day



Artwork courtesy of [Amy Buchheit](#)

Some days, you wake up early, storm through tons of work before lunch, and come to the evening feeling as though you've accomplished a lot. For many of us, though, those days are the exception rather than a rule. Perhaps you're reading this in the middle of a rather unproductive day. Maybe you woke up late, spent time procrastinating, had to deal with a dozen "urgent" little tasks, or simple got interrupted every five minutes.

If it feels like your day is slipping through your fingers, here's how to turn things around and make that unproductive day into a fulfilling one:

Stop and Take Stock

So often, we end up in “reaction mode”, responding in a knee-jerk way to things as they come up. This is generally an ineffective way to work: you often end up dealing with fairly low-priority tasks simply because they’re the ones which present themselves.

When your day’s running away from you, take just five minutes to completely stop. Close your email program and your browser, or simply switch off your computer monitor. Think about what you want to accomplish today. Are you on track? If not, what’s gone wrong – and how can you pull things back into line?

Pick One Important Project or Task

As you take stock of your unproductive day so far, *work out one important project or task that you want to get done*, something that will give your day a sense of meaning and purpose. Perhaps it’s something you’ve been putting off, like writing an important letter or email. Maybe it’s the first step in a new course of action, like signing up for a course or seminar. It could be something that will take you further towards an important goal – perhaps getting your business’s website online.

Spend An Hour Focusing On This

A whole hour of focused attention is long enough to make meaningful progress. *Let everything else slide for an hour*, and spend that time concentrating on your one important thing. Your emails, and phone calls can wait until that hour’s up. It might help to set a timer. If your task involves writing, try using a full-screen program like [Dark Room](#). Shut down your email – or even disconnect your computer from the internet if it helps.

Eliminate As Many Distractions As Possible

You might have to struggle to find just one hour to devote to something truly important. *To keep your day on productive lines, eliminate the distractions that are sapping your focus.* That might mean that you close your email and leave it closed until it’s nearly the end of your working day. Perhaps you’ll let your phone go to voicemail. Let your colleagues know you’d appreciate only being interrupted in a real emergency – or if you work from home, explain to your family that you could really use some uninterrupted time.

Challenge Yourself to Be Productive

Some unproductive days aren't simply caused by us succumbing to distractions – they're partially influenced by external events. Maybe you have several meetings scheduled, a lot of family duties, or various chores to run. *Challenge yourself to squeeze in as much productive work as you can:* perhaps you'll jot down some notes while waiting in line at the post office, or maybe you can blitz through some emails with your toddler on your lap. If you have routine chores to do around the house, listen to audio books or podcasts during them – it's a great way to fit some learning into your day.

Review Your Day

When you've had an unproductive day, don't waste time and energy feeling guilty about it. See it instead as an opportunity to learn about the conditions in which you work best. Spend ten minutes reviewing how your day went, asking questions like:

- Where did things start going wrong? (eg. "I woke up late", "I checked my email first thing")
- What distractions did I succumb to?
- What could I have done differently?
- What helped me to focus?

There's nothing wrong with making mistakes – they're great learning opportunities, and chances to eliminate methods of working that aren't helpful to you.

Do you find that you regularly have unproductive days? How do you turn things around?