

362 - A Simple Strategy for Your To-Do List

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't.

Today is episode 362 - A Simple Strategy for Your To-Do List.

You all know I love helping us deal with our to-do lists. Life is full of things to do, and sometimes we feel buried in all that wants our attention. So today's episode is a short and sweet look at one simple strategy that might make a ton of difference for you.

First off, let's set the foundation like we always do. Because before we start talking about what we can do, it's important to identify how we see what we do. We've got to figure out the why before we get to the how.

To-do lists are in essence a way for us to remember what we need to do and keep us on track in getting it done, right? Pretty simple. There are plenty of ways to maintain a to-do list, and I'll go over some of those later in the episode. But the first big picture thing to remember is that a to-do list is a tool for us to use. It is not in charge. It is not the boss. It is not real outside of our own making. It's literally a piece of paper or a digital note with mostly arbitrary, often disconnected things, waiting to be checked off. And we can get in the trap of treating the list like it's the boss, like we're at its mercy. We are not. Yes, there are urgent things we need to get done, but the to-do list itself needs to be taken down a couple of notches. It's getting way too haughty over there, thinking it runs the world and has to have color-coordinated outfits and custom check-off boxes and all the things. It's just a list of things to do so you don't forget about them. Cool.

Next, I want to remind you that life is not about how much we can get done. Our goal isn't to achieve everything possible day after day. Living is so much more than accomplishment. In fact, accomplishment, depending on what it is and what it requires of us, occasionally gets in the way of living. To-do lists get us hung up on productivity in a way that might not serve us well on a regular basis, so as we talk about this strategy, remember that. Remember that productivity is not the be all, end all. It is not what runs our lives. Our lives are meant to be lived, not managed and completed like we're some kind of project.

So with that as our foundation, I want to share with you a simple strategy for your to-do list that might help you feel less overwhelmed by what you have to do: have to and hope to. That's it. Certain things you have to do. Others you hope to do. Separating the two does a weird kind of alchemy to your to-do list that might really help you out. I know it does me.

When you are making a to-do list for a certain stretch of time, pay attention to what you have to do and what you hope to do. The stretch of time is pretty important here. Without a boundary of time, most things might feel like a have-to, but maybe this week, they're not so much.

Let's take paying bills as an example. You have to pay your bills. If you don't pay them, you'll suffer some fairly dire consequences. It's definitely one of life's have-tos. But do you have to pay them this week? Not if they're not due for another two weeks. Maybe this week, they're a hope-to task because they're not yet urgent. Next week, they become a have-to, but because of the timing now, they can remain a hope-to for now.

You see what I mean? It's not just about the overall perception of the to-do list item itself. Whether it's a hope-to or a have-to depends on the timing, on the season of life you're in, on the stretch of time your to-do list is meant for, on where you are right now.

Now, many hope-tos eventually turn into have-tos, right? Some things are necessary but not yet urgent. I've said this before, but one of the most helpful things you can do whenever possible is to tend to the necessary before it becomes urgent. Urgency is what makes us feel like we're drowning. Urgency is what makes our to-do lists feel like weights on the ankles. There's so much to do, and there's so much to do *right now*. That's urgency. Have-tos and hope-tos separate what's urgent from what is necessary.

They also help separate what is necessary from what is important. Some things are going to be deeply important to you because of what matters to you. Someone else would look at your to-do list and wonder why "paint for an hour" is on your list because that's not necessary and it's definitely not urgent. But is it important? To me it is. Again, have-tos and hope-tos help us see what is necessary, what is urgent, and also what is important.

You can choose if something important to you, like painting for an hour, is a have-to during the particular day or week or whatever time your to-do list captures. Maybe you've been so busy and scattered in your brain that without some creative outlet, you will dissolve. This week, painting for an hour is a have-to. Maybe in other weeks, it's a hope-to, but if hope-tos stay undone for too long, especially ones that make us feel like ourselves, they sometimes turn into have-tos because we haven't been tending to what is important.

Let's look at how you might incorporate have-tos and hope-tos into your regular to-do list rhythm.

I've shared a number of to-do list strategies on this podcast over the years, and that's for good reason. Depending on your season of life, your personality, your energy, your schedule, your executive functioning, and a million other things, we all need different time management and to-do list strategies at different times.

In super busy seasons, I need to do a brain dump and then categorize those things about six different ways to make sense of them. I make my weekly to-do list from that chaos for a series of weeks, and then I do the whole process again. And then there are other seasons where a quick reminder list on a sticky note is all I need. Sometimes you might need to utilize strategies

like Now, Soon, Later, Never Mind, an approach I shared in episode 288: How to Make the Rest of 2022 Easier. That was awhile ago for sure, but I'm pretty sure it's the first time I shared Now Soon Later Never Mind. It's essentially a way to categorize your to-do list by urgency. When you're not sure what is urgent, assign it. Look at what is swirling around in your brain, and assign it its proper urgency. Maybe you need to group your tasks together by what they are - errands, phone calls, chores - so you can batch it and do them all at once. You can read more about batching in my first book, *The Lazy Genius Way*, and learn about all 13 Lazy Genius principles, not just batch it. Maybe you have finally noticed that you have a huge project written as a single item on your to-do list that you keep moving from list to list, week after week, and you know that you need to break that project down. You can do that with Episode 353: How to Plan a Project and Actually Finish It. Again, there are many strategies in the world, and I've shared a number of them here.

So what makes hope-tos and have-tos different? When is that a strategy that's helpful to choose? Simply, whenever it resonates with you. You don't need particular guidelines to make it work. If separating your list, no matter how much time it captures, seems helpful to you, do it! But if you'd like a little more guidance, here's how you might utilize hope-tos and have-tos.

One spot to use this strategy is at the start of a new season. You're looking ahead to an upcoming season, whether it's a season on the calendar like summer or a season of life like starting a new job. In those times, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by all there is to do. You're seeing a giant expanse of time before you, and you know there are so many things happening within that expanse. You think that the way to feel more in control over that new season is to organize as much as you can, and how do we keep things organized and get our stuff done? With to-do lists.

First, a quick reminder that a great to-do list is not meant to help you feel more in control of your life. We have far less control over our lives than we think. But you can remain yourself, remain human, remain kind, and remain focused on the things that matter to you in this season. If that is your posture and your purpose, you'll more easily get your stuff done. Back to the list though.

At the start of a new season, you might do a Brain Dump and write down all of the things on your mind, all of the things that are overwhelming you, that need a plan, that you'd really like to make happen, and you make one big seasonal list, almost like a seasonal to-do queue. From there, you might find a lot of comfort in separating the have-tos from the hope-tos. A have-to is buying plane tickets for the trip you're taking. A hope-to is to having the fridge cleaned out before you leave. Go ahead and separate the two types of tasks, and you'll feel more freedom if and when you can't get the entire list done. Focus on completing the have-tos and don't get too bogged down in the abject failure of not getting to the hope-tos. You hoped to, and you didn't. That's okay. That's why they're hope-tos.

Another place you might utilize have-tos and hope-tos is when you're in a busy week with a lot to do and you're not sure how you're going to get it all done. Have-tos and hope-tos create a natural triage in how you decide what to do. If you have to do it, you have to do it. Get it done

first. Pay the bills by the due date that's this week. Get pants that fit your kid for their band concert on Friday. Turn in the marketing pitch to your boss by the deadline this week. What absolutely has to be done?

Now, in a busy week, hope-tos can be super helpful, and you get to decide if something is a have-to or a hope-to. In a busy week, putting away the laundry might be a hope-to. Sure, the stack has been sitting on the edge of the bed for over a week, but it can wait a little longer, especially in light of all the have-tos on the list. But then there are times when something that has been a hope-to for awhile suddenly moves to a have-to. If you look at that stack of laundry one more day, you're going to lose it. It's an emotional have-to. That's what I mean when I say you get to decide. You're the only one who really knows if your task is a have-to or hope-to, but the point of the distinction is freedom. It's permission. It's helping you let something go until a later date so that you can clear the decks a little and get the most urgent things done.

I also love using have-tos and hope-tos when I get all dreamy and start thinking about things I might want to do, experience, learn, or change. It's easy for our future dreams to become have-tos. We've been told for a long time that we have to have big dreams. If we don't know what our dreams are, we're not dreaming big enough yet. That's not true. A contented life is a beautiful thing. But because of cultural messages we've been getting over the last 10-20 years, it's easy for us to feel like anything we dream up, we have to do. We're not being faithful to something if we let a dream fade or whatever. Now, that might be true. Again, only you can know what is a have-to and a hope-to. But I find that putting fun ideas and future plans in a hope-to category makes them lighter and feel more accessible than making them have-tos. I like *hope* better than I like *should*. So maybe you'll find freedom in using have-tos and hope-tos when you start to dream.

Okay, let me share how I do this. This is my personal process. Pretty much every week, I make one big Brain Dump list, either from scratch, or I look at my seasonal to-do queue. So I have one big single list. Then based on what is on that list, what I notice about how it can be grouped, I'll rewrite each entry into a new category. Those categories are usually calls, errands, emails, big tasks, little tasks, and those are often divided into work and not work. Really, it's whatever the week requires. But then each of those sections - the errands, calls, big tasks, what have you - are each divided in half, into have-tos and hope-tos. These are the calls I have to make this week, and these are the ones I hope I can get to. These are the errands I have to run this week, and these are the ones I hope I can get to. I basically break my giant to-do list into 6-10 tiny ones, broken up in whatever way makes sense and often with a split of have-to and hope-to. It makes everything smaller and feel lighter.

Right now, it's the end of April, and I'm about to enter the season of Crazy May. I prioritize making this podcast relevant to everyone and not just to parents, and I know that a lot of you listening do not have kids and/or your May is Crazy May for reasons other than kids. For me, Crazy May has everything to do with having three kids. They all have concerts and plays and class parties for weeks on end. They also have things they need for those concerts and plays and class parties for weeks on end. Basically, there's a lot to do in this short upcoming season

of May, and it's a fantastic time to use have-tos and hope-tos on my to-do list. Some things have to get done this week, and others can wait until next. If I can get it done now, great, but I'm not going to run myself ragged getting everything done when not everything *has to get done yet*. Have-tos and hope-tos are so simple but so helpful.

So whether you have a busy season, a busy week, or a busy mind, see if this simple strategy of dividing your tasks into have-tos and hope-tos adds a little lightness and ease to your schedule. And that's a simple strategy for your to-do list.

A great way to start thinking about your have-tos and hope-tos for this upcoming season is to check out The Summer Docket! The Summer Docket is a digital resource we have available every year at this time, and it is now available in our digital store! You can click the link in the show notes or go to thelazygeniuscollective.com/store to get yours! It's like The Holiday Docket but for the summer season, helping you enjoy a fun summer without being overwhelmed by it. And even though it's still April, May will mentally be over in three days. I love thinking about an upcoming season before I'm overwhelmed by the one I'm already in, so if that's you, check out The Summer Docket. Again, that's thelazygeniuscollective.com/store.

Before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it's Danni Washburn. Danni writes this. "Summer/spring is toes-out season and I have nail-color picking anxiety. I decided last summer that what mattered most was that my toes were PAINTED: I didn't care about the color matching my hands or outfit. So, I started picking my annual color for toes. Last year was white. This year, I've selected a cute nude and I will wear this color until it's boot season! This means I get to look at my toes and feel "put together" no matter what bc they're painted (which is what matters to me!)" This is such a great idea, Danni, and super relevant for right now. It's also a fun example of a kind of take on have-tos and hope-tos. For Danni, it matters to her to have her toes painted. Just painted. That's a have-to. The hope-to is if it matches something, but that's necessary. That distinction makes the choice and task of painting her nails so much lighter. So thank you for sharing this tip, Danni, and congratulations on being the Lazy Genius of the Week!

This episode is hosted by me, Kendra Adachi, and executive produced by Kendra Adachi, Jenna Fischer, and Angela Kinsey. The Lazy Genius Podcast is enthusiastically part of the Office Ladies Network. Special thanks to Leah Jarvis for weekly production.

Thanks, y'all, for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!