You're listening to You've Got This, episode 344. Welcome to You've Got This, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day to day demands of an academic life. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder. On this episode, I'm sharing a trick for how to be productive when you are feeling overwhelmed.

Now I know this is definitely something I have talked about in the past, and this kind of, uh, strategy or method recently occurred to me. When I was feeling like I just had a ton on my plate, and this is the time of the year where, when I start to turn my attention to the new term, I know a lot of people are doing that as well, and it can start to feel really overwhelming.

Um, in, in my case, I have a lot of, um, back to campus activities that I'm expected to attend, and this includes some evening events, which are challenging for me after a long day of, of being around folks as an introvert. I, I start to kind of lose my energy. Also, we just have way more people on campus, and it's kind of a startup time for new initiatives that, that take place in the coming academic year.

Um, and I've got some pretty major things that I'm, I'm helping to launch in the next, you know, few weeks. So it's easy for me to start to feel overwhelmed, and I can only imagine for folks who are trying to get their kiddos back to a school schedule, maybe you're trying to complete final prep on new or existing courses, You've got some research projects that you're trying to wrap up.

Um, just more and more is going to start to pile on your plate in the coming weeks. So recently I came up with a new trick that helps me to simplify the things in front of me. And I feel like this is a trick that works really well when you are just feeling like mentally fatigued. So if your cup is kind of empty, but you're like, I'd need to get something done, like maybe that will help me to feel better.

Um, even though I'm feeling like my brain is not, you know, like. fully engaged or I'm kind of tired or depleted. This is a trick that I think can, can potentially help. So the first step is to look around and find two or more things that belong together. And then you just take the step to bring them together.

So let me explain exactly what I mean by this. So, I find this really easy to think about in terms of things to do around the house. So, for example, dishes belong in the dishwasher or the cabinet. Like, in my house at least, they do not belong on the counter or in the sink. So, I can unload them from the dishwasher and put them away and put them where they belong.

Or I can move them from the counter or the sink into the dishwasher to be cleaned. And that's like putting two things that belong together. back together. This is also true for, like, laundry. Laundry belongs in the washing machine or put away in drawers or the closet. So you can kind of look around and see things around your house and it's like, where does this thing belong?

Like, it may not belong where it actually is right now. Mail could be filed into the recycling bin. I can return a stack of books to the library. I can enter my grocery order into the app, you know, I can, uh, deliver donation pile to my local donation center. As you can see, a lot of these things are, they could be just like decluttering, which I think is also, you know, like we, we can feel better when our environment around us is also a little more organized.

But I think it's also about, um, to do items where each item has a place that it belongs. Now, I'm going to talk a little bit later about what about the things that don't have a place where they belong. Um, because that, that's telling as well, and it can be helpful. Um, but first, let me talk about how this might apply to your work to do list.

And I think that this is one of those things where it could feel a little more complicated, but I also was able to find some ideas. that at least for me, this was kind of helpful. So one was adding unscheduled appointments onto your calendar. So for example, if you have, this could be personal appointments too, like maybe you have a doctor's appointment that you need to schedule or a haircut you need to schedule, but maybe you also have just like a committee, you know, schedule that you need to add to your calendar, or you want to add in your course, you know, schedule to your calendar.

Or regular coffee dates with a research collaborator, you know, adding unscheduled appointments on your calendar, and then they're kind of tucked away where they belong. You might also want to, like, complete that email that you've been meaning to draft and send. So, I actually include, you know, especially important emails that I need to be sending out.

On my to do list, you know, this is something that I kind of assign to myself if I have to, like, update, you know, the leadership of our institution about an initiative or something. And it's going to take me a little while to kind of draft that email. But sometimes those emails get put off and you don't necessarily actually complete them.

So this idea of, like, completing something that's, like, maybe 80% or 90% of the way there and getting it where it needs to go, that can be, um, something that kind of falls into this category. For me, I also file emails out of my inbox and into the spaces that I've assigned for them. So when my inbox starts to get really out of control, and I'm, I'm kind of an inbox zero person at work, I really try to not just like leave things in my inbox.

Filing those things away is like a simple thing that I can do to say like, where does this belong? And if I'm not ready to file it away, why am I not ready to file it away? So it's kind of a process of understanding like, why is this thing still here? Why is this still sitting out? When I know where it belongs, but it's not necessarily getting moved into that place.

I also think this counts for things like turning your notes into an article or a report draft. So it's like the evolution of like where something needs to go next in your mind. Like you might have something that you've been kind of collecting notes around. that you want to like put into your note taking system or maybe you can like process those notes and then recycle them because you've already taken action on what you needed to do.

I've actually been keeping a paper notebook that's allowing me to kind of take notes and keep lists when I'm in meetings and things like that. And I try to process it at the end of each week and I just put an X through the things in my notebook that are like no longer relevant. I've already taken action on them.

Or I've already processed them into my to do list, or I've already, like, scheduled that meeting, you know, that was a follow up to the meeting I just had, you know, whatever it is. And that allows me to kind of physically see that that thing is done. Like, I've processed it, and I can move on from it. Um, I also think that this is one of those things where sometimes you need to, like, compile your thoughts into, like, a coordinated action plan.

And I see this as, um, something that maybe you've been thinking about, like, a project or, or some kind of, like, next step for a while. But you haven't really thought through what exactly would it take to move that thing forward. And this is another version of this, like, bringing two or more things that belong together, together.

So it's like taking your thoughts and putting them into a plan. Or taking your thoughts and putting them into a meaningful set of next actions that you can decide what you want to do next. So, um, for example, I might have on my mind, like, oh, I have a conference presentation coming up. I need to actually, like, draft the deck for that.

Like, what is my plan to do that? Like, do I need to do it with anyone else? Is there a particular date on my calendar that it's due? Are there resources I need to gather in order to know, you know, like, what I need to compile for that presentation? Um, So how do I start to kind of coordinate my, just kind of the thought of like, Oh, I should get this done into an actual plan of how I'm going to move it forward.

And the other one that kind of immediately occurred to me was things like assigning readings to the appropriate place on your syllabus draft. So again, if you've just been kind of like compiling things and you're like, okay, you know, I know we're eventually going to get to this reading or, or this topic, where does it actually live, you know, in terms of the syllabus draft.

So it's starting to kind of thinking about like when you're feeling disorganized or overwhelmed. Are there things that are just smaller pieces that have not been connected with something larger where it belongs? And when you can collect a bunch of smaller pieces and connect them to something larger, all of a sudden you have less pieces to deal with because they're kind of starting to connect with other, you know, larger pieces of projects or other things you're working on.

By putting these pieces back together, at least for me, it helps me to feel more organized. And also, when I find that I don't know where something connects to, like when I find something that's kind of an outlier. or I don't know where it belongs, that's also a really important signal to me to identify, like, that might be why I'm, like, stressed about that thing, because I don't know what to do with it, and it's just kind of sitting there.

So, one example of this is, we have been collecting batteries in our house. Because we don't want to throw them away. We want to recycle them, but we don't really have a place where they belong because we had not created like a system for where to ship them or where to take them to be recycled. And recently my partner found this service and they kind of send you a box and you're able to kind of do this recycling service.

But until then, they just kind of like collected on our dining room table and I was like, what are we supposed to do with these? They just sit there, you know, and I, they kind of stare me down because they're, they're sitting there and I don't know what to do as a next step. And that can just be kind of like a subtle form of stress when you have something like that, that's just kind of hanging around and you don't know what you're supposed to do with it.

Now the other thing I found is sometimes those kinds of outlier things indicate to me that it's something that I need to delegate to someone else. So like the battery thing is a great example. My partner kind of took that on and figured out what we were supposed to do with that. And sometimes it also indicates something that I need to move off my plate altogether.

Like it's not my job to do that particular thing. Um, because I don't know how to do it, or I, I don't, you know, it's not important enough to me to kind of figure it out. And so sometimes something gets moved off my list because I, I realize that it's not something that I want to move forward. So I would love to hear if this is a kind of trick or strategy or tactic you can use in your own life, where really you're just trying to figure out where does this thing belong?

That's kind of hanging out in my brain. Maybe taking up some space or even like physical space in your life or work, and you can always email me at hello at drkatylynder. com to share if this is working for you and how it might be working for you. But I do hope this offers a helpful trick if you're starting to feel a little bit overwhelmed as we head into this new academic year.

As we head further into August, I am wishing you a really good start to your term, whatever that looks like for you. And also, just hang in there if you're feeling a little bit overwhelmed and not quite sure how this is all going to work out in the next coming months, um, eventually it'll kind of work its way and maybe this trick will help along the way.

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