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Q&A#119 How To Get Things Done

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And now for something completely different...!

Today's question: "Do you have any productivity advice for someone who struggles to get tasks done?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, do you have any productivity advice for someone who struggles to get tasks done? Well, I'm talking as someone who struggles to get tasks done too, but I often speak to myself about this and consider ways that I can improve my practice. And this is the fundamental way that I think about it.

So, think of yourself as a donkey and a rider. And the donkey is your more animal nature, your desires, your habits, your appetites, your energy levels, your bodily needs, all these sorts of things. It's your, very much your animal nature.

And on the other hand, your rider refers to your aspirations, your ideals, your goals, your values, all these sorts of things. And ideally, you want the rider to be directing the

donkey towards the destination you want to go to. And this relationship is one that plays out in many different levels of society.

So, for instance, you can think about the relationship between social idea of sexuality and then marriage. Marriage is the way that the donkey of our sexuality is directed towards a goal that it would not naturally work to by itself. Through marriage, you can direct the donkey of sexuality towards the building up of a home, creating of a realm of life and union with someone else for a lifelong.

Now, this is not something that the donkey of sexuality naturally wants to work towards, but with a good relationship between the rider and the donkey, you can get there. Now, this also works on the level of individual productivity. By nature, your donkey is uncooperative and stubborn.

Your donkey wants immediate gratification. He wants to wander around in search of carrots or sugar cubes. And the donkey is driven mostly by appetite and desire.

It has a very limited horizon. It sees what is immediately in front of it, but doesn't really see much beyond that. The donkey certainly doesn't plan ahead.

The donkey doesn't make sacrifices for the future. And the donkey, left to its own devices, won't really go anywhere of any interest. The donkey will really just stay in its immediate realm and look for sugar cubes.

But by contrast, the rider has a much wider horizon. The rider is able to imagine all sorts of destinations that he would like to get to. The problem is the rider is sitting on the donkey.

When thinking about these far distant possibilities that the rider imagines, the rider often forgets this fact and doesn't calculate on the stubbornness and the presence of the donkey within his plans. So the donkey, the rider can often presume that given the strength of his own desire and will to get to a certain destination, the donkey will suddenly and magically just cooperate with him. The donkey wants to go in the same direction too, presumably.

If only it were that easy. It does not happen that way. And the rider who hasn't tamed his donkey will find a predictable pattern.

He wants to get to a particular destination. So he wants to get a particular thing written or a particular task finished. And he finds that his donkey is meandering around in search of sugar cubes.

If he's lucky, he may have trained his donkey just enough to get to some less immediate destinations, what we call productive procrastination, but still not really to where he wants to go. And often the donkey will give some sort of token effort. So if the rider

wants the donkey to get to this big thing that they want to achieve, the donkey will put in some token effort and get them to some other destination that isn't quite what they wanted, but has some positive aspects to it, will satisfy the rider for a period of time.

And so that's how productive procrastination works. It's when you find that you need to get your taxes sorted out, but oh, I can sweep the hall. I can vacuum the stairs.

I can prepare this special meal. Suddenly all these tasks become a lot more attractive because you're avoiding the big tasks that you want to get done, that you need to get done. And when the donkey is in search of these sugar cubes, what you'll find is the rider is just fretting and feeling guilty and not able to enjoy the experience at all.

So the donkey has this experience of searching for the sugar cubes and constantly the rider is berating him, is irritated and frustrated with the donkey. And the donkey isn't truly happy either. And on other occasions, the rider is trying to rationalise things to himself, but deep down he knows he's lying.

He knows that the donkeys wandering around is not a good thing. And it's a sign that they have not developed a good coordination and relationship between the two of them. For a rider with an uncooperative donkey, goals and deadlines and plans will seldom work until the donkey sees the threat of immediate negative consequences on its horizon.

Now the rider can see far ahead, it can imagine things many roads ahead, but the donkey can't. The donkey only sees things on the immediate horizon and at that point it's usually too late to get things done. And at that point the donkey can sometimes panic and throw its rider off or bolt for safety.

And on other occasions it may even get the rider to the destination, but the rider will arrive with frayed nerves, exhausted and frustrated and he could have arrived there in a much calmer manner. And for the donkey's part, the donkey is feeling accused and berated and if his rider is irritated with him and maybe slapping him or beating him to get him to the destination, and that's not a happy donkey. Freedom is found when the donkey and the rider act in unison.

When your inner desires, your habits, your appetites and all these sorts of things are brought into union with your ultimate goals, with your values, with your ideals, with your purposes, with the objects, objectives that you have. When you're bringing those things into union with each other, suddenly you find you feel free. Your donkey is happy, your rider is happy.

And too many riders think that the way to get to their destination is merely through strength of desire or will and give little thought to training their donkey. But the freedom is found as you train your donkey and bring the donkey and the rider into union with

each other. Bring the donkey into union with the will of the rider and bring the rider into a healthy and kind relationship with the donkey.

Many people are beating up their donkeys because they just cannot cooperate with them properly. They cannot get down on their levels and be kind to them. A donkey is naturally a limited creature in many ways and unless you work on its level you will end up being cruel to it.

But if you're kind to your donkey you'll end up with a lot more energy, you'll end up with a lot more effectiveness and you'll get to your destinations without all these frayed nerves and irritation. Remember, I think one of the best things that I've found to remember is the greatest prediction of your future relationship with your donkey is your past relationship with your donkey. If you want to think about your future goals and whether you will achieve them or not, think about your past goals and how effective you were in achieving those.

If you have not trained your donkey and if you have not developed this healthier relationship between rider and donkey you'll find that all your future goals won't be achieved. Now as I've mentioned the rider has these very ambitious goals and the donkey does not cooperate. Particularly as those goals become further and further out from the immediate horizon of the donkey, the donkey just does not work very well like that.

So the rider needs to get down on the level of the donkey and develop that relationship if the rider and the donkey are going to get to desirable destinations. Now donkeys are a tricky beast to handle. Many riders are fooled into thinking that their donkey is cooperating only to find their donkey stopping in its tracks.

And again the donkey thinks only about what's directly in front of him. And riders can often think that they're making real progress towards their destinations when they do various little token tasks that seem to be in the direction of their larger goals. So if someone has this big task that they want to do, they'll write a list, they'll buy some books that they intend to read, they'll buy some equipment, they will write something in a diary, they will watch a video on procrastination, they'll do all these sorts of things and it never actually materialized.

Faced with a destination they have no intention of working towards, donkeys will often give token cooperation to their riders after which their riders will be less irritated with them and may even reward them with sugar cubes. And they're not getting to their destination. There's no reason why the donkey has to be their rider's enemy.

Indeed if you have a proper relationship with your donkey and your rider, your donkey can be your best friend. And freedom as I've mentioned is found in the union of rider and donkey, not in the freedom of the donkey from the rider as people often think about it.

The true freedom is found when you want to do the things that get you to your greater destination.

When your desires and your appetites and your habits are pushing you in the right direction. When you're no longer having to struggle against those things but they are moving you in the way that you want to go. Now if you don't have those things behind you, you'll often find you are less effective than if you have a positive relationship between donkey and rider.

Donkeys don't have good memories but every donkey feels happiest when their rider is genuinely happy with them and treats them kindly. And a donkey that cooperates with their rider enjoys far better conditions than one that doesn't. If your donkey cooperates with your rider, your donkey will be treated well.

Your donkey will be a happy creature. Your donkey will be fed well. Your donkey will be able to have guilt-free relaxation.

All these sorts of things that we long for but we don't get when we're in this tension within ourselves. And so a rider with a good relationship with his donkey can train his donkey to make sacrifices for the future and those will lead to positive outcomes not just for the rider but also for the donkey. Now we tend to work naturally with guilt and panic as our motivators and those don't work very well as motivators.

Guilt can often end up taking the... it can end up making us less effective than we would be without it and panic doesn't always lead to productive forms of action. It only works on the immediate horizon and it also can lead us just to throw up our hands and run around in circles. It can leave us just frozen whatever it is.

You need to think about better motivators and most of the time these do not work until later on and often too late and they can leave you feeling miserable and guilty. So you need to think about a proper relationship between your donkey and your rider if you're going to be productive. So go down on your donkey's level.

Think about your donkey. Your donkey is an easily distracted creature. Your donkey has little sense of the past or the future.

Your donkey is a creature of habit, a relatively lazy beast and it's not especially smart and it's a creature of appetite and rather than just beating itself up for that fact you need to work with those limitations and see what you can make out of that. So first of all think about your donkey as a creature of distractions. Well how do you deal with that? You ruthlessly remove distractions.

When the sugar cubes aren't easily accessible the donkey will be less distracted by them. So what do you do? You remove the sugar cubes from the immediate realm of the donkey and then make the path that you want to go on the most attractive one for the

donkey and often that can be through external controls. It can be through things like having a set time that you're working in.

It can be having external limitations that you have upon you that you turn off your internet connection for several hours of the day or that you leave your mobile phone off or you say you'll only check your email twice a day and you'll deal with it in those particular windows of time. Anything outside of that you ignore. It can be finding a quiet room where there are not people around to distract you.

Now obviously we all have limits this way particularly if you have kids there are some external factors that you just can't sound out. You just can't remove from the scene. You have to deal with that and you make of these situations what you can.

What you ideally need to do is, I mean in some ways training your kids is like training your donkey. If you can train your donkey well you should be able to train your kids well because they are creatures that are very much driven by the donkey within them and they haven't yet developed an effective rider. And so what you're doing as a rider is someone who's teaching them to control that.

You're first of all teaching them as a donkey and then you're teaching them to develop their own internal rider so that they do not just follow their appetites. That they do not just throw tantrums. They do not just go for whatever they want immediately but they learn to make sacrifices.

They learn to work in a way that brings the rider, a newly developing rider and their internal donkey into a coordination with each other. Work on developing healthy habits. When something becomes habitual for your donkey you'll find that you need to expend a lot less effort on it and so reshaping habits can be really tough at first but it can rapidly become easier as you develop momentum.

For instance, if you have a particular trigger that sets in, sets rolling a particular pattern of behavior, identify the trigger and redirect that trigger towards something else. So for instance maybe your donkey, whenever you reach the end of a paragraph you're writing, your donkey wants the sugar cube of going on Facebook and then once it's gone on Facebook it wants to check its email and then wants to check Twitter and then it wants to go through that cycle again perhaps. Whatever it's doing and you'll find sure enough you've wasted half an hour because you've not controlled your donkey and you've got this cycle and habit that just distracts you and destroys any momentum you might have.

So what you need to do is recognize the trigger. Now that trigger may be I've reached the end of a paragraph and for that moment of time my attention is no longer so engaged and my donkey wanders off in search of sugar cubes. So at that point I need to redirect that.

Now sometimes you can just learn to resist it but other times you need to redirect it for a period of time. So have a bowl of nuts for instance next to your desk and every time you reach an end of a paragraph eat a single nut rather than actually going through this cycle of wasting time online. Again it would be easier if you just turned off your internet connection and your mobile and phone.

Turn those things off completely for that period of time you want to get work done. Other things. If you want to recognize your you need to recognize your procrastination and avoidance cycles.

Often you will act out of aversion to unwelcome work and that's the donkey within you that just sees this difficult task and does not want to do it. Don't give your donkey time to think about this or to get into this funk. You need to actually deal with your donkey immediately.

Get it moving and don't allow it to pause and to get into that aversion cycle because when that aversion cycle develops you'll find you're constantly avoiding this task and you'll have lots of other tasks that you'll take up rather than actually do the thing that you need to do. Do the thing that you need to do right away. First thing in the morning do that task that you are avoiding that you're most likely to avoid and once you've done that everything will be easier and it deals with things in a way that will make your donkey happier in the longer term and it will also save you a lot of fretting a lot of a procrastination cycle of feeling guilty and ineffective and just worthless because you're not doing what you need to do.

Do the tough thing right away. Don't give your donkey time to fret about it or think about it or to get into the aversion cycle. Think a lot more about momentum.

Now we tend to think about just absolute blocks of time. How much time am I giving to this particular task? That's in my experience that's not the best way to think about things. Your donkey is not a creature that stops and starts.

Your donkey every time your donkey stops it will cost you a significant amount of time to get him moving again and most of the time you'll find will end up being spent struggling with your donkey or hanging around while he's eating sugar cubes. You need to get your donkey moving and keep your donkey moving and the more that you keep your donkey moving the less you will have to waste time getting him moving again after he's stopped. So again first thing in the morning start moving.

Do the tough task right away. Develop that get over the brow of that hill and once you've gotten over the brow of the hill everything will be downhill from then on. It will be easier and your donkey will not feel that it's having to get up this energy all the time.

It's done the difficult task and things can be more relaxed from that point. It's important

to also aim for long periods of time without interruption. Every successive hour that you're working on a particular project you're developing more momentum until you start to become tired but that's the tiredness of your donkey is a lot further out than the lack of attention or its ability to be distracted and all these sorts of things.

Your donkey takes a while to get tired but it can very easily be distracted and lose momentum, lose interest. So what you need to do is get your donkey moving and keep your donkey moving for a longer period of time and every period of time that you keep it moving you'll find that it speeds up. That you're not having to keep it stopping and starting and each hour will be more productive than the previous one.

So focus less upon just the amount of time you're giving and think more about momentum and flow. If you develop a flow your donkey moves very naturally and you're not struggling with your donkey. When your donkey has developed a momentum and a flow you're not having to struggle with your donkey.

Your donkey is moving for you. Fragmented time on the other hand is a very limited value so focus upon uninterrupted time. Time that isn't going to be broken up in any way.

Don't wait for the perfect conditions. Perfectionism is a great excuse for not getting things done and when you constantly give into your donkey for instance your donkey doesn't want to go out when it's raining and your donkey as a creature of habit will be much less useful to you if you're always giving into it in those occasions. Because as a creature of habit it will internalize that lesson that when it's raining I don't do anything and that's not what you want your donkey to internalize.

You'll struggle with your donkey on the first few occasions but don't wait for the perfect conditions. Just move right away and as you move right away the donkey will start to become more and more cooperative over time because it's a creature of habit. Get the support of other people around you.

I think this is something I've found helpful. Keep good company. Hang around with people who are disciplined workers who are managing their donkeys well.

Work in groups of people where there is a sort of collective rider and a rider that knows how to manage donkeys well and you'll find that that can externalize some of your task of managing your donkey. When a lot of donkeys are working alongside each other they will be more cooperative just because they're moving with each other. If you're trying to manage your donkey all the time by yourself you'll find it harder.

Now that doesn't mean that there aren't occasions where you need to do that. If you work by yourself you will need to manage your own donkey but if you're working in a group it's easier because there is usually a rider donkey relationship already operating

there and you can play into that. Make laziness and inaction uncomfortable for your donkey and cooperation pleasant and appealing.

So reward your donkey when it cooperates and if laziness and inaction is what comes naturally to your donkey and it comes naturally to every donkey then try and make that uncomfortable for your donkey. Set more immediate goals. Turn the heat up a bit.

Have a situation where if you do not get things done it will be unpleasant for you and you need to work to keep things pleasant for you and then you'll find your donkey will move. Now if you're just mean to your donkey, if you're always beating it, your donkey will not work very well. What you need to do is give some degree of aversion to just being lazy.

Get your donkey moving but be kind to your donkey as it moves on the right path. So reward it as it goes along. When you reach a particular goal then give it a sugar cube but give it a guilt-free sugar cube.

Something that it can enjoy truly and give it a pat on the head and show that you appreciate it. Don't treat it in a bad way. Enable your body to and just your animal nature to be pleased, to enjoy itself.

Treat your body well. Feed yourself well. Sleep well.

Exercise. Those are all things that will help your donkey work for you. If you're not keeping your donkey well treated you'll find that it just cannot bear the burdens that you'll put on it and many people struggle with this I think.

So treat your body well. Other things. Think less about your final destination and think more about the itinerary that will lead you to that and that itinerary is not just a desire, an aspiration, I would like to get to this destination.

It needs to be broken down to specific chunks of action. To get to that destination I need to do this, then this, then this, A, B, C, D etc and think about it step by step. The specific steps that will take you to that destination and then place points upon your horizon as you go along and that's working on the donkey's own terms.

That's how the donkey works. So you work that way too. Get the donkey to that point on the horizon, then to the next point on the horizon, then to the next and as the donkey moves along reward it and treat it well.

Break big tasks down into lot of little tasks. Get to know your donkey and become wise to its tricks. You in your animal nature, you need to get to know yourself.

You need to get to know how you work, where you work best, what things actually excite your donkey, what things are deep aversions for your donkey and think how you can

work in terms of that. How you can change it a bit, how you can mold it a bit but also how you can accommodate it and then think about ways that you can reward your donkey. What does your donkey really enjoy? What makes your donkey really want to work with you and for you? Think about it that way and get to know the cycles and the habits and all these sorts of things about your donkey.

That's how you train an animal. You have to learn how it works on its terms. Don't just expect it to cooperate with you on your terms.

You first have to understand it if you want it to make it work for you. Make your destination and your journey towards it easier for your donkey. As I've said, keep lots of little rewards to give to your donkey on the way and allow your donkey truly to enjoy himself when he arrives and do this consistently and your donkey as a creature of habit will become a lot more cooperative.

It will know my ride is a good person, my rider likes me, my rider is good to me and as a result I work with my rider and when that relationship is healthy and maintained you'll find that your donkey works for you. Also be aware that the rider can be a problem too. There are many ways the rider can be distracted so learn to be for instance less obliging.

Say no a lot more often. People will respect your time a lot more if you are more disciplined in how you handle it and this is something I've found that if you do not say no you'll find lots and lots and lots of things put on your plate that you just do not have the time to do. If possible and to the extent that it is possible, focus on work that you love and the idea that if you love what you do you'll never work a day in your life.

There's some truth to that that if you find something that your donkey can truly find pleasure in, that there's something about your appetites that you have a passion for this particular sort of work, that you find it delightful to do this particular sort of thing with your hands for instance or this particular area of interest that you can explore it and you find a lot of pleasure in that. Cultivate that and see the ways that you can work with your donkey that way, your donkey's natural preferences. Often you'll find that will be the area in which you are most effective.

You can learn these, I mean I've found for me it's often interest in theology. I have a natural interest in that and so it's not so much work to spend hours a day studying and writing on that subject whereas it would be for someone else. Now partly that is because I've trained my donkey but also much of it is just I have a natural appetite for those things and so I work with the donkey and I work with the rider to try and bring them together into a more productive union.

If you don't currently love your work give careful thought to ways to make it more enjoyable. Now thinking about things from that level, not just thinking about the immediate task in front of you but thinking about the more the higher level of how can I

make the way that I work more enjoyable for my donkey. How can I develop this good relationship with my donkey that will make everything easier for you.

It's not just the specific task that you want to do now it's every single task that you do will become easier as a result. Now I've been talking to this point about the relationship between donkey and rider and the consistency between the two but there are other forms of consistency within the self that we need to think about and there is a natural multiplicity to ourselves and our task in many ways if we're going to be productive and effective and persons of integrity our task is to form union between these various different aspects of the self. So for instance union between past and future self.

How do we form a union between our past and future self? In many ways it's through making and keeping promises to ourselves. Now we can think a lot about sunk cost fallacy the idea that if you've put a lot of money into a particular venture and the venture isn't actually giving you anything in reward and you're losing money don't just put more money in after the money that you've lost to try and recoup your losses. Recognise that it's the last investment and you've lost that money and don't just follow the sunk cost fallacy rather put your money somewhere where it would be more fruitful.

That's not how we should work with our lives. There are more complex considerations to take into mind there. When we're thinking about the course of our lives we need to realise that there is we work according to sacrifice and sacrifice is giving up current gratification, immediate gratification for something in the future and so it's being low time being someone who sacrifices a lot for the future is being someone who has a low time preference who does not value the immediate time so much greater than the time in the future.

Rather we're prepared to wait for things for good things. Now how do you work that out? How it works out often is by keeping a good relationship between your current rider and your future rider and your past rider and a lot of this comes down to keeping your promises to yourself. Making and keeping promises to yourself and that is how you forge consistency over time.

People who do not make and keep promises to themselves end up fragmented. They end up lacking integrity. When we think about something like marriage, marriage is a vow that you make to yourself in order that you'll make a consistency of life between your current self and your future self and in that consistency of life there is a unity of life and an integrity that makes it possible for us to produce things that we would never be able to produce otherwise because you're getting your past and your future self to work in cooperation.

You're not allowing your current self just to be caught into its own immediate more immediate goals but you're making a deeper set course of action that you're committed to following through and decisions are not so much about that initial statement I'm going

to do this or I'm going to do that. A decision is the ability to cut off. The ability to cut off from all the other possibilities and to follow through with that choice that you've made.

So the decision is about the following through less than about the original choice. Now when we think about what it means to be people who keep make and keep promises to ourselves we will find that it is important to value the sacrifices that we have made in the past and that means not thinking in terms of the sunk cost fallacy. I've started doing this PhD let's say and I've been doing this PhD for a couple of years and I do not feel inspired by it anymore maybe I'll just drop out.

Now if you think that way you are reneging on the sacrifices that your past self made and the meaning of your past self is invested within those sacrifices and if you become a person that does not keep your promises to yourself you'll end up not being able to make promises that keep that are effectual and if you want to make effectual promises promises that make you productive and powerful you need to follow through on the promises that you have made to yourself in the past. Value those promises, value the sacrifices that you made for yourself. Also value the sacrifices that other people have made for you because the meaning of our work is often found again we make sacrifices and we make sacrifices because we believe that they will be rewarded at some point in the future.

We give up immediate gratification for something later on down the line. Now if people do not value our sacrifices we do not make those sacrifices and so to be people that whose sacrifices are valued we need to value other people's sacrifices and that requires particularly a generational thing that you respect what your I mean an honouring of your father and mother and in an honouring of your father and mother there's also something about your own integrity within that. It's honouring what has gone before in your own life what your parents have done for you but also what you have done for yourself the ways that you have invested in your future honour that and respect that and then make commitments to your future well down the line and as you do that you'll find that your riders start to work together that they become a unified rider that your life is heading somewhere consistent and you're producing things that aren't just a thing over here a thing over there a thing over there but you're working towards a consistent aim and your life has a unity of purpose and destination and that I believe is how you become more productive.

Now it takes a lot to get these lessons into yourself. It's one thing to know this in principle it's another thing to train your donkey and learn to think well as a rider. This requires daily effort and it requires being kind with yourself when you fail to pick yourself up that requires both kindness and it requires strictness that on the one hand you're not going to coddle yourself you're not going to allow yourself just to languish and have these sorts of cycles of guilty pleasure where you're indulging your donkey because you just lose faith in getting towards your destination.

Rather be strict with yourself but also be kind with yourself. Recognise the ways in which you need to look after your body the ways in which you need to give yourself rewards you need to find pleasure in your work get people around you who encourage you and all these sorts of things and that's how you become more effective. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing you have found this helpful it's not my usual sort of video to do um so I may not do something like this again but if you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account and if you'd like to support this and other videos like it and a lot of videos unlike it please do so using my PayPal or Patreon accounts. Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow.