WELLNESS TIPS

THE CASE FOR USING "TO-DO" LISTS

A to-do list is basically a list of priorities, goals, or tasks that you want to accomplish, from long-term goals covering years to what you want to accomplish today.

ADVANTAGES OF TO-DO LISTS

- To-do lists provide structure and improve organization by identifying what you want to accomplish. Prioritizing items provides direction for what to do next and decreases likelihood of becoming side-tracked, contributing to more efficient use of time. Lists can be created and revised fairly quickly.   Overall, using to-do lists can save you time.

- Lists can contribute to decreased stress and anxiety.   Research shows that having a plan decreases anxiety. This results in feeling less overwhelmed, with increased sense of control.

- Lists benchmark progress, contributing to a sense of accomplishment.

- Because many tasks or projects that need to be accomplished are not related, they do not provide a cue for what to work on next.   Lists provide that direction, decreasing the energy needed and distraction of trying to remember what needs to be done next.

- To-do list can hold one more accountable when it is written out, like an informal contract.

- Lists can support flexibility. They are easy to reorganize when additional tasks need to be added. It is also easier to adjust priorities and rearrange items if the list becomes too long. They can help you identify how you might use unexpected available time.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Keep your list to a manageable number of items. A common mistake is putting too many items on the list. This results in feeling discouraged and concluding that lists are not helpful because the end is never reached. Although there will be days when everything will not get done, it is disheartening if this becomes the default.

- Be realistic about how long a task will take. There is only so much time in the day. If you are not able to complete an item on the list in 1-2 hours, break it down into smaller sections. This highlights progress being made and avoids a natural tendency to put off tackling big tasks. Consider making a checklist if a big task is complex, to make sure you complete all the steps needed.

- Prioritize the items on your list.   Some people are creative, using color codes, for example, or other visual cues.

- Lists help us recognize accomplishments and some people gain a sense of satisfaction and motivation by crossing off completed tasks from a written list. Research shows this simple act releases dopamine! If your list is digital, consider making a "done" list. Highlighting what has been accomplished is supported by the Zeigarnik Effect, named after a Russian psychologist, which is the brain's tendency to focus on what is imminently most pressing and forget what has been done.

- Revise your list as needed.   Add new tasks to your list as they come to mind or occur. Although you do not have work on them right away, putting it on your list frees your mind from dwelling on it or having to remember to put on the list later.   Re-evaluate as you progress through your list. Is it still realistic? Should it be modified?

TYPES OF LISTS AND STRATEGIES FOR USING TO-DO LISTS

There are a myriad of methods, types, and formats for organizing lists.

Formats

Formats include handwritten lists, lists on a digital calendar, and digital task managers. Each has its advantages.   There are many digital task manager apps to choose from and have capabilities such as reminders of upcoming deadlines, synchronizing with phone or email, sharing on group projects, and they easily update, reorder, and prioritize tasks.

Strategies

- There are no hard and fast strategies. Everyone has a preference for what works best for them.

- Some people keep several lists, such as daily, weekly, monthly, or longer term. Some keep separate lists for different types of activities such as work/school and personal. Be careful not to make it too complicated and become the person who has a list of your lists!

- Many experts recommend beginning with the most important task. Despite the lure of beginning with easier tasks (as a "warm up"), it does not tend to be the most productive. Even easy tasks take energy, you may be distracted by the more important task anyway, and you might run out of time to complete the most important tasks.

- The 80 20 Rule's strategy is to identify and prioritize 10 goals, then focus on completing the top two. This rule is based on the premise that 80% of your results will be accounted for by the top two (20%) tasks. Or as Brian Tracy puts it: "Eat the biggest frog first."

- The guidelines for the 1-3-5 Rule's focus on a combination: completing 1 big task, 3 medium tasks, and 5 small tasks.

- Another strategy recommends using the list as a guide and choosing one task, putting it on Post-It where you will readily see it while working on that task.

CONCLUSION

To-do lists are not for everyone. But for many people, they are helpful in being more organized and productive. They can help you remember what needs to be done, what your priorities are, moderate anxiety and stress, and support productivity and feelings of accomplishment.   They can be adapted and personalized to best fit your needs, using the format that you find most appealing.

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Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

 https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources

If you would like to discuss questions or concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment.

Be proactive and stay well!

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