

Lesson 8, Irritants—Eliminating Unfinished Tasks (Video Transcript)

Hi and welcome to another video in the Time to Change video series by The Practical Disciple. I'm John Arnold and today I am going to talk to you about what I call 'Irritants'. **An irritant is one of those tasks hanging out there** and all it really does is irritate you because it is incomplete. It's unfinished. Allyson Lewis, author of The Seven Minute Difference, she refers to them as unfinished tasks.

I am going to talk to you about eliminating those in your life because **irritants are silent suckers of your energy and your productivity**. When you have something and it is unfinished, mentally it is stewing around in your subconscious and when you bump into it, it stresses you briefly. Now an irritant can be something really simple: a button that needs to be replaced on a pair of pants, a simple home repair that needs to occur, maybe it's dropping something off at a donation center. It's just one of those tasks that you never seem to find time for. Back when I had my bottomless to do list, back before I had my 5 before 11, those tended to be the things that got carried over from list to list to list to list. I would never address them and they would sit there and just irritate me.

So, here is how we are going to go about getting rid of them. **The first thing that you are going to do is create a master list of all of the irritants that you have right now**, the things that are left out there unfinished that you haven't done. I actually use Allyson Lewis's, 7 Minute Daily Life Planner and in it she has an unfinished master list that you create. In my daily planner a little over thirty days ago, I listed twenty-five unfinished tasks that I wanted to address. Eleven of those, I have crossed off in just a little over thirty days. My planner is a ninety day planner. At the end of that ninety days, I can guarantee that I will be through with those and more.

I have to confess something. Most of the irritants that are on that list, they are things that have been sitting in my life for months driving me crazy. Things like cleaning up the garage. The first one I did was sewing a button on a pair of suit pants. That button probably fell off over a year ago. I would go to get ready for something and I would pull out the suit pants and let out a frustrated sigh and recall the button was missing. Half the time I would say, "Forget it. I am going to put on a belt. Cover it up and hide it. Nobody will ever know. I'll pin it." Well, that's

crazy to live that way. It wasn't until I created my master list that I knocked it out of the way.

Now once you have the master list, I found that to be effective with it, there are two things that I do. **Along side my master list, I list the first action that I need to take in order to finish that task.** So, for instance...and there is a funny story behind this one...I have replace light in laundry room and next to it I have find spackle. You know there was a lot more to that job than just finding the spackling. **I find that many of these tasks, it's just that we have mental block against doing them and if we can just take the first step we will often times finish the whole task.**

I said that there was a funny story to replacing that light. I had put down 'find spackling.' Now one day, I had scheduled...and that's the second tip I want you to pay attention to—**You want to schedule when you are going to take the first step in a task.** I have my master list. I put down the first step and then when I look at my list on my calendar for the day I will list unfinished tasks that I want to get done. And then, I will schedule them. I will set an appointment. I will set a time for when I am going to do them. I don't do that when I generate my list. What happens is, when I am planning a day, I will jump back periodically and look at my unfinished task list and say, "You know what, I could bite this off today. I'll do that at four o'clock when I get home."

So, going back to my story. Alright I had moved into a house about two years ago. I was in there just a few weeks and a light went out in a big fluorescent fixture in our laundry room. I got up on a ladder and I was opening up the fixture to change the bulbs. It was a big heavy wood frame fixture and the whole thing pulled out of the ceiling. It left four big toggle bolt holes and no functioning light in our laundry room. For probably a year and a half, I had a lamp sitting on our washer...actually, sitting on our dryer in the laundry room...and we had no light that we could turn on. Yet, reflexively I would come through and flip the switch and give a disgusted sigh and remember that I hadn't replaced the light yet. So, I put it on my master list when I created that and wrote down find spackling.

One day at two o'clock I had scheduled, "find spackling." I went out into my garage and poked around in my cabinets. It didn't take me but a couple of minutes and I found it. It was quick drying vinyl spackling. I thought, "You know what, now I know where it is. I'll go ahead and at least patch these four little holes." I got a step ladder out. I patched the four little holes and thought, "You know I have time. I bet I have paint for this. I went out. I looked around in a closet. Found

some paint and gave the spackling some time to dry. Once it was dry, I painted it. Long story short, by the end of the night I had the whole new light fixture hung. I ran out to the store and got new bulbs for it and I went to bed with the light fixture replaced. All I had intended to do was find the spackling.

What I learned out of that lesson and what I have learned out of most of these unfinished tasks in writing down the first step, is that it is such a mental game that we play with ourselves. We just need to get the ball rolling. **So, I write that first action step down and I know that if I can just get me to do that then I am likely to finish the whole thing. If I don't, its okay. I have made progress.**

With every task there is kind of a friction that we have to get beyond. If you have ever been pushing something heavy like a couch or a large box across a surface, at first, you push and you push and you push and it doesn't feel like it wants to move. That's because there is what's called a coefficient of friction between that object and the surface it rests on. That coefficient is higher when it is at rest than when it is moving. Once you pop it loose it actually takes a fraction of the effort to keep it moving.

Now given that illustration, I want you to extend that concept to your whole list and here is how. I want you to take...once you have made your master list...I want you to **pick the five absolute easiest things on your list to do and do those first**. That is to get you over that mental hump of being able to do them. Pick your five easiest ones and do those first.

So let's recap. You are going to make a master list somewhere. It can be in your day timer. It can be on a clipboard, whatever, but you are going to create a master list. On your master list alongside each of those things you need to do, you are going to write down the first action you need to take. Then **periodically you are going to look at that list and you are going to put a time down for when you are going to address it**. Otherwise, it is just going to float around out there and never get done. I can guarantee that from my own experience. If you will just do that fairly regularly...you don't have to do it every day. I may go three or four days without addressing an unfinished task, but then I may kick out three or four easy ones all on one day. The key is to just perpetually keep going back and scheduling them and over time you will get rid of them...I guarantee that over time it is going to free up so much mental energy for you.

The last thing I will say is this. Once you start doing it, it's going to reset your bar about unfinished tasks. Now I find little things that I thought I was too busy to do

and I would have kind of put them off--I don't put them off. I just do them and that's because I now have a winning edge on that mental game around unfinished tasks. So, put that to work and I look forward to seeing you in the next video.