

A Deep Dive into Actually Completing Current Projects and Next Actions



By April and Eric Perry



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In the popular story, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie...*, we read about a little mouse who jumps from activity to activity all day long.

It's humorous to read, but sometimes it hits a little close to home when we think about how we sometimes do the exact same thing. For example...

- You open your computer to type two specific emails.
- But then you see a message from a friend reminding you to order tickets for a group event this weekend, so you click the link to order those tickets before they sell out.
- Then you realize you didn't clear the date with your spouse, so you go to send a quick text message.
- When you open your phone, you see a notification from a client who needs to talk with you this afternoon.
- You open your calendar to see if you're available, but you realize you actually have a different appointment starting in ten minutes that totally slipped your mind.
- You jump up from your computer—never actually sending those two emails you intended to send, and you spend the rest of the day putting out fires, hoping there won't be new ones tomorrow. (But you know there probably will be...)

This scenario plays out uniquely in each of our lives, but we don't have to live this way. There is a better option.

In this lesson, I will show you simple strategies to get your life in order so you *never have to be in fire-fighting mode again*.

If you want this to make a difference in your life, please don't just file this eBook or decide to come back to it later. (You know what will happen...)

Carve out 10 minutes today and *do this*.

We've created these lessons in a way that will encourage you to work together with a spouse or another family member. And you'll feel incredible by the time you've completed the simple assignment we've prepared for you at the end of each lesson.

All right, ready to go?

Lesson #1: Create Your Current Projects List

Now you might be tempted to skip this step by saying to yourself, “I know what I need to do!”
But do you really?

Are you bouncing from one project to the next—and never actually getting anything past the finish line?
Do you have a short, focused list of no more than seven or eight current projects that you are actually working on this month?

If we asked you to show it to us, could you do so?

Here’s what you need to know about a Current Projects List:

*(A) A **project** is a multi-step task that has a beginning and an end.*

These aren’t routines, like doing your laundry or running your business. Instead, it’s something like “organizing the laundry room” or “creating my company logo and colors.”

*(B) **Current** means that you’re working on it this month.*

And we recommend you have no more than seven or eight.

If you have 163 projects written on your list and you are *genuinely* working on all 163 *right now*, that’s fine.
But chances are that those extra 150+ projects are only stressing you out.

That’s why you’re snapping at your family members and getting a headache when you look at your list.
That’s why your stomach hurts when you’re trying to get your kids to bed.

Your mind wants to be responsible, trustworthy, and productive, but every single day, when you think about that big long list that is *not* getting checked off, your mind says, “You are FAILING!”

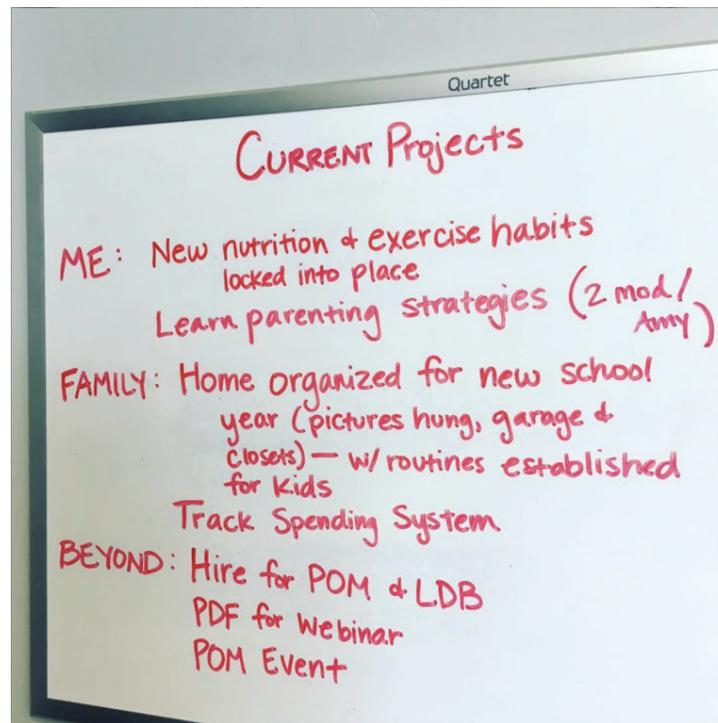
Not true. *You just have too many items on your list.*

See? Aren’t you breathing better already?

(C) Your Current Projects List includes projects for yourself, for your family, and for other activities beyond the home.

- Projects for yourself can include things like, “Play three songs on the guitar,” “Establish a new exercise routine,” or “Go through the *Steps to Everyday Productivity* (STEP) program and build my STEP Command Central.”
- Projects for your family can include organizing a specific room in the house or planning a family vacation.
- Projects for activities beyond the home include things for work or volunteer positions. Maybe something like “Coordinate with Brenda for the December employee event.”

Here's an example of my (April's) Current Projects List:



And here's how Eric creates his—using Excel. He brainstorms a *bunch* of projects within categories that are essentially “Me, My Family, and Beyond,” and then he picks the top 8 projects to be *current* projects:

All My Projects [Example of Noting Projects by CATEGORIES]

Personal Organize project folders into file drawer Organize writing projects/materials (Evernote) Coordinate personal calendars in Google/MC Learn to read faster and photo memorize Learn to play guitar (C, A, D, G, Em chords)	Couple Plan overnight getaway with April Decide on summer program for children Evaluate IRA and portfolio options
Family Plan family Yosemite camping trip Look into travel ball team for daughter Prep family/home for new puppy Determine back to school budget	Service Opportunities Sign-up for community service website Help older neighbor plant flower beds Help son complete literacy training program
PTA/School Identify and call interested parents	Consulting Client Build ad/page framework for new products

Current Projects [Select 7-8 per month--FOCUS]	
Organize project folders into file drawer	Organize Dad's paperwork into a box
Decide on summer program for children	Bathroom organization and cleaning system
Plan family Yosemite camping trip	Identify and call interested parents
Create promo content for product launch	Learn to play guitar (C, A, D, G, Em chords)

Household Bathroom organization and cleaning system Household/hygiene item inventory and system Get technology storage in one place/organized	Home Improvement Create account and call for utility service Get bids on back patio cover/concrete
Business Development Look into CPA (and S-Corp) Set lunches with associates (Lyon, Bennett) Develop new marketing plan for program	Community Leadership Role Prepare for Thomas meeting to discuss role Prep agenda and hold first meeting

While we have separate Current Projects Lists each month, we *share* them with each other so we can coordinate our efforts and give each other support. It's really important that you know what *you* are doing this month. And if you're in a family where other people are also working on projects, it's wonderful to know the areas where you can be helpful!

Ready to take action?

Your Assignment:

Part 1:

Do a brainstorm or "mind sweep" of all the projects you'd *like* to accomplish. This is where you can list all 163.

Part 2:

Pick the top projects you'd like to work on *this month*.

Again, we recommend no more than seven or eight, but it can be as little as one or two. Don't panic here. We always hear people ask, "How can I possibly choose just a *few*?"

Here's the answer: Think of this like a game of dominoes. You can get to all of them, eventually, but you want to start with the ones that will have the greatest effect on your life. They will help you build momentum. And think about it—if you do not narrow your choice, you are—by default—most likely choosing zero.

We do not want to spin our wheels anymore. We want to have a tailored, focused list. It feels incredible.

Lesson #2:

Okay, so once you have 7 or 8 current projects on your list, what do *you* do? How do you keep from feeling overwhelmed?

Here's an example from the Perry household:



Has *your* garage ever looked like that?

I could go through and explain each and every part of that mess—like how our green carpet steamer broke three years ago, but I never tried to get it repaired. Or how we went camping, but just kind of threw everything in the garage when we got back because it was really late at night, and we were totally exhausted.

But what's most important is what we *did* with all of it.

First step? We wrote “Clean the Garage” on each of our Current Projects Lists.

Second step? We identified our *very next action*.

*A Next Action is the next specific, visible activity that will lead a project toward completion. (This is from David Allen's book, **Getting Things Done.**)*

Ours was to simply have a calendaring session and pick a couple of days out of the month when we would prioritize the garage.

That took five minutes, and then we spent the whole afternoon cleaning things up last Saturday. (The garage looks so much better!)

Now here's the key to Next Actions (and if you learn this one skill, you will never procrastinate ever again):

When you are identifying your Next Action, you need to boil it ALL the way down to the most basic step.

If the Next Action you choose is actually a multi-step task—or something that can't be done until another task is completed first, your brain will freeze, and you will say to yourself, "Oh, I'll just think about this later."

But that project is still hanging out in your brain and is stressing you out...maybe without you even being aware of it.

Instead, just stop for a moment, think about the most basic, easy, no-brainer of a step that needs to happen in order to move your project forward, and you *write that step down*.

Because this is such an important concept, we've put together a super simple worksheet to help you practice.

Your Assignment: Identifying Next Actions

On the left side of this chart, record three projects that are weighing heavily on your mind.

Then on the right, identify the very next action required to move this project forward. Your goal? Boil the Next Action ALL the way down—so there is absolutely no reason for you to procrastinate!

<i>Project</i>	<i>Next Action</i>

Lesson #3:

We're now going to talk about how to organize your Next Actions in a way that will practically eliminate your stress.

Most people's "to-do" lists include things like this:

- Clean Desk
- Backyard
- Email Rosie
- Plan Vacation
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Exercise
- Snack for Preschool
- Check Airline Miles
- Pay Bills
- Gift for Mom
- Ink for Printer
- Weekly Appointment with Jim

Clearly what's *on* the lists changes day to day, but here are a few reasons why this set-up isn't optimal:

a. Most to-do lists include projects.

As we learned in Lesson #1, projects are multi-step tasks that can't typically be done in one sitting. When you write something like "Plan Vacation" or "Backyard" or "Clean Desk" on your to-do list, you most likely won't get those things done in one day. So you can't *really* check them off, and then you feel like you failed.

Instead, those projects would go on your Current Projects List or they would be waiting next in line, if they didn't fit within the 7-8 projects for this month. And then you would *only* have the Next Actions for each project you're working on *that week* written on your to-do list.

b. Most to-do lists include routines.

Routines are things we do every day, week, month, etc., and we have dozens of them. Exercise, eat more fruits and vegetables, pay bills, attend that weekly appointment with Jim.... Those are all routines.

Putting those routines directly onto our calendar or onto a Routines and Responsibilities List that we review every week or so is a *thousand* times better.

It will free up our lists so they can include only the Next Actions we need to accomplish that day.

I don't know if you're interested, but I've created a note in Evernote of some of my daily and weekly routines. You can go to the link below to see it, if you'd like. It will show you the kinds of things I keep totally off my calendar and Next Actions List.

<https://LearnDoBecome.com/AprilRoutines>

c. Most to-do lists are not specific.

Because we want to “get something off our mind” and stick it onto a list, we most often write tasks in general terms—and leave the specifics for later.

But that causes us to procrastinate because we either haven’t thought through the details or we’re not sure where to locate the extra information we need.

For example, that “Gift for Mom”: Do you know what you want to get her? Have you compared prices? Have you talked with your siblings to see if anyone wants to go in on it with you? There may be three or four decisions associated with that task, which will cause you to procrastinate.

(When I wrote this list, my mom had Alzheimer’s, and I was looking for a blanket, toy, or activity board to give her something to do during the day. I was still comparing prices and exploring options, but I found this DARLING stuffed dog with little toys attached...)



Now let’s look at “Ink for Printer.” Do you know what item number you need? Have you thought about how much you need to buy? Did you check your desk drawer where you thought you saw a few cartridges sitting last month? Again, this might sound over-the-top, but, until you answer those questions, that task will sit and sit and sit on your list.

Whenever I see a task that has been sitting on my list for awhile, I ask myself, “Is that really the Next Action? Is there something else that I should do first?” Because if you look at a task and it feels hard, it’s typically because it’s not the Next Action.

d. Most to-do lists jumble up the contexts.

We typically write our lists as part of a stream-of-consciousness activity.

“Let me just get everything out of my head!”

But some things need to be done at home, some in the office, some while you’re out running errands, etc. We used to spend so much time staring at our lists during the day in an attempt to figure out what to do next. That becomes exhausting!

This is the best solution we’ve found, and we’re giving it to you as Assignment #3.

Your Assignment:

Part 1:

Write any calendar-specific tasks onto your calendar (I use Google Calendar) or a day-specific task list (for this, I use my Franklin Planner). Make sure they are one-step tasks or Next Actions that are boiled all the way down to the most basic steps possible. This should be a very short list.

Part 2:

Anything that needs to be done this week—but not on a specific day—goes onto a Context-Based Next Actions List. And that list is divided into the following five contexts:

- Home
- Phone
- Errands
- To Discuss
- Computer

What's awesome about this is that you will easily be able to work from whatever context you are in.

If you are at home with your family, that's a great time to work on some yard work or plan your vacation together.

When you have time to make phone calls, you give the airline a ring and check with your friend about working out together.

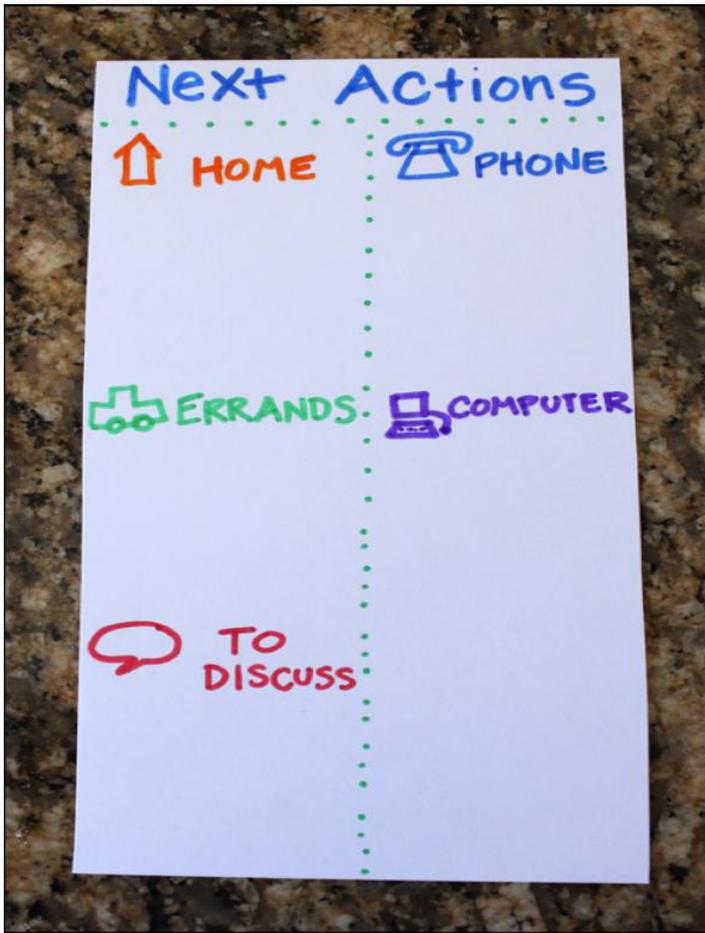
While you're running errands, you can pick up that preschool snack.

When you and your spouse have discussion time, you talk about how you'd like to eat more vegetables (yay!) and you review that bill that doesn't seem quite right.

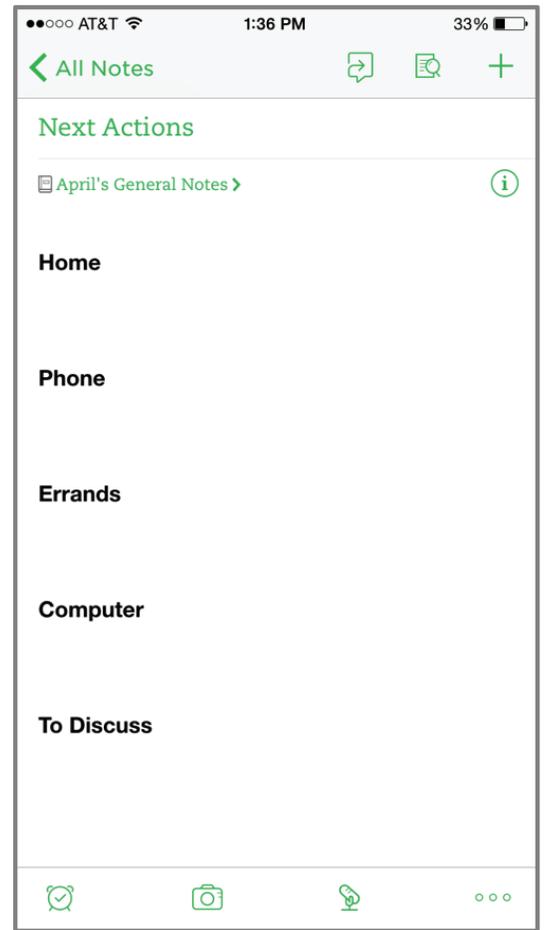
If you have quiet time in your office, you research that gift for mom, email Rosie, and look for those ink cartridges.

Feel free to tailor the contexts to your own life. Someone in our community had a context for when her baby was asleep, and a context for when her baby was awake and her husband was home. Someone who travels frequently might have a context of things to do while on the airplane.

My (April's) list is on paper:



Eric's list is within Evernote:



Other great apps to do this digitally are Cozi, ToDo, Remember the Milk, and Asana.

We update/clean off our lists each week, and we're good to go! So enjoy the process. We are here for you!

Are you ready for more training? Feeling excited about getting your whole life organized and building a "Command Central" to keep all the details totally organized?



Learn More about the *Steps to Everyday Productivity* (STEP) Program Here in our free class!

<https://LearnDoBecome.com/STEP>

Or if you're ready to start right in, join here:

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