This presentation introduces a methodology based on the book “Getting Things Done” by David Allen. We have tried to adapt it to be specifically useful to students!

The premise here is that stress comes not from being too busy, but from feeling like you’re forgetting things, dropping balls, or being unsure if what you’re working on is the right thing to be doing.

We want to decrease stress and increase “flow,” which is that feeling of being “in the zone”, or being really productive and (hopefully) happy. You’re going to have to work really hard no matter what, but having a more organized approach to the work can make you feel much more positively about things.
The Goal:
The Right Focus at The Right Time

The WAY we decrease stress and increase “flow” is to have a methodology that ensures that we are always working on the right thing at the right time.

Step 1:
Collect Your STUFF

Step 1 in the Getting Things Done system is called “Collecting.” “Stuff” is anything you need to do or deal with- an assignment for class, a project, an idea you have in the middle of the night. It comes at us from all different places: email, conversations, phone calls, etc!
What we do in this Collection phase is take all the “stuff” and get it captured, on or in something that you trust. In this presentation we’ll call it a “board”.

The point is to get these items out of your brain and onto something external. You don’t want to waste brain power having to remember everything you need to do- get it out of your head so you can spend your time thinking about more important things!

Where you put it is up to you- there are many options, from low-tech to high-tech. A board, a notebook, an online tool like Trello, etc. Just make sure it’s dependable, and preferably available to you wherever you are.
Activity: right now, take some time and write down anything that’s in your head that you know you need to do or deal with. This is how you start keeping your “board.”

Step 2: Process & Sort that STUFF

Now that we have captured some of our “Stuff” and put it onto our board, we need to decide what to do with it! The second step to this system is Processing or Sorting.
The first thing to ask is “Can I actually DO anything about this?” If the answer is no, you can file something for reference, or “incubate” it until it does become actionable.

Set a reminder for yourself somehow so you remember to check back in on it! If it’s not actionable but you may want to refer back to it, put it in a filing or archive system.

If it’s not actionable and you don’t think it will ever be relevant to you, this is called clutter! Get rid of it!

If something is actionable and it can be done it less than two minutes, DO IT NOW!
Is it Actionable?

Yes?
But not by you?
• Delegate

But not in this moment?
• Defer

Perhaps something is actionable, but not by you. This is called Delegating - get it to whoever it is that CAN do this, but it still stays on your board, and make a reminder for yourself to check back with this person.

If it’s actionable by you, but not right in this moment, it falls into the Defer category. 90% of our “stuff” is going to fall into this category, and most of the organizational work we are talking about today is about how you deal with your Deferred Stuff.

Email

• Necessary.
• Not a to-do list.
• DO IT or send to Board.

A note about email: it is a necessary evil. It is the standard method of communication for any professional arena and will likely continue to be for many years. You must get in the habit of using it whether you like it or not.

However, think about how “stuff” you get by email gets inserted into this system. The email Inbox should not be a to-do list! If an email can be dealt with in less than 2 minutes, do it. Otherwise, think about how to get these items out of the inbox and onto your general board or whatever it is you are using.
Activity: Take a look at the “Stuff” on your board. How would you begin to sort these items? Which are actionable? Which need to be deferred? Within the deferred items, how would you sort them? By priority? By class or project? By how hard they are to do?

Something to consider is the impact-effort matrix shown above, sometimes known as a value/effort matrix. Many of your projects will likely be in the high value/high effort category, but it’s nice to identify any “low-hanging fruit,” i.e. the important but easy tasks. If you find yourself running out of time and have to make choices about what NOT to do this can be very helpful.

Check out our videos on Trello and Google Calendar as these may be good options for keeping your “Stuff” organized on an online “board”!

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoEndK0MUkYjpCrSi53OMx8D-E0ufzcg
And now we move on to the DOING!

OK, you’re ready to work. How do you decide what to do? Look at your board of stuff and consider the factors above. Where are you? How much time do you have? How much energy do you have? Are there fires that need putting out, figuratively or literally? This is also a good time to reference back to that value/effort matrix.
Here are some tips specifically about bigger projects, or even little ones that are stressing you out.

The #1 thing you need to do is look at these projects or tasks and break them into little pieces. What’s the first thing you would need to do in a certain project? OK, what’s the thing after that?

If you take things one baby step at a time you will avoid psyching yourself out.

If parts of the project are farther off on the time horizon, it’s OK to leave them in large, vague chunks, but as you come up on doing things soon, you want to break them into smaller and smaller pieces, until each piece is a single, manageable action.

Breaking things into pieces can also be helpful because you may be able to do part “B” of a project even if you’re stuck on or unable to complete part “A”. Things may not always have to go in sequence.
This is a great site for all kinds of projects- papers, videos, etc. You enter in your project info and it will both break it into steps for you and give you a suggested timeline! While you don’t have to stick to the timeline religiously, it will be useful for getting a sense of if you might be falling behind.

https://rpc.elm4you.org/

This site has great resources and advice on planning and writing research papers.

https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
So again- even the largest projects are made up of tiny pieces. Figure out what the pieces are, and take a brick by brick approach!

Next Steps?

Activity: take a look at a couple of the items on your board. What are the first steps or next steps on each of those tasks?
Step 4: Review

The last step in this process is to Review. Take a look at your board and mark off anything you’ve done. Congratulations! You might want to look forward to things you need to work on next- what are the next steps there?

Go back to your board on a regular basis, and also review your system in general- is it still effective?

The upshot to all this, we hope, is that you will be able to RELAX. When you know that everything you need to worry about is captured on your board, you can give yourself a break and enjoy a little time away from your “Stuff”!
So, we know this all sounds great, but we also know it’s not always that easy. Here are some ideas about common challenges.

**When there’s not enough time...**
- know what you’re not doing
- be able to articulate why you’re not doing it
- drastic times/drastic measures...

There will be times when you simply cannot do everything you are supposed to be doing. If you stay true to this system, however, you will be making the RIGHT choices about what not to do, and you will be able to articulate and defend why you couldn’t do them, if only to yourself! This may at least help you feel more at peace with what you couldn’t get done.

The next slide is about an option for when you truly cannot get it all done...
In Kristin Luker’s book “Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences” she talks about the process of “Harvarding” a book, which she says is an unspoken but common practice at colleges where students are routinely assigned more reading than is humanly possible. It basically means skimming something and picking out the main points. This is actually good practice even if you DO intend to go back and deeply read something.

As of press time parts of this book are available on Google here: [http://books.google.com/books?id=LecAx7ffQzoC&lpg=PA96&dq=harvarding&pg=PA93#v=onepage&q=harvard&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=LecAx7ffQzoC&lpg=PA96&dq=harvarding&pg=PA93#v=onepage&q=harvard&f=false)

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**Distraction and Motivation**

We get asked a lot of questions about how to deal with getting distracted or feeling unmotivated. Here are some suggestions.
Here are some basic facts about your brain.

#1- It can’t multitask. We think we can, but we can’t. Everything you’re doing while multitasking suffers. Just say no. One thing at a time.

Brain Fact #2- Physical activity is a tonic for the brain. Even a brisk walk is going to improve your learning and focusing capacity. We know fitness can be a loaded issue, but if nothing else do it for your studies!

It is possible to get a program that blocks certain sites or the entire internet for your computer. We would suggest trying some other strategies first and only using these as a last resort.

https://macfreedom.com/
http://selfcontrolapp.com/
http://mashable.com/2012/01/03/block-internet-distractions-apps/-

The Pomodoro Technique

http://pomodorotechnique.com

One technique for staying focused is the Pomodoro technique. You do not need to buy their timer to do this. The basic premise is that you spend 25 minutes on a task, then give yourself a five minute break. This helps with the “Fear of Missing Out” because you know you will get to check your phone (for example) at the end of the 25 minutes. Then after four rounds of 25 minutes you take a longer break.

This technique can also help you start to determine how long it takes you to do things which will let you plan your time better going forward.

http://pomodorotechnique.com/
One last random tip we find a lot of students mentioning is listening to White Noise or “Pink” Noise to block out distractions and improve focus. There are lots of free sources online and tracks on YouTube etc. Worth giving a try to see if it works for you!

Thanks and good luck! Get in touch with us any time for help or questions!

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An additional resource for Time Management and other advice on managing workload is the Disabilities Services office:

Joel Dansky, Disabilities Services Coordinator
Center for Academic Support and Advising (CASA)
Lemelson Building
413-559-5498
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