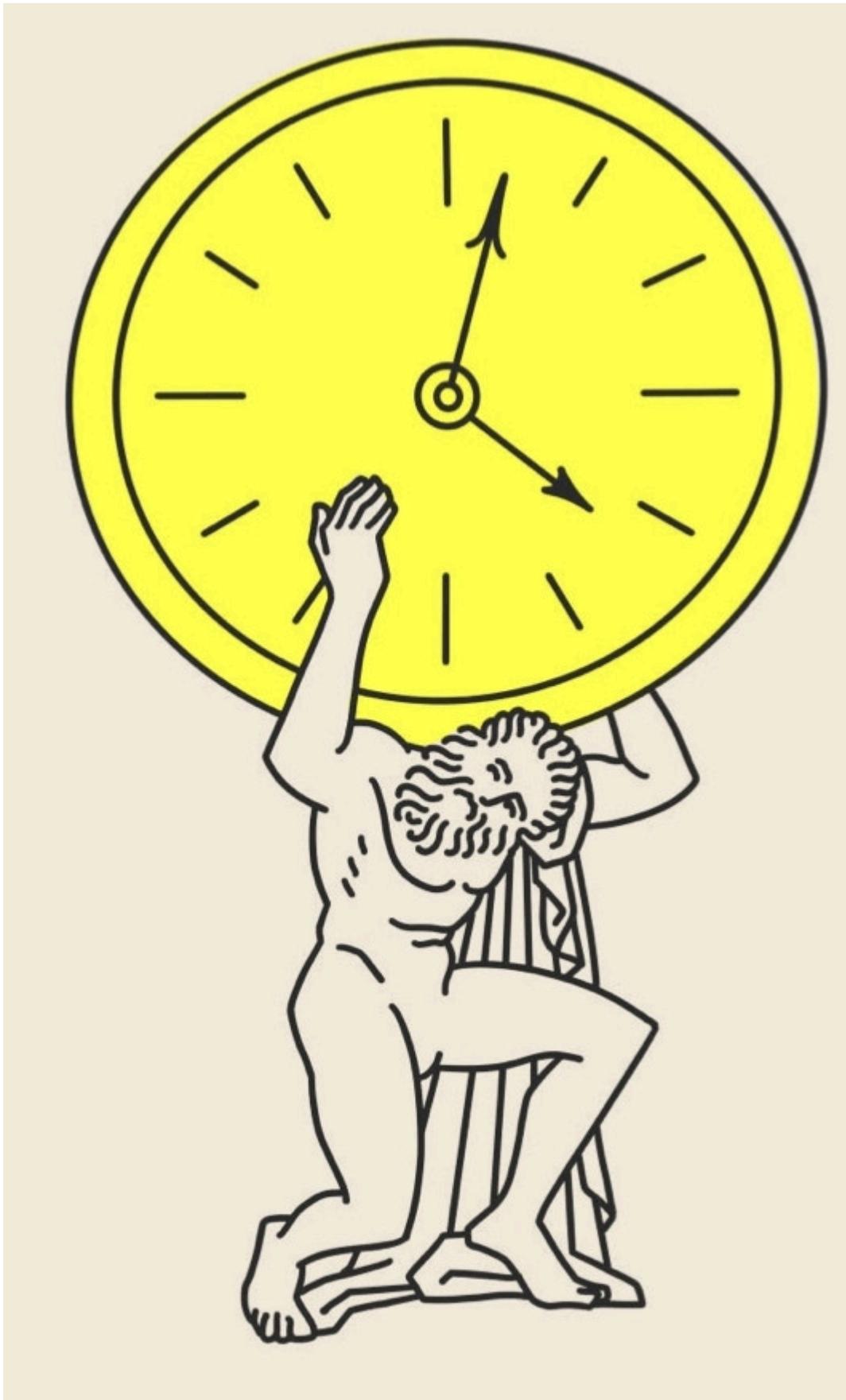


# What if you're already on top of things?

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OB [oliverburkeman.com/donelist](http://oliverburkeman.com/donelist)



Apparently I struck a chord [on Twitter the other day](#) when I observed that many people (by which I meant me) seem to feel as if they start off each morning in a kind of "productivity debt", which they must struggle to pay off through the day, in hopes of reaching a zero balance by the time evening comes. Few things feel more basic to my experience of adulthood than this vague sense that I'm falling behind, and need to claw my way back up to some minimum standard of output. It's as if I need to justify my existence, by staying "on top of things", in order to stave off some ill-defined catastrophe that might otherwise come crashing down upon my head.

It doesn't just apply to work tasks, either. In times like these, when (to use a little technical jargon) A Lot of Bad Shit is Going Down, it's equally easy to feel "in debt" when it comes to political activism, donating to charity, volunteering in your community, and so on – not to mention whether you're being a good enough partner, parent, or friend. There's just so much that needs doing – and so, naturally, you're really going to have to buckle down, if you've any hope of getting to feel like a decent person.

My suggestion on Twitter (again: directed mainly at myself) was to try another perspective. What if you worked on the basis that you began each day at zero balance, so that everything you accomplished – every task you got done, every tiny thing you did to address the world's troubles, or the needs of your household – put you ever further into the black? What if – and personally I find this thought almost unthinkable in its radicalism, but still, here goes – what if there's nothing you ever have to do to earn your spot on the planet? What if everything you actually get around to doing, on any given day, is in some important sense surplus to minimum requirements?

There's an obvious objection here, which is that to achieve certain outcomes, there clearly are certain things you "have to" do. In order to get this email to you, I had to write it; in order to have a clean kitchen, I have to clean the kitchen, or else passive-aggressively comment on the disastrous state of the kitchen until my partner cleans it. In order to keep paying the mortgage, I have to generate an income. This is where inequality enters the picture, too, because of course some people have to do a lot more than others simply to stay afloat.

But I think many of us overlay this instrumental sense of obligation – "in order to have this, you'll need to do that" – with the existential one described above: the feeling that you must get things done, not merely to achieve certain ends, but because it's a cosmic duty you've somehow incurred in exchange for being alive.

### The benefits of keeping a "done list"

This is why I'm such an enthusiastic proponent of keeping a "done list", which starts empty, first thing in the morning, and which you then gradually fill with whatever you accomplish through the day. Each entry is a cheering reminder that you could, after all, have spent the day doing nothing constructive – yet look what you did instead! (If you're in a serious psychological rut, just lower the bar for what gets to count as an accomplishment: nobody else need ever know that you added "brushed teeth" or "made coffee" to the list.)

But a done list isn't merely a way to feel better about yourself. If you can give up the impossible quest to pay off your productivity debt, and instead start thinking of each day as an opportunity to move a small-but-meaningful set of items over to your done list, you'll find yourself making better choices about what to focus on. And you'll make more progress on them, too, because you'll waste less time and energy being distracted by stress about all the other stuff you're (unavoidably) neglecting.

And make no mistake: paying off your imaginary productivity debt completely – in other words, working so hard and so efficiently that you no longer feel like you're falling behind – is literally impossible, not just grueling and unpleasant. In the modern world of work, there's no limit to the number of emails you might receive, the demands your boss might make, the ambitions you might have for your career, etcetera – so there's no reason to believe you'll ever get to the end of them. Meanwhile, modern media, especially social media, is a giant machine for exposing you to a bottomless newsfeed of far more suffering than St Francis of Assisi himself was ever asked to care about.

Whenever I manage to remember that this is just the way things are – that the cosmic debt I seem to imagine I must pay off is in fact inherently impossible to pay off – I find I'm far better able to relax in the midst of having too much to do, as opposed to making relaxation dependent on first getting on top of it all (which I never will). Crucially, I'm also far better placed to actually do things – the productive and good-citizen things that were the focus of all this angst in the first place. Look: there they are, on the done list! Not many of them, perhaps, at least by comparison to the immeasurable galaxy of "things that need doing." Still, there are generally quite a few more than zero items there, by the time 6pm rolls around. At which point I usually mix a gin and tonic, though I tend not to add that to the list.