How A Top Psychologist Changed the Way I Approach My To-Do List
It's about way more than tasks.

The to-do list and the calendar are like square pegs and round holes. With the rare (or deadline-driven) exception, the time spent completing a task doesn't fit into polite half-hour chunks. My expectation used to be that I could just drop tasks into my calendar, with the guarantee that those things would get done in the precisely allotted amount of time.

Then I realized that you can't really schedule tasks at all.

This insight came courtesy of Georgia Tech organizational psychologist Howard Weiss, who I saw present at this year's Association for Psychological Science conference in Boston. He's come up with a better way to think about our time and productivity. To Weiss, the chunks of time you spend working on things are called performance episodes. They are bounded by time: if you are pulled into a meeting, have to answer an important email, or otherwise pulled off-task, then the episode is over. That's why they're so different from tasks, which can stretch on indefinitely: when you return to a project you started in the morning in the afternoon, that's a new episode.

I find the distinction between tasks and episodes super illuminating for organizing (and protecting) my time. It rhymes with the essay by venture capitalist Paul Graham titled "Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule." Graham emphasizes how managers' schedules are separated into hour-long chunks. "The manager's schedule is for bosses," he writes. "It's embodied in the traditional appointment book, with each day cut into one hour intervals. You can block off several hours for a single task if you need to, but by default you change what you're doing every hour." A meeting with that potential hire, that team, that new client is governed by the clock, and (hopefully) wraps up on time. In the manager's case, the performance episode, the task, and the calendar are all synced up.

But makers—writers, programmers, and the like—have tasks that don't slot so neatly into hour-long chunks. I've learned not to panic when, mid-way through writing a story, I need to spend an hour doing additional research to add meaty evidence to a thinly argued point. My dev friends tell me they often need to spend an extra hour or two to dig into a bug, optimize performance, or edit code so that it's easier to maintain longterm. These tasks are unruly in their complexity, and you can't really predict when they'll be complete, though deadlines will enforce their being done.

But because of the cognitive complexity of the stories and code that makers are making, interruptions—like the kind of a half hour check-in meeting—are deadly, because they shake up the Etch a Sketch of attention. It takes time to reacquaint yourself with the details of the task (once) at hand: one study found that it takes about 25 minutes to get back to on track after an interruption. Because of this, breaking up a task into too many performance episodes—if a maker's day is getting peppered with meetings, for instance—caps just how enterprising you can be in a given day.

"Don't your spirits rise at the thought of having an entire day free to work, with no appointments at all?" Graham writes. "Well, that means your spirits are correspondingly depressed when you don't. And ambitious projects are by definition close to the limits of your capacity. A small decrease in morale is enough to kill them off."

But time isn't the only resource being used up in a given performance episode. Weiss was speaking at a symposium on the role that emotions play in our work lives.

If you have a bad meeting with your boss, that will sink your execution in the following episode, since your brain will naturally ruminate to try to make sense of the encounter. He calls this "attentional misallocation": if you're automatically thinking about bad meeting, an argument with your partner, or something really positive like a raise, those states draw your attention elsewhere, distracting from the episode. When you feel bad at work—whether it's for a professional reason or not—it's likely to distract from what you're trying to get done.

Weiss says that the difference is maybe more obvious to workers than to researchers. "In organizational studies, it has traditionally been the case that researchers looked at the differences between people," Weiss says. "That ignores all the variability that exists for each person over time—even LeBron James has a bad game." By considering episodes, you're able to think about productivity more clearly than saying a worker is engaged or disengaged, a good or a bad fit, high-performing or not. The task for us workers, then, is to protect our performance episodes, and do what we can to make the most of them.

"What influences how well you engage in the task during these performance episodes?" Weiss adds. "The attentional resources that you're bringing to bear on the task that moment." These are basic physiological things that the cult of busyness would pressure out of your day: eating, sleeping, and working out , since all of those help not only your decision making, but overall wellbeing.

What we need to do, then, is gain what Weiss calls a "meta awareness" of how our personal resources match our performance episodes, and how those episodes in turn match your schedule. For me, I'm finding that slotting my interviews with sources and meetings with colleagues in the early afternoon—say between 1 and 3 pm—allows me to serve the "manager" necessities of connecting with people while protecting my "maker" need for sustained performance episodes. That way, meetings aren't breaking up the episodes, and more ambitious work is allowed to unfurl.

I've begun to appreciate that my to-do list doesn't plug into my schedule neatly. Instead, it's my job to understand how the components parts of a task can be pulled apart, and then matching my time and my energy to them. By filing the edges down just right, you can get square pegs to fit round holes.