PARA Part 5: The Project List Mindsweep

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SERIES NAVIGATION: **THE P.A.R.A. METHOD**

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Welcome to the Project List Mindsweep, a step-by-step exercise to help you properly identify every project in your work and life.

Your Project List is a list of the outcomes or goals you are currently committed to, all in one place. It serves as a dashboard of your current workload, helping you grasp the current progress of your projects with just a glance.

Most people couldn't give you a full inventory of their projects if their life depended on it. Yet they also tell you that they have too much on their plate. Creating an accurate Project List gives you the confidence to say yes OR no to new commitments. Once you know how much capacity you actually have, the decision of what to fill it with can be intentional and strategic, instead of reactive.

There is often a resistance to writing down all our projects, because we fear that seeing them all in one place will be overwhelming. But non-judgmentally collecting the full inventory is the first step to gaining control. You committed to these projects – we're just creating a tool to support you in managing them.

Follow the instructions below to create your Project List. **Click here for an Evernote template to help you follow along**.

The definition of a "project"

The key distinction to understand as you begin this process is that we aren't using the word "project" in the usual vague sense. That word is used to refer to everything from a bathroom remodel to a multi-billion dollar construction project.

We are using the following definition of a project: "Any outcome you're committed to that requires more than one work session to complete."

This definition forces us to acknowledge the reality that even the simplest outcomes—like "buy headphones" or "prepare an agenda"— usually require numerous steps. Instead of tracking all these steps in our heads, we want to track them in an external tool. Your Project List

remembers all these steps for you, so you can focus only on the next action.

Most people find that sticking to this definition produces a list of around 20–40 projects. This is why we want to use an external tool—not our brains!

Step 1: Do a brain dump of everything you think could be a project

Here's some things to consider and places to look:

Your mind

What's worrying you that you haven't taken the time to identify as a project? What's taking more mental bandwidth than it deserves? What needs to happen that you're not making consistent progress on, that could benefit from a project structure?

Example: "My back is hurting" => Schedule doctor's appointment

Calendar

Look a few weeks into the past: what do you need to follow up on? What needs wrapping up? What projects do you want to create out of events that already happened?

Look a few weeks into the future: what needs planning and preparation? What requires some goal-setting? Who do you need to catch up with?

Example: "I need to figure out what we'll do at that team off-site" => team off-site agenda

To Do list

What actions are you already taking, that are actually part of a bigger project you've not yet identified?

Example: "I need to follow up with that house cleaner" => Find cleaner and schedule weekly cleaning time

Agendas

What communication or followup actions you've scheduled with people are actually part of a bigger project?

Example: "I need to call Linda back" => Develop sales campaign with Linda

Briefcase/bag/wallet/purse

What objects or papers have you saved because they remind you to take an action? What have you not gotten rid of because it's needed for a project?

Example: Business card in purse => Follow up with potential contractor from conference

Physical environment

Look around your office, home, car, or desk: what physical objects represent projects you haven't identified as projects?
Document on desk => Package up and mail document to business partner

Computer

Look at your computer desktop, downloads folder, documents folder, bookmarks, emails, open browser tabs: what are you keeping around because it is part of a project?

Example: PDF article => Read draft article and give feedback to co-author

Processes or procedures

Which processes in your work or life could be more efficient, streamlined, or purposeful? What do you do regularly that takes too long, is too difficult, or hasn't been thought through?

Example: Grocery shopping => Collect list of staple food supplies and set up recurring deliveries

Creative opportunities

What would you like to learn, develop, build, put on, pursue, start, explore, or play with as a project?

Example: Flyer for improv class => Look up and schedule improve class

Competence building

Which skills would you like to learn? Which hobbies would you like to start? What kind of project could advance your career, or make your life more fun or interesting?

Example: Email confirmation for online course purchase => Compl online course on coding

Don't worry about the exact definition of a project at this stage. In the next step, we'll decide what to do with this initial brainstorm.

Step 2: Organize and refine your list

Some options to consider:

Delete anything that is obviously not a project

Sometimes you just need to write something down to realize it's not something you're committed to.

Combine projects that are tied to the same outcome

"Wipe old computer" and "Research new computers" could be part of the same project "Buy new computer."

If a project can be substituted by a calendar entry, add it to your calendar instead

For example, "Pick up sister from airport" doesn't really need to be actively tracked over time. Seeing it on the appropriate day will trigger all the necessary actions.

Move "someday/maybe" projects to the bottom of the list

Keep track of these future projects, but don't let them clutter your current list.

Step 3: Define the desired outcome of each project

Look at each project on your list and ask yourself: what is my desired outcome for this project? What would need to happen for this project to be considered an outstanding success?

I suggest writing these desired outcomes in the present tense, to help project yourself forward in time to when the outcome you are describing has come true:

- Project: Schedule doctor's appointment => **Outcome**: Back pain is resolved and I can sleep through the night without discomfort
- Project: Plan team off-site agenda => **Outcome**: Team is clear about what needs to be accomplished and next actions are identified and assigned
- Project: Develop sales campaign with Linda => **Outcome**: Sales campaign is approved by exec team, budget is allocated, and team is briefed on it

Add a date

Part of defining the desired outcome is deciding "by when." Every single project on your list needs to have a specific deadline or timeframe that leaves no room for confusion (such as "by June 30, 2017," "by the end of 2017," or "by the end of Q3 2017.").

This is the true test of whether it is actually a project. Even if the deadline seems arbitrary, it serves as a reminder for you to check on your progress and reevaluate your approach.

Add a target completion date for each project on your list.

Use action verbs

We're looking for a verb that describes DONE: finalize, submit, del
complete, send, clarify, organize, update, implement, resolve, su
reorganize, design, roll out, install, set up, publish, or complete.

reorganize, design, roll out, install, set up, publish, or complete.

If you find yourself using verbs such as manage, oversee, ensure, or maximize, it is probably an ongoing Area of Responsibility, not a Project. Something must be able to happen in the near term so that you can mark the project as "done."

If you see any projects that don't include clear action verbs, add them now.

Step 4: Prioritize your list by project

Most people prioritize their work at the level of *individual* tasks.

Here's the problem with this approach: it takes only one phone call, one email, or one new piece of information to completely change your priorities. Priorities are constantly shifting throughout your day and week. Why spend a lot of time to sit down and identify your priorities when they'll probably change within minutes?

But it's a very different story when it comes to prioritizing *projects*.

Projects move much more slowly, and don't change their priority even if there's an emergency. It's worth spending the time to clearly identify which projects are the top priority, because that is unlikely to change much during the course of a week.

Rearrange your Project List from most to least important for the *current week*. Reprioritizing this list is as simple as moving projects up or down on the list. By doing this at the beginning of each week, you can focus your attention the rest of the week on those top priority projects, and not get distracted by the rest.
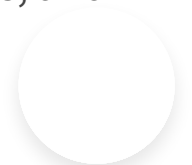
Make an intuitive judgment of how much of your mental bandwidth each project should be taking up this week, and sort your list accordingly.

Step 5: Evaluate your Project List

Does this include all the outcomes you're committed to?

Look over the whole list from a bird's eye view: does it accurately represent your current priorities, interests, values, and long-term goals? In which area do you have too many projects? Not enough? Which outcomes or goals you say are important to you don't have any projects targeted at them? Where are you spending time or attention that has no clear outcome or goal?

For any that are simply unclear, take a step back and ask "What am I really trying to accomplish here?" or "What bigger goal is this connected to?"

With this whole inventory in front of you, which projects should you cancel, postpone, renegotiate, or clarify?

In conclusion

With a clear and complete Project List in hand, you are now ready to execute on your tasks without having to remember which balls you have in the air. You can focus most of your attention on the top priority projects, while keeping an eye on the rest.

Consider this exercise just the "first pass" on creating a Project List. Any time you feel you are lacking clarity and don't know where to foc

can run through this checklist to gather up and prioritize all your commitments.

Even better, you can make this exercise into a "Weekly Review" – a standing appointment with yourself to reflect on the week and update your Project List. If you do this review from a more calm and balanced perspective, away from the chaos of the workweek, you'll find it easier to maintain balance throughout the week.

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