

Your to-do list is morally neutral

A thing I love is to spend the first moments of Saturday morning drinking coffee and reading in the living room. A thing I dislike is the inkling of guilt that suffuses these moments, kilobytes of RAM dedicated to surfacing my work life and reminding me that I could be, should be, doing something about it.

A to-do list is many things. It is commitments and agreements made to others and ourselves. It is maintenance work for our practices and non-clinical roles. It is the aspirational “someday/maybe” projects and future states that battle the shinier, deadlined tasks. It is processes adjacent to or involving you that you mentally choose to own and feel liable for. The to-do list is also the mental space allocated to patients, your worries about them, wondering if that person’s cysto is booked or that CT happened or if you’re derelict in your duty when you happen to have operated two days before vacation. In this case, to-dos are not tasks, but a fractal space for fussing and optimizing. Better clinic prep, tighter documentation, more granular consultations and care plans, and the ubiquitous what-ifs can never be saturated or perfected.

Having high-responsibility roles and tasks is good, actually. Being a urologist is great, and deploying bandwidth and skills to professional citizenship roles is a grand use of them. No one really wants to be dispensable or idle. The opportunity for trouble arises from the fact that having an active mind and an active working life means the conveyor of ideas, projects, and tasks never stops, and the mind must contend with this somehow.

That “somehow” in my case, and I suspect many of yours, is that grumble of guilt that accompanies idleness. If I’ve decided there is gravity in my work, then why aren’t I working right now? Am I resting, exerting agency, living my life, or just procrastinating? The list becomes a tribunal that is *staring back* and wondering why it languishes

while I dare loaf. I tend to see my list as “good intention’s mausoleum” and a scoreboard that shows me hopelessly down.¹

This guilt is misplaced. The tasks are real, but their status as markers of character is not. The title of this piece borrows from the self-help book *How to Keep House When You’re Drowning*, wherein I found myself arrested by the phrase “care tasks are morally neutral.”² A line that struck me: “If you are competing tasks from a motivation of shame, you are probably relaxing in shame too, so if you ever actually sit down to rest, you’re thinking ‘I don’t deserve to do this.’”

To be clear, I’m not equating patient care and healthcare-aligned projects with unwashed laundry. Our work carries weight, but the size of the list or the backlog itself is not a reflection of worth. This “scoreboard” is no such thing; it is an inventory of roles that matter, and unless the business is shuttering, inventory is for management, not closeout. Rest is not a reward for completing the list at last, but a maintenance step to ensure our best is available when it’s time to work.

Morally neutral does not mean morally bereft. Nihilism around your to-dos — ignoring deadlines, becoming unavailable or unreliable — is clearly uncool. One should learn to understand their own bandwidth, and to cull or routinize as much work as reasonable, but these won’t draw down the list to zero.

Stating this is the easy part; internalizing it is not. I am regrettably not coaching from the winning side, but I believe it, even if I’m not fully equipped to embody it. Consider this a self-affirmation I find helpful and suspect may resonate.

REFERENCES

1. Leveridge M. Dispatches from productivity purgatory. *Can Urol Assoc J* 2025; 19:222-3. <https://doi.org/10.5489/cuaj.9361>
2. Davis KC. *How to Keep House When You’re Drowning*. Simon & Schuster 2022

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