

# Summary of *Getting Things Done* by David Allen

Have you been in a situation at work where the number of things you could do, should do, or have agreed to do, completely consumes your mind?

In a desperate attempt to reduce overwhelm, did you put your appointments in your calendar, actions on post-it notes, or ideas on a notepad? You may have felt stupid for relying on these tools...but you shouldn't have.

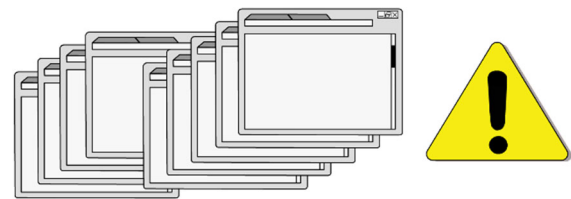
The brain is an incredible organ capable of generating brilliant ideas, but it was not designed to keep track of everything you need to do and want to do. As author David Allen says, **"Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them."**

With over 30 years of executive coaching and validation from the latest cognitive science, author David Allen has found if you always rely on a calendar and external lists, you can experience stress-free productivity.

You can think of Allen's "Getting Things Done" system (GTD for short), as a brain hack for the modern age.

Agree to do something?  
Think of something you want to do?

When you agree to do something or think of something you want to do and fail to capture that thing in a trusted external system, your brain is like a computer opening new programs in the background as you work. These open programs take up processing power and slow down your mental computer.



But if you capture everything in a trusted GTD system, you give your brain permission to close all the open programs on your mental desktop and be fully engaged with the task at hand and fully present with the people in your life.

## THE GETTING THINGS DONE SYSTEM

**BRAIN HACK!**

Fully engaged  
& present

"Mind like water."



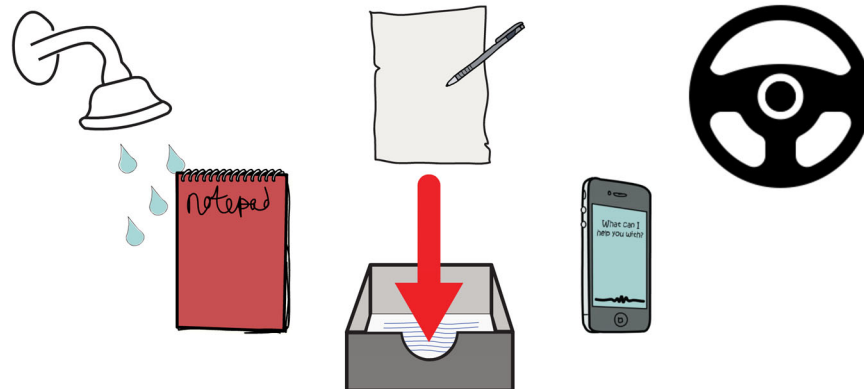
"...with minimal effort."

Allen says, the GTD system allows you to **"get meaningful things done with minimal effort, across the whole spectrum of your life and work (and) experience what the martial artists call a "mind like water" (or) top athletes refer to as the "zone."**

However, building a system you trust is not easy. I've struggled with maintaining a GTD system for years. But after reading *Getting Things Done* several times, I've realized the only way to create a GTD system I trust is to consistently execute three vital habits: *capturing, processing, and reviewing*.

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## 1. CAPTURING



When I think, "I should remember this..." Or, "I need to do that..." I immediately get that thought out of my head and onto an external device. In the shower, I write down ideas and actions on a waterproof notepad. During meetings, I capture ideas and actions on a loose sheet of paper. When I'm driving, I capture ideas and actions on my iPhone using Siri so I keep my eyes on the road.

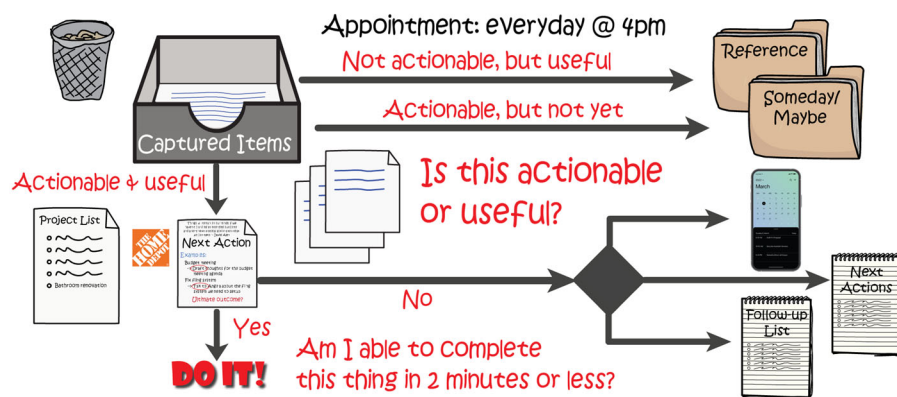
ANYTHING that captures my intention is put in digital and physical inboxes I process later.

I never perfect an idea or action when I capture it. The ideas I capture typically aren't very good, but I capture them anyways (by capturing a bad idea, I make room for good ideas).

The goal of capturing is to release the psychic stress of having to hold onto something that prevents me from being fully present.

If you want to experience the power of capturing, take out a piece of paper after reading this summary and write down everything on your mind. After a few seconds of writing, you'll feel a wonderful sense of relief.

## 2. PROCESSING



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Each day at 4:00 PM, I have an appointment on my calendar called “processing.” During my processing appointment, I look at the things I’ve captured since my last processing session and ask: *Is this actionable and useful?*

- If something is not actionable or useful, I delete it.
- If something is useful but not actionable, I put it in my “reference” folder.
- If something is actionable but I don’t want to do it yet, I put it in a “someday-maybe” folder. I check my “someday-maybe” folder on the first of every month to see if old items are worth putting back into my processing pile.

Everything else gets converted into a “next action.” Allen says, **“things will remain on our minds if we haven’t clarified an intended outcome and a very next physical action step that we can take.”**

If, for example, I captured an item called “*budget meeting*,” I now convert that item to “*draft thoughts for the budget meeting agenda*.” If I captured, “*fix filing system*,” I now convert that item to, “*talk to Angela about the filing system we need to set up*.”

All next actions start with a verb and contain clear instructions to my future self.

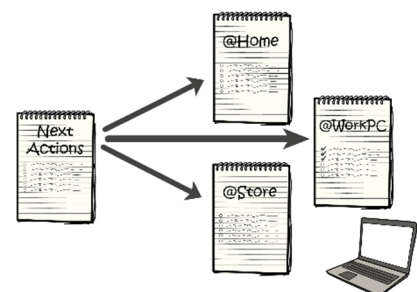
After writing down the “**next action**,” identify the “**desired outcome**” you hope to achieve by completing an action. When you identify a “desired outcome,” you determine if additional actions are required. When more than one action is required to achieve your desired outcome, you must add a project to your “**project list**.” For example, if one of my “next actions” is to “*drive to Home Depot and purchase new handles for the bathroom cabinets*,” my “desired outcome” is “*bathroom renovation*.” Therefore, I must put “*bathroom renovation*” on the “project list,” so my brain stops reminding me that I need to do more to achieve my “desired outcome.”

Once all the things you’ve captured have been deleted, deferred to the “someday-maybe” list, or converted to a “next action,” look at your “next actions” and ask, **“Am I able to complete this thing in two minutes or less?”** If so, do it immediately. If not, place it in one of three locations:

1. Calendar
2. Next action list
3. Follow-up list

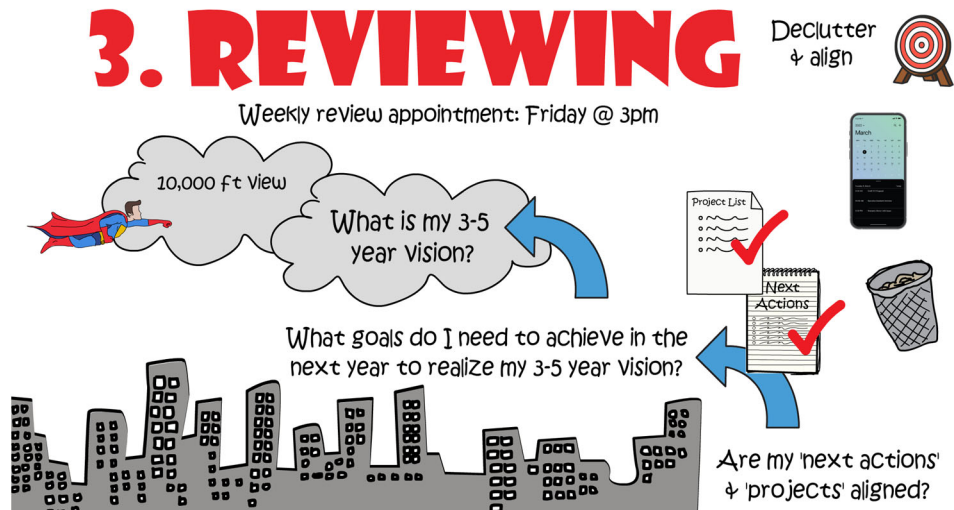
Time-specific items go in the **calendar**. Items that need to be done as soon as possible but are not time-specific go on the **next action list**. And items you delegate to others or waiting on information, go on the **follow-up list**.

If your next action list gets too long (typically more than 30 actions), divide it into context-specific lists. For example, I have an “at home” list, an “at work computer” list, and an “at grocery store” list. When I arrive at a certain context like “at work computer,” I bring out my “at work computer” list and work my way down the list.



The goal of the daily processing habit is to remain in control of your stuff, so your stuff doesn't take control of your mind. Allen says, **“The reason most organizing systems haven’t worked for most people is that they haven’t yet transformed all the stuff they’re trying to organize, as long as it’s still stuff it’s not controllable.”**

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Every Friday at 3:00 PM, I block out 30 minutes to do a top-down review of my system. The goal here is to clean out non-essential items in my system and ensure my actions and projects align with my long-term goals.

I start by taking a 10,000 ft view (imagine going up into the clouds) and asking: *What would I like to be doing on a typical day three to five years from now?*

Then, I go down to the 1,000 ft view (imagine standing on top of a tall building) and ask myself: *What goals do I need to achieve in the next year to realize my three to five-year vision?*

Then, I go down to the street and see if my list of “**next actions**” and “**projects**” aligns with my 1,000 ft goals and 10,000 ft vision for my life, and prioritize my actions and projects accordingly.

After re-organizing my “**next action**” and “**project**” lists, cleaning out non-essential items, and putting critical next actions in my calendar for the upcoming week, I am complete the “**weekly review**.”

This “weekly review” allows me to trust and rely on my system. I ensure I do my “weekly review” each week. I do my review at the same time and place each week and reward myself with something special, like an expensive chocolate bar, that I only allow myself to have after my weekly review session.

## Takeaway

Keep your system alive by consistently doing C.P.R.: *capturing, processing, and reviewing*. If you embrace a bit of structure, have zero tolerance for holding things in your mind, and commit to capturing, processing, and reviewing, you will create mental space, be fully present with the people you love, and be get meaningful things done with minimal effort.

Remember: “*Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.*”

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## Key Quotes

*"You have to use your mind to get things off your mind."*

*"Most stress comes from inappropriately managed commitments (you) make or accept."*

*"Your ability to generate power is directly proportional to your ability to relax."*

*"How long can you let your in-tray go unprocessed and all your stuff unreviewed and trust that you're making good decisions about what to do?"*

*"If you don't pay appropriate attention to what has your attention, it will take more of your attention than it deserves."*

*"Everything you've told yourself you ought to do, your mind thinks you should do right now. Frankly, as soon as you have two things to do stored in your RAM, you've generated personal failure, because you can't do two things at the same time. This produces an all-pervasive stress factor whose source can't be pin-pointed."*

*"When we truly need to do is often what we most feel like avoiding."*

*"Do unexpected work as it shows up, not because it is the path of least resistance, but because it is the thing you need to do vis-à-vis all the rest."*

*"One of the best ways to increase your energy is to close some of your loops. So always be sure to have some easy loops to close, right at hand."*

*"There is no reason not to be highly productive, even when you're not in top form."*

*"Processing Guidelines: Process the top item first. Process one item at a time. Never put anything back into 'in.'"*

*"Most people feel best about their work the week before they go on vacation, but it's not because of the vacation itself. What do you do the last week before you leave on a big trip? You clean up, close up, clarify, organize, and renegotiate all your agreements with yourself and others. You do this so you can relax and be present on the beach, on the golf course, or on the slopes, with nothing else on your mind. I suggest you do this weekly instead of yearly, so you can bring this kind of 'being present' to your everyday life."*

*"You don't actually do a project; you can only do action steps related to it. When enough of the right action steps have been taken, some situation will have been created that matches your initial picture of the outcome closely enough that you can call it 'done.'"*

*"Get clean, clear, current, and complete."*

## Bonus Insights from *Getting Things Done* by David Allen



### The three action filters

Select your next action based on three criteria:

- ✓ **Context:** Where you are.
- ✓ **Time:** How much time do you have available to work.
- ✓ **Energy:** How much mental energy do you have to work (current ability to focus).

Context categories:

- **At PC/Office** [Ex: I can only do animation work while sitting at the computer in my office].
- **In Meeting** [Ex: I must be in a meeting with Susan to get my questions answered].
- **On-Site** [Ex: as an Engineer, I can only “take photos of the valve” when I am at the power plant].
- **At Home** [Ex: I can only “organize closet” when I return home from my vacation].
- **Town/Store** [Ex: I can only run errands when I am driving around town and only buy items on my grocery list when I’m at the store].
- **Phone/Anywhere** [Ex: I can send an email from my phone from basically anywhere].

Time categories:

- **Time Category #1:** Tasks that take 15 minutes or less to complete [Ex: writing an important email, reviewing a document, making a quick phone call with a client].
- **Time Category #2:** Tasks that take more than 15 minutes [Ex: completing a section of code, drafting a proposal, organizing the closet].

Energy categories:

- **Energy High:** Tasks that require high concentration and are best done when mentally fresh, like after your morning coffee [Ex: editing a document, writing an important email, practicing a presentation].
- **Energy Low:** Tasks that do not require high concentration and can be completed when mentally taxed, like after a long meeting or big meal [Ex: cleaning dishes, sorting laundry, doing easy administration work].

Use the label and tag functions in a to-do list manager to label each action with a “1” or “2” depending on the time required to complete the action and “High” or “Low” depending on the mental energy needed to complete the action. Then tag each action with a context or put actions in different context lists.

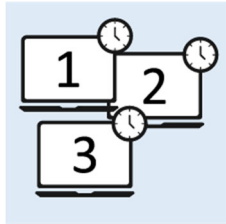
At the beginning of a work session, filter potential actions based on where you are, how much time you have available, and how much mental energy you have. For example, if you are at your work computer, only have 15 minutes before your next meeting, and are not feeling mentally sharp, sort by “At Work Computer,” “1,” and “Low.”

### Action Plan #1:

Tag and filter next actions according to three categories: *context, time required, and mental energy required.*



## Bonus Insights from *Getting Things Done* by David Allen



### The three work activities

At any time point during the workday, you are doing one of three things:

1. **Defining your work** [capturing action items, making action lists, and prioritizing projects and next actions].
2. **Doing predefined work** [executing scheduled work and next action lists].
3. **Doing work as it shows up** [dealing with unexpected work and urgent requests].

David Allen says, “Many people let themselves get sucked into the (third) activity—dealing with unplanned and unexpected things that show up—much too easily, and let the other two slide, to their detriment.”

Consider two questions:

- *Is my time in the third activity increasing?*
- *How much time do I want to spend in a typical workday in each work activity?*

If you spent 100% of your time doing work as it shows up, you would be entirely at the mercy of others - like a boat at sea going with the waves [not a good career strategy].

Spending a fraction of time defining your work and a healthy amount of time executing your work as planned is like using a compass and a map and paddling in a direction you want to go.

### Action Plan #2:

This week, measure the time you spend in each of the following three modes: *defining work*, *doing predefined work*, and *doing work as it shows up (reactive work)*.

If you are spending too much time doing work as it shows up, schedule in time to define work and do predefined work. Then resist unplanned work requests.



### Task trajectory

Before starting a task that will take more than 30 minutes, I imagine getting into a rocket ship and ask myself: *How far will this task take me?*

If the task produces an outcome I'll be proud of when I reflect on my day tonight (like completing a proposal for a client who requests my services), then I feel like the action leads to a successful lift-off.

If the outcome leads to a better life in one-to five-years, then I feel like the task gets me above the clouds. For example, completing a business proposal could lead to another source of revenue and a successful business in the next one-to five-years.

And if completing the task, getting the outcome, and improving my life one-to five years from now enhances my purpose, then the task gets me to the moon. Since my purpose is to learn, create, and improve the lives of others, generating more revenue and having a successful business will enhance my ability to learn, create, and improve the lives of others.

## Bonus Insights from *Getting Things Done* by David Allen

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"You've got to think about the big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction." - Alvin Toffler

### Action Plan #3:

When overwhelmed and everything feels urgent, pause before starting the next thing on your action list and ask yourself: *How far will this task take me?*

If a task does not have the potential to *"take you to the moon,"* find ways to delegate it or do as little as possible.