

PRODUCTIVITY ROAD TEST

Personality priorities

Doing the worst task first is **Sue White's** formula for a week of fulfilment

Mondays are never the bounciest day of the week, but every Monday morning I'm struck with the same dilemma: who is the overambitious employee who spent Friday afternoon putting together my weekly to-do list?

Apparently, it was me. But unfortunately, the Friday list-making me bears no relation to the Monday morning me. This me looks at the list in horror, peppered as it is with tasks ranging from "mildly unappealing" through to "I absolutely do not want to do this despite the fact it is extremely necessary".

Since the peppy Friday afternoon me appears unstoppable, the Monday morning me has found a new way of dealing with her: do the least-appealing task first. Just like my mother's efforts to get me to eat my broccoli as a kid or the Australian cricket team management's message that homework must be done before you go out to play, doing the "worst task first" has become the adult version of "do it now because it's good for you later".

Still, it's a discipline that comes down in part to personality type. Some of us are simply the types who can rip sticking plaster off quickly: it hurts, but then it's over. Others prefer to scratch away at the edges until said plaster comes off without as much trauma (or simply falls off in the local swimming pool).

The human brain habitually defaults towards one of these extremes. Our approach is either: "Get it over with because life will be better, sooner" (an attachment to pleasure) or "Ignore it as long as possible" (an aversion to pain).

Members of the former group seek to continually move their mental state towards happiness, so doing a task that is unappealing now is palatable.



Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

However, those whose brain's default mode is "aversion to pain" will aim to avoid the bad stuff because it's simply too much to handle.

If you're attached to pleasure, "doing the worst task first" is worth a go. Of course, it makes Monday even less appealing than normal; my Monday passes in a grind of tasks that (although they may be important) bring little joy at all.

Tuesday is slightly better.

By mid-morning I've booked into training I've put off for months, written a speech I've been procrastinating on for weeks, and made not one but three slightly stressful phone calls.

By hump day (Wednesday), I'm celebrating. Not only is the working week moving closer to sign-off, but the tasks left on this week's list are, well, almost pleasant.

While the big downside of doing

the worst task first is the constant discipline in facing unappealing stuff head-on, there's a clear advantage: every day, your working week will become exponentially more enjoyable.

I soon realise the joy goes beyond the approaching weekend, or the fact that Thursday and Friday are filled with nicer tasks than the first half of the week.

The further away the "worst" tasks become, the better I begin to feel about them. By Friday, the memories of Monday's boring broccoli-esque tasks are long gone. Surely the perfect breeding ground for the peppy Friday afternoon me to construct next week's list.

Sue White is a freelance writer interested in working sustainably, making Monday less of a shock to her system, and trying to eat more broccoli. @suewhitewriter