

Do This in the Afternoon for a Better Workday

This small habit can help you feel like you're making progress at work.

About the Author

Do you feel content with what you've accomplished at the end of your workday—or do you always focus on what there is yet to do?



What we focus on shapes our mental narrative, which affects how we feel about work. Ruminating on our lack of progress can keep us in a rut, feeling like we're lagging behind. But

according to research, we can shift this narrative by reflecting on what we have accomplished each day—and feel good about these small “wins.”

In one [study](#), researchers Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer asked 238 employees from different types of companies—management, inventing, technology, and more

—to write daily journal entries about their workday and answer questions about their mood and motivation. Over the course of about four months, the researchers collected almost 12,000 entries.

They found that when people journaled about making progress that workday, they were more likely to feel happier, be intrinsically motivated, and perceive obstacles as a challenge rather than a threat—setting them up for further progress. In fact, of the different factors the researchers examined—from getting help from a colleague to receiving words of encouragement—making meaningful progress was the most important predictor of a good workday.

What counts as progress? Big wins, like completing a year-long report or receiving a bonus, can make us feel great. However, [according](#) to Amabile and Kramer, “Even ordinary, incremental progress can increase people’s engagement in the work and their happiness during the workday.” This could be as simple as clearing your inbox or having an important conversation with a colleague. Whatever it is, if it is a meaningful accomplishment to you, it is a win to celebrate.

In another study, researcher Dan Ariely and his colleagues [asked](#) participants to build LEGO figures at a declining pay rate until they chose to stop, starting at \$2 per LEGO. In one group, each LEGO figure they made was added to a

collection on the experimenter's desk, so that they could see the progress they were making. In the second group, after the LEGO figure was put together, the experimenter would break it down, then give participants the option to recreate it again. Despite both groups being paid the same, the first group was motivated to build significantly more LEGOs than the second.

According to Ariely, seeing progress gives our tasks some purpose. Purpose can come from contributing to something we personally care about, or just some specific objective that we are working toward. Either way, we're more motivated when it's clear how our work is making a difference.

How to recognize small wins

The way an organization is structured and run plays a role in how much progress employees can see, including how managers support and motivate them. Managers should be sure to express to employees how valuable their work is, recognize progress, and avoid canceling projects as much as possible.

We can also take steps to cultivate motivation on our own, by focusing on small wins from the workday. Journaling—like the people in Amabile and Kramer's study did—is one exercise that can help to make meaning and progress more

salient. At the end of each workday, consider a success that stood out and how it made you feel.

In the GGSC's online [Foundations of Happiness at Work course](#), we had learners try this out by writing about wins from their workday. Michel, a learner working in hospitality in Madrid, Spain, shared the joy of coming up with a name for a new product. "After submitting the idea to the team, there was a large consensus that this would be the name. I felt very happy," he said. "It is a small thing that did not require big efforts but the satisfaction is very high. That made my day."

When you accomplish something, it might be tempting to move straight on to the next task. But pausing to recognize your own effort and achievement is meaningful.

It's especially important if you have a tendency to focus on your mistakes or failures. "I find that if I spend too much time dwelling on the losses, especially in a sales role, it gets me down and negatively impacts my outlook. I can become discouraged and pessimistic," shares Matt from northern California. "If, instead, I can list and focus on the small wins, this feels empowering to me."

Work life is full of obstacles, especially now during the pandemic. For those who are still employed, many of us have had to adapt and change the way we work in this new

environment. Acknowledging each challenge overcome and each task completed as a win helps us to build a sense of meaning and motivation.