



3 Productivity & Work Efficiency exercises

- SCIENCE-BASED
- FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Welcome

Do you frequently experience your workday slipping out of your grasp? Despite beginning each day with a clear plan to accomplish numerous tasks, do you find yourself easily distracted, engaging in low-priority activities, and succumbing to procrastination? It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of positive psychology exercises on productivity that were designed to help you and your clients reclaim mastery over time.

Since 2013, our aim with PositivePsychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>

All the best,

Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



**Work & Career**

Exercise



45 min



Client



No



Spatial Action Planning

Setting goals improves motivation and self-confidence, enhances resilience, boosts performance, and facilitates personal and professional growth [1]. When it comes to goal achievement, planning, and preparation are crucial for success. Indeed, without a well-conceived and structured plan, identifying the actions needed to accomplish a goal can prove challenging [2].

Well-defined action plans are, in essence, a roadmap for goal achievement. They increase the likelihood of attainment by breaking a goal down into small, actionable steps that help maintain focus, motivation, and accountability [3]. Action plans can also enhance overall performance and allow goal-setters to track their progress and finish activities within an appropriate timeframe [3].

While action plans are undoubtedly helpful for goal attainment, their creation is not always straightforward, and some people find it hard to clearly define the steps they need to take to achieve a goal. Being in the same physical space where initial planning efforts were unsuccessful can exacerbate this uncertainty [4]. In other words, people commonly become ‘anchored’ to the negative mindset associated with their surroundings [4].

One solution to this problem is spatial action planning. Spatial action planning is a technique that uses different spaces to represent milestones toward a goal [4]. The key to this approach is for individuals to physically move to another location away from where they previously struggled with their planning attempts. Relocating to a different physical space helps people think more clearly about what they need to do and the specific steps they need to take [4]. In this exercise, clients will practice spatial action planning to help overcome mental blocks and generate a well-defined goal action plan that might not be possible to accomplish in their usual workspace.

Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients visualize how to achieve a goal in new and creative ways through spatial action planning. By changing the physical context and moving to a new environment, clients can overcome mental blocks, gain a fresh perspective, and generate ideas that would not be possible in their usual workspace.



Advice

- Spatial action planning will help clients define a desired state (goal) and determine the specific actions that will bring them closer to it by identifying immediate and future actions. When completing this exercise, clients may find it helpful to consider factors like key milestones, requisite resources, and the specific steps needed to achieve the goal(s) they have set for themselves.
- Clients must define goals in specific terms. They should have a crystal clear idea of what they want to achieve to identify all the steps and actions needed to reach their desired state.
- Encourage participants to use all senses at each point on the scale.
- Clients should take their time with each step and avoid rushing through the exercise. If clients feel they are losing focus or getting 'stuck' when considering action steps, they should be reminded of their goal and encouraged to refocus on it. If necessary, clients can be guided to the space allocated to their future (a goal they wish to achieve) and remind themselves of how successful goal achievement will feel.
- While spatial action planning is a valuable tool for goal achievement, this exercise can also be used to map out the steps clients need to take to complete a large project; for example, it can also be used for problem-solving and when working on something new and unfamiliar.
- While spatial action planning is a valuable tool for goal achievement, it should be emphasized that this process requires patience, effort, and commitment. Spatial action planning can be beneficial for both individuals and teams. In team settings, the steps remain the same, but clients work through their action plans together rather than individually.



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Exercise

Setting goals is an important part of personal and professional growth. Goals give you direction and purpose and help you stay motivated. A clear idea of what you should do to achieve your goal is essential.

An action plan clarifies what you need to do by breaking your goals into small, manageable, and specific steps. While creating an action plan is essential for goal achievement, identifying what you need to do may be difficult. Often, this uncertainty comes from being 'anchored' to the negative thinking connected to your surroundings.

Let's say you have been sitting in your office thinking about what you should do to reach a goal. You've been going around in circles, struggling to identify what to do next. If you remain in your office, you will likely remain 'stuck' in this way of thinking. One way to overcome this is through spatial action planning.

Spatial action planning uses different spaces to represent the various milestones toward your goal. With spatial action planning, you physically move to another location/room/environment.

Changing your physical location can help lift the anchor and unstick yourself from the negative thoughts linked to your original surroundings. In this exercise, you will practice spatial action planning to overcome mental blocks, gain a fresh perspective, and generate goal-related actions that might not be conceivable in your usual workspace.

Step 1: Identify a goal

First, you will identify a work-related goal you cannot clearly think about or for which you cannot find solutions.

Write your goal down in the space labeled 'Goal' on the Spatial Action Plan template (Appendix) and include a target date for when you hope to achieve your goal.

As you write your goal, you should describe it in as much detail as possible so that you have something clear, well-defined, and specific to work toward.

Step 2: Move to a different physical location

Take a moment to think about a suitable location that is separate from your usual workspace.

This could be a completely different room, a new environment, or (if space is limited) another area of the room where you usually work. Moving away from where you have previously considered this goal will help you think more clearly about it.

You should now move to this new location.

Step 3: Develop your spatial action plan

Now that you are in your new space, you will get to work on your spatial action plan. To begin, choose three spaces in this new location to represent:

- 1) your current situation
- 2) the future (i.e., your goal)
- 3) the halfway point between the two

An example is shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. An example of three spaces representing the different stages of the spatial action plan



Now that you have allocated a physical space to each of these, follow the instructions below. Remember to take your time and follow these instructions carefully.

1. Physically move to the spot allocated to your current situation. Once you are standing in this location, reflect on the following questions:

- How would you describe your current situation?
- What do you see, hear, or feel?
- What else is happening?

Write your response in the space labeled 'Current Situation' in the spatial action planning template.

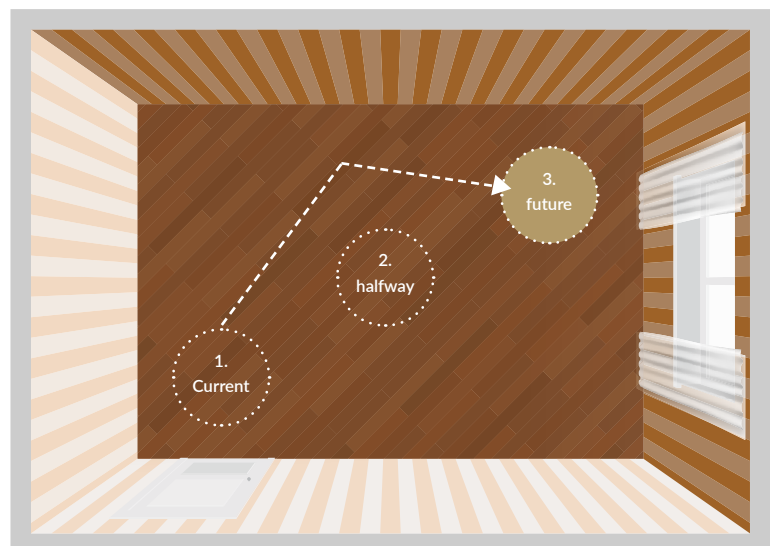


2. Next, move to the location you chose to represent the future (your goal). Imagine that you traveled to the future and have successfully reached your goal.

Take a moment to stand in this space and reflect on the following questions:

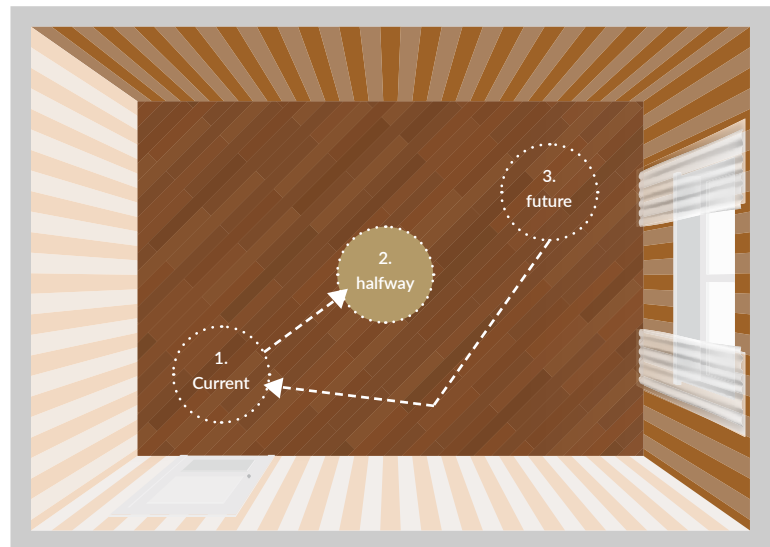
- How would you describe your current situation?
- What does success look like/ feel like?
- What do you see, hear, or feel?
- What else is happening?
- What differences do you notice compared to step 1?

Write your response in the space labeled 'Future' in the spatial action planning template.



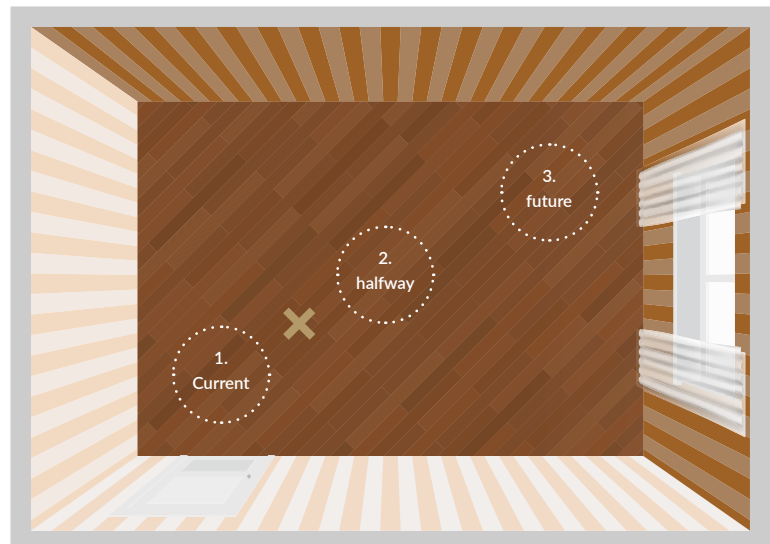
3. Return to the space representing your current situation and then walk to the halfway point.

While standing here, imagine you are halfway to achieving your goal. Write down what is happening now and how it feels to be at this point in the space labeled 'Halfway Point.'



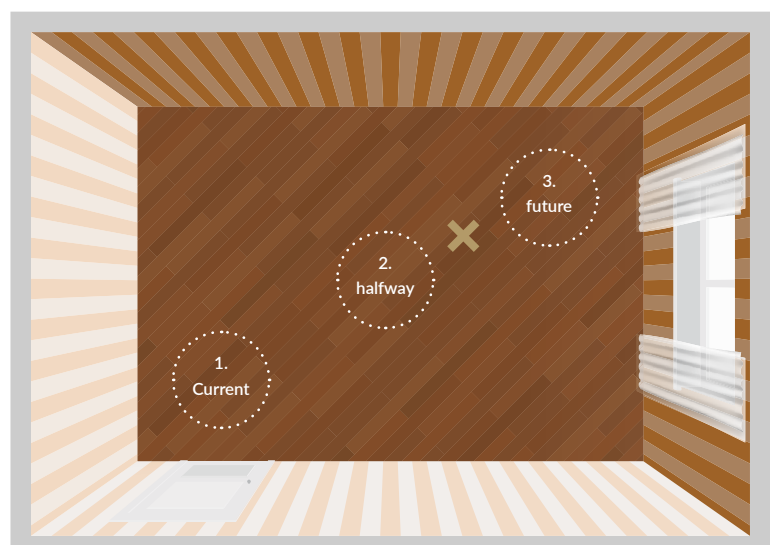
4. Next, stand between the current situation and the halfway point locations. As you stand here, think about the first steps you will take to start working toward your goal.

What steps will help you move from your current situation to the halfway point? Write these steps in the space labeled 'Immediate Steps and Actions' and include a target date for completing each action.



5. Finally, stand in the space between the halfway point and future locations. Take a moment to think about what your halfway point will look like, then consider the steps you will take to move from here and in the direction of your goal.

What will you do to move from the halfway point to achieving your goal? Write these steps in the space labeled 'Future Steps and Actions' and include a target date for when you plan to complete each action.





Step 4: Take action

Now that you have completed your spatial action plan, you can return to your usual workspace and begin implementing the immediate steps and actions you identified in the previous step. As you complete each initial action, you can remove them from your action plan before moving on.

Upon completing your immediate steps and actions, you will have reached your halfway point, and you can now move on to the future steps and actions listed on your action plan.

It is important to note that you should revisit your action plan regularly to ensure you are on track. Revisiting your plan will also allow you to include any missed or forgotten actions, flesh out details that may be less clear at the time of planning, and reassess your timescale if needed.

Step 5: Reflection

- How was it to complete this exercise?
- In what ways did you find this exercise helpful?
- What did you learn from this exercise?
- In what ways has this exercise changed how you will approach goals in the future?
- After completing this exercise, what do you consider the main benefits of spatial action planning?

Appendix: Spatial Action Plan Template

SPATIAL ACTION PLAN				
Goal:				
Current Situation	Immediate Steps and Actions	Halfway Point	Future Steps and Actions	Future



Work & Career



Intervention



25 min



Client



Yes

Increasing Productivity Using the Pomodoro Technique

Francesco Cirillo developed the Pomodoro Technique, a time management method, in the late 1980s [1]. It is a structured method comprising processes, tools, principles, and values to learn how to deal with time and turn it from an enemy to an ally to boost productivity. The technique involves setting a timer for 25 mins and working on a chosen task for the duration of this time (this equals one pomodoro). After the timer rings, you take a short one-minute break. After four pomodoros, you take a longer, more restorative break. According to Cirillo, the technique helps people develop self-observation and awareness skills, making it possible to change their relationships over time and reach their goals with less effort and anxiety [1].

If used correctly, the Pomodoro Technique encourages *flow*, a mental state characterized by high concentration and focus, clear goals, a balance of ability and challenge, losing track of time, and a feeling of being 'in control' and intrinsically rewarded [2]. Flow is a desirable state of creativity and presence. The Pomodoro Technique's timed work increments allow people to enter into a flow state for the duration of the pomodoro and then snap out of this state for a few minutes to regain awareness of and attention to the bigger picture—their working strategy and progress.

For many people, the anxiety triggered by deadlines leads to ineffective work and procrastination. By transforming time into a valuable ally, the Pomodoro Technique enables people to use the assigned time to be more productive. It is particularly helpful for people who feel overwhelmed by their work, struggle with concentration, tend to procrastinate, or have problems meeting deadlines. Indeed, research has shown the effectiveness of the Pomodoro Technique in improving writing skills [3], procrastination behavior [4], and time management skills [5].



Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole and Dr. Hugo Alberts.



Goal

This tool aims to introduce clients to the Pomodoro Technique and guide them in using it to enhance efficiency and productivity.



Advice

- Once a pomodoro is set, it must ring. The idea with pomodoros is that they are indivisible units of time and cannot be broken, especially not to check incoming emails, team chats, or text messages. Clients may record any ideas, tasks, or requests that come up during a pomodoro that they will address later.
- Advise clients that the 5-minute break after 25 minutes of working allows them to completely “disconnect” from their work and do something good for their physical and mental health, energizing them for their next pomodoro. Examples include walking around the room/house/garden, drinking water, breathing or stretching exercises, or even fantasizing about their next holiday.
- If clients work an 8-hour workday, ensure they do not exceed sixteen pomodoros daily. If they do, advise them to postpone the least urgent/least important tasks for later in the week. Moreover, while an 8-hour workday technically leaves room for sixteen pomodoros, it’s best to build a buffer of 2-4 “overflow” pomodoros, to leave some space for unforeseen activities.
- For some types of work that require extended periods in a creative “flow” state, 25 minutes may be too short. Ask clients to try extended work sessions with longer breaks. Ask clients to experiment with the length of their pomodoros.



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Exercise

Introduction

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that needed to be done? Many avoid getting started when they feel too much is on their plate.

An effective way to break out of this avoidance is by shrinking a task to a tiny, unthreatening first step. Doing something small for a short period is easier to face than taking on a big project all at once.

This is exactly what the Pomodoro Technique asks you to do: break down your big tasks, projects, or goals into something you only have to do for the next 25 minutes.

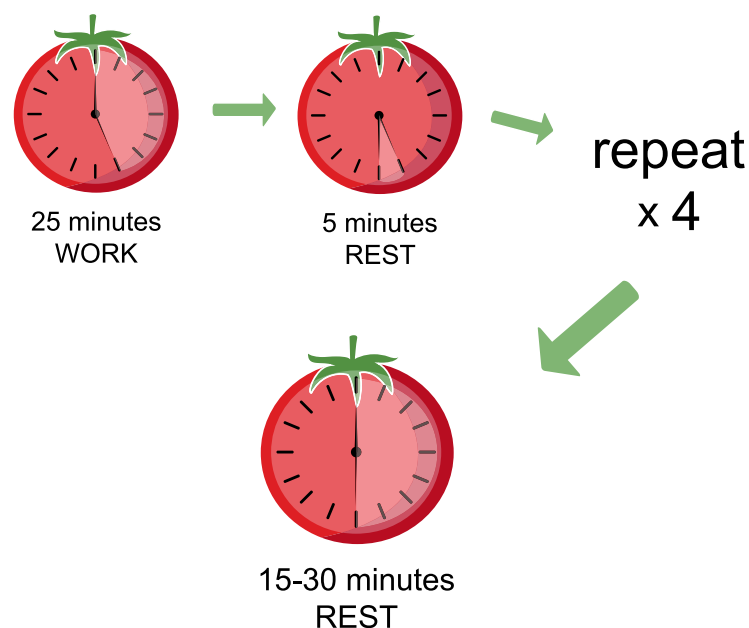
For this exercise, you will need the following:

- A timer (e.g., kitchen timer, digital, phone)
- Printed or digital copy of the Pomodoro Worksheet (Appendix)

Step 1: Understanding the Pomodoro technique

The Pomodoro technique is a simple yet effective way to improve your work and study habits. This technique involves setting a timer for 25 mins and working on a chosen task for the duration of this time – this equals one pomodoro. After the timer rings, you take a 5-minute break. Some tasks may take just one pomodoro to complete; others may take five or six. After four pomodoros, you take a longer, more restorative break (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. A visual representation of the Pomodoro Technique





Using the Pomodoro technique has several benefits:

- It keeps you highly focused on the next thing you need to do rather than getting overwhelmed by the enormity of what you are taking on.
- The abstract idea of “time” (often causing us to underestimate how much time is needed to complete a task) now becomes a concrete event: it becomes a pomodoro - a unit of time and effort.
- It helps us view time in a more positive and motivating way. Rather than something lost, time is now represented as events that have been accomplished.
- It is a way to gamify your productivity: every pomodoro provides an opportunity to improve upon the last.

Step 2: Write a ‘To Do Today’ List

Appendix contains a blank ‘To Do Today’ list (Table 1). On this list, write down all the tasks you must do today, big and small. For example, you might have to create a slide deck for your upcoming conference speech, respond to a colleague about an important issue, and schedule team meetings.

Step 3: Prioritize tasks and estimate the required number of pomodoros

Look at your list of tasks for today and then write them down in order of priority (most important task first) in your Task Inventory (Table 2). Once you have ordered your tasks, estimate the number of pomodoros required to complete each task (Table 2, second column), remembering that one pomodoro equals 25 minutes. Use an empty box to represent one pomodoro. Think carefully about the length of time you think the task will take you and assign pomodoros accordingly. For example, if you think a task will take just under an hour to complete, you would assign two pomodoros.

A task requiring more than four pomodoros should be divided into smaller, actionable steps. In contrast, if a task takes less than one pomodoro, it should be combined with other smaller tasks. For example, “write a rent check,” “set vet appointment,” and “read pomodoro article” could go together in one session.

Step 4: Pick a task

Choose the highest-priority activity on your To Do Today list. You will first work on this task using the Pomodoro Technique.

Step 5: Identify usual distractions

Before you jump into your first pomodoro, take a moment to think about what tends to distract you when you are working on a task. Examples include email notifications, social media, texts or phone calls, and housework. In the space below, list your usual distractions and identify one way you can limit each of these distractions during your pomodoros by, for example, turning your phone off, exiting your email, or using noise-canceling headphones.



Common distraction	Action against distraction
<i>E.g., Colleagues chatting noisily nearby</i>	<i>Put on noise-canceling headphones</i>

Step 6: Set a timer for 25 minutes

We are now ready to begin. Wind up your clock or timer to 25 minutes.

Step 7: Work on your task until the timer rings

Start working on your chosen task—and only that one—for 25 minutes. Because you took the time earlier to address your usual distractions, this time should be uninterrupted.

Step 8: Take a 5-minute break

After completing one pomodoro, take a 5-minute break. Do something good for your health; for instance, stand up and take a walk, go outside for fresh air, have a glass of water, or do a breathing/stretching exercise. The idea is to do something that requires minimal mental effort and is relaxing and refreshing.

Step 9: Every four pomodoros, take a longer break

After completing four pomodoros, stop the activity you're working on and take a longer, more restorative break of 15-30 mins. As with the short 5-minute breaks you've been taking (Step 7), choose to do something relaxing that requires minimal mental effort, like taking a walk, eating, or even resting.



Step 10: Complete and cross out a task

Keep on working, pomodoro after pomodoro, until the task is finished, and then place a checkmark in the third column of your Task Inventory (Table 2) and cross it out on your 'To Do Today' list (Table 1).

Step 11: Create a Pomodoro habit

- Continue building your focus and concentration skills by making your pomodoro planning a daily routine. Create a calendar reminder for the same time each morning (e.g., when you sit down at your desk) to remind yourself to plan out your pomodoros for the day's work activities.
- Challenge yourself to complete several pomodoros daily, and reflect on what went well and how you could improve your pomodoro work.



Appendix: Pomodoro Worksheet

Table 1. To Do Today list

Task #	Task description
1	Create slide deck for conference speech

Table 2. Task Inventory

Task	Estimate of # of Pomodoros Needed	Done
Create a slide deck for the conference speech	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

**Work & Career**

Exercise



n/a



Client



No

Establishing Upper and Lower Bounds

Establishing boundaries is an effective way to make consistent, steady progress on a project or work. The term “upper and lower bounds” represents the idea of defining the smallest and the greatest amount of work one will complete each day on a given project, be it finishing a slide deck for work or writing one’s wedding speech [1]. Upper and lower bounds help prevent exhaustion and burnout in that they ensure that individuals’ daily working limits are both high enough to keep them motivated and engaged in the project and reflect good progress and low enough so that they can achieve it even if unexpected chaos arises [1].

Planning is critical for optimal goal achievement [2], and defining boundaries forms part of this preparation. Planning the short-term, concrete actions necessary to accomplish the larger goal forms a realistic and workable action plan. Action plans have been found to increase the likelihood of goal attainment while simultaneously enhancing perceived self-control and improving overall performance by at least 10-25% [3,4]. Setting boundaries or limits for our work allows us to keep track of our progress, and this awareness of goal progress is an important source of positive reinforcement. Research has shown that being aware of one’s progress instills a sense of achievement which, in turn, fuels motivation [5]. This association is referred to as the progress principle, meaning that recognized progress, regardless of size, provides sustenance and encouragement that moves individuals forward [5].



Author

This tool was created by dr. Lucinda Poole and dr. Hugo Alberts.



Goal

This tool aims to help clients create a plan by establishing boundaries (upper and lower bounds) on a personal project to make consistent, steady progress.



Advice

- Emphasize to the client the importance of celebrating small wins, e.g., completing their lower bound. Celebrations can help clients become aware of their talents and abilities and remind them of their resilience or persistence. This serves as positive reinforcement. Taking time to reflect on an accomplishment can motivate clients to keep working towards their goals. This sense of accomplishment builds self-efficacy and strengthens clients' beliefs that the goal is attainable.
- Advise clients that when choosing upper and lower bounds, the idea is to promote consistent progress, meaning the lower bound must be high enough to keep individuals motivated and low enough so that they can achieve it even when dealing with unexpected upheavals (like an urgent meeting or a tantruming toddler). Furthermore, the upper bound should be high enough to reflect good progress but low enough to prevent exhaustion/burnout.



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Exercise

Introduction

When we try to make too much progress on a goal or project by steaming ahead at full speed, we can get trapped in a vicious cycle of getting tired, taking a break, and then thinking we have to make up for the lost time by sprinting ahead again.

Consider, for example, trying to complete your business plan so that you can move on to the next stage of developing your business. You spend every waking minute of your weekend working on it, powering through until it is complete. While the result may be a completed business plan, the process burned you out so much that you had to take a mental break from developing your business for the following two weeks.

What would change if you worked on your business plan at a steady pace over several days (four days or more), moving through the different parts while taking time for rest and self-care? Taking those few extra days to complete your business plan would most likely help you move on to the next stage swiftly instead of postponing it for a few weeks. In the end, you avoided burnout and used your time more efficiently.

This exercise teaches you how to establish boundaries on a project to make consistent, steady progress and avoid burnout.

Step 1: Understand the theory of upper and lower bounds

Establishing upper and lower bounds involves defining a range within which you can sustain a good amount of progress on a project without burning yourself out.

To establish your upper and lower bounds, we will use the following rule:

Never less than X, never more than Y

Let's say, for example, you set a goal to finish reading your book. Because you prioritize watching television over reading, you might set your lower bound ("never less than X") to something like never reading less than five pages of your book daily. At the same time, because you want to spend time with your family in the evening (rather than spend the whole night reading on your own), you might set your upper bound ("never more than Y") to something like never reading more than one whole chapter per day. This range of 5 pages to 1 chapter should theoretically ensure that you make steady progress on finishing your book while also allowing you to meet your needs for rest and family time.



Step 2: List priority projects

Now let's establish upper and lower bounds for the most important projects you are currently working on (or would like to start). These projects can be related to your work or study (e.g., prepare conference slide deck; complete Art assignment) or to your life (e.g., master a headstand in Yoga; make a new friend). In the first column of Table 1, list all of your most important projects.

Table 1. Upper and Lower Bounds

Project	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
<i>E.g., Finish reading novel</i>	<i>E.g., Never less than five pages per day</i>	<i>E.g., Never more than 1 chapter per day</i>

Step 3: Define lower bounds for each project

Starting with the first project you listed in Table 1, define your lower bound for completing this project. When thinking about lower bounds, keep in mind that these must be both high enough to keep you motivated and engaged in the project and low enough so that you can achieve it even when things do not go to plan, like getting stuck in traffic on your way to work or a family emergency. When you come up with your lower bound for your first project, write it down in the second column of Table 1.

Step 4: Define the upper bound for each project

Let's now define your upper bound for the first project you listed in Table 1. When thinking about upper bounds, keep in mind that these should be high enough to reflect good progress but low enough to prevent exhaustion and burnout. When you create an upper bound for your first project, write it down in the third column of Table 1.



Step 5: Repeat steps 3 and 4 for all projects

Repeat steps 3 and 4 to define the upper and lower bounds for each priority project you listed in Table 1.

Step 6: Start projects

Now that you have established your upper and lower bounds for each priority project you are working on at the moment, it's time to make a start! After two weeks of applying your upper and lower bounds to at least one of your priority projects, return to Step 7 to see how you are doing.

Step 7: Reflection/check-in

Every two weeks, take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- How would you describe your level of productivity on your project(s)? How does it compare to your usual level of productivity?
- How engaged and motivated are you to continue working on your project(s)?
- How suitable is the lower bound that you defined, or might it need adjusting?
- How suitable is the upper bound that you defined, or might it need adjusting?
- Have you encountered any difficulties using the upper and lower bounds for your project(s)?