

“I Never Finish Anything”: How to Stop Feeling Guilty about All of Your Unfinished Projects

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Topics: [Multipotentialite Patterns](#)

Many (many) years ago, I decided to take up wood carving. I went to a local arts store, bought a bunch of tools and materials and things... and then promptly did *absolutely nothing* with them.

Ever.

The sole lasting legacy of this tiny episode is that whenever I remember it, I feel guilty *forever*, even though it had zero effect on anybody’s life, and nobody but me remembers – or remotely cares – about it.

I bet, however, that a large percentage of people reading this have their own “wood-carving tools” story. And perhaps you’re even fighting off similar “oh god, I wasted so many things/so much time and I never finish anything” guilt *right now*.

There are Many Reasons for Failing to Finish

We’ve talked before about [why we might lose interest](#) in something. But failure to finish (or, in some cases, like with me and the wood-carving, to even *start*) isn’t just about losing interest. Sometimes it’s because the work gets difficult. Or perhaps we’re [scared of failure](#), or of [success](#). Maybe we’re genuinely unable to [find time](#), or something unexpected comes up to get in the way. Of course, this list isn’t exhaustive; figuring out the specific reason(s) we struggle requires [great self-knowledge](#), and is a worthwhile project in its own right.

But meanwhile, maybe we can get better at perseverance. No matter the circumstances, having greater perseverance will always help.

First though, let’s learn to let go of this *guilt*.

It Doesn’t Matter Where Guilt Comes From

Objectively, it doesn’t *matter* that I bought some wood-carving tools and never used them. Nobody, bar my bank balance, was hurt by it. So the guilt must come from some deeper story I believe about myself.

In situations like this, we could spend forever delving into our psychology, searching for deeper reasons and [childhood incidents](#) and painful beliefs. This is all worthy work, but sometimes... Chasing the origins of this guilt down a psychological [rabbit hole](#) only gives it more power, time, and attention, none of which it deserves. Instead, simply recognizing the excess guilt can allow us to let go of it.

Sure, our failure to finish may cause ripples in our lives even today ([small moments can have huge effects](#), after all), but feeling guilty about it does not serve us.

Worse, this guilt can become a self-perpetuating problem, which makes it harder to persevere next time. We start to believe our own hype that we’re incapable of finishing, which simply isn’t true.

So if you have guilt about unfinished business, let it go. And let's work on persevering with the next thing. Here are some tips to help.

Change the Story You Tell About Yourself

If you have to prove to yourself that you can finish, start something small and see it through to the end. Write a fifty-word story, or draw a single picture, or learn ten words from a new language. (If that doesn't work, *go even smaller.*)

Congratulations, you've just finished something! This means that all those times you beat yourself up for "never finishing," you were wrong: you *can* finish.

The trick is this: every big project is made up of multiple smaller ones. We just need the right mentality to chain them together.

Finding Satisfaction as We Go

There are two aspects of any project: the results and the process. Or, if you prefer, the finish line and the journey.

Focusing on the journey – those mini projects that make up the full project – makes it much simpler to finish. At every moment in time, we think only of the next step along the way.

For example, if I'm learning to carve wood, perhaps the first step would be "locate the right materials." Instead of being distracted by the glorious wooden sculpture I'm going to someday make, and then being demoralized by the inevitable flaws in my first attempt, I focus only on [getting the materials](#). After that, I focus on the next step. And then the next.

At each point I can be pleased with the progress I'm making without being distracted by the imaginary end result.

I'm not a natural at this mentality. In fact, if anything, I'm naturally bad at it; my instinct is to be results-oriented, only taking *any* satisfaction at the very end of a project. However, this doesn't have to be the case. I can learn to take satisfaction during a project by thinking about how far I've come.

A Practical Recipe for Perseverance

I'm currently working on a couple of very large projects – one personal (my [health and fitness](#)) and one professional (writing another book).

In each case, I'm consciously working on several habits for maximum persistence and minimum guilt. You might like to adopt them too:

- Focus on one step at a time. (If you don't know what the next step is, the next step is *a/ways* "figure out the next small step.")
- Periodically look back at how far you've come. Keep a log of words written, minutes spent exercising, hours spent productively, etc. Take regular moments to review this log and feel genuine satisfaction at the effort put in, regardless of the results, which will come eventually.
- Recognize that at times you will inevitably fail to put in the effort. Try not to feel guilty about it; shake yesterday off and put in the hours today.

Perseverance isn't a Stick to Beat Yourself with

Persistence is a great skill to develop, and a necessary one if you want to make progress on your various projects. At the same time, beating yourself up won't get you anywhere.

The main lesson to draw from not finishing something is that you weren't interested enough in that particular thing to finish it in the circumstances you were in at the time. That's it. Don't draw broader conclusions about yourself. Instead, move forward and focus on the actions that you can take today.