

In this lesson, you'll learn the first of nine rules of productivity that I strive to live by, which is "no more zero days."

What does that mean? What is a "zero day?" And why should you avoid them?

A "zero day" is day in which you produce zero results or make zero progress towards a goal that you had previously defined. Basically, a day when you achieved nothing at all.

Now, I have to emphasize that part about "previously defined."

That's an important distinction because our brains are very good at convincing us that we did something useful after ignoring something we meant to do in favor of something that's more fun or more urgent. But, in fact, we did not. It's a way we protect ourselves from feeling bad when we've failed at something.

And if you do it too often, not only do you fail to make progress on your most important work, but you start to feel a lot of what's called "cognitive dissonance." That's the feeling you get when you try to convince yourself something is true when you know, deep down, it isn't true.

We want to avoid that feeling. And even more, we want to make real, measurable progress on the goals we know are important.

That's the purpose of this rule. That's the purpose of no more zero days.

It means that, at the beginning of the day, you commit to making progress on one specific thing, and then, no matter what, you make progress.

Even if it's 11:59 PM and you've achieved nothing all day, you find a way to do something useful in that final minute.

This is all about making the commitment to never letting a day go by with nothing to show for it even if all you accomplish is something tiny.

So, why does this work? How does the no more zero days rule actually make you more productive?

If I waste the entire day away and only accomplish one little thing, how can you call that productive? How will you ever make *meaningful* progress towards a big goal this way?

The reason no more zero days works is not because, on any given day, you make progress. Though, of course, that doesn't *hurt*.

Why it really works is because of the psychological commitment it creates. The rule forces you to anchor your biggest priorities in your mind, and then take one small step towards achieving them.

When you do that day in and day out, you find it gets a lot easier to do *more* each day. It helps you start to build momentum. And when it comes to productivity, momentum is your best friend.

After you've committed to doing something useful every day—and then fulfilled that commitment—you start to experience something called the “sunk cost fallacy.”

Normally, that's a bad thing. Sunk cost fallacy is the improper belief that you should keep doing something just because you've already invested a lot into it. It's the reason why we stay in bad relationships, or put more money into bad investments, or stick with a job because it's familiar, and lots of other dumb things.

But! The sunk cost fallacy can also be used as a force for good.

When you identify something truly important to you and take a step towards it every day, no matter how small, you reinforce in your mind that you should stick with it. And for the same reason: because you've already put a lot in.

That's how big results are achieved over time with small actions. And no more zero days helps you keep making progress even when times are really hard and you feel like quitting. It keeps the ball rolling because the barrier to getting something done every day is very small.

You can put the no more zero days rule to action in many areas of your life.

If you want to be healthier, you could make the commitment to do something—*anything*—for your health each day, even if that something is very tiny. It could be as little as doing one push up before bed.

Personally, I commit to doing 10 minutes of stretching every day. And that stretching is my warm up for other exercise. Doing it makes it easier to get started but, even if I don't continue, I still met my minimum commitment.

Maybe you want to be a better artist. You could commit to doing one sketch in your notebook every day, no matter what. That sketch may only take 30 seconds. And it might need a lot more work tomorrow to turn it into something you can be proud of,

but just completing the act of getting your notebook and a pencil out when the whole rest of the day was wasted is a big psychological boost.

Do you have a big project at work that you're responsible for, but your days are already full? Find a way to carve out just 5 minutes to get *something* done. That way, things keep moving forward, even if just a little bit, and you don't get stalled.

I do a lot of writing. What helps me is having a no more zero days rule around that.

Even if I'm too busy or lazy to write something decent, I make sure I write something—no matter what it is—just to keep the momentum going. It could be as little as jotting down an idea for a new blog post. Just a few sentences today is all it takes to make sure I have the best shot at having an even more productive day tomorrow.

You can apply this to *anything*, so figure out what's most important to you, and commit to no more zero days.

Now, there's one more thing you can do to make yourself much more successful at actually implementing no more zero days, and that's to find your SATs.

Nope, not talking about that awful test you took in high school. I mean your smallest actionable tasks.

Part of being successful with no more zero days is being able to bust something useful out at 11pm when you've been laying on the couch all day feeling sorry for yourself.

That's hard to do if you don't know ahead of time what the smallest piece of useful work is that you can do. Or if there are lots of things you could do, and you have to choose between them.

You need to know, right now, what those things are so that, when the time comes to rely on them, you're not thinking about *what* to do. You're just doing.

Having a good understanding of your SATs is kind of like having an emergency preparedness kit at home. If you don't already have one when disaster strikes, it's too late. You can't drive around trying to buy everything you need. You're either stuck where you are, or everything's sold out.

But if you do have one, you're ready to go. You dig into it and get what you need.

Same with productivity and SATs. If you know what they are before you need them, it's so much easier to get yourself on track and get something useful done.

Here's one other thing to note: over time, your SATs can—and probably should—expand and contract. As you get more successful with this, you can increase the size of your SATs, and that can propel you to get even more done every day.

But don't forget that life and productivity often runs in cycles. So, if you need to, you can also shrink your SATs back down over time to kind of reset your foundation and build up again.

These are the simple things you can do to bring some routine and order to what is, otherwise, a kind of organic and unwieldy process.

So, here's what we just learned:

First, we learned what “no more zero days” means. It means we no longer let a day go by with no progress. And we try to tie that commitment to a specific project or task so that our brain doesn't trick us into thinking we did something useful when we really didn't.

We learned that no more zero days works because it creates a micro-commitment that's easy to meet. And when you meet it a few times in a row, it creates a momentum that makes it a lot easier to stay productive day in and day out.

We also learned the best way to get started with this rule is to figure out what the smallest piece of work is that we can do to satisfy it. We call these our “SATs” or smallest actionable tasks.

And we learned that, over time, we can grow our SATs to challenge ourselves to be even more productive, or we can shrink them to shore things up when we're struggling.

I recommend you implement this rule right now since it's so easy to do. Take a second to figure out what your SATs are, and try to finish one of them before moving onto anything else today.

Good luck, and I'll see you in the next lesson.