

Baby Steps

“I can’t do it! Every night I come home from work, and I see those stupid suitcases staring at me. I know I should have unpacked them weeks ago, but I just can’t seem to do it. It just feels too overwhelming, so I mostly just take my dinner in the other room and eat while I watch TV. It’s more comfortable in the room where I left the suitcases, but I just can’t look at them.”

Evie had felt depressed at different times in her life, and it often left her feeling paralyzed and unable to do the things she wanted to do. She did go to work every day, but that was about all she could manage.

In her defense, ‘unpacking the suitcases’ didn’t just mean putting them away. She had to take out the dirty clothes and wash them. She had to put away any clean clothes. She had to figure out what she wanted to do with her souvenirs. Plus, she wanted to go through her toiletries to throw out the empties and make sure it was ready for her next trip. It was a big job that needed to be done!

All of us have found ourselves overwhelmed with the number and/or size of the tasks that needed to be completed. And, if we’re honest, most of us have sometimes found ways to distract ourselves to avoid getting started. If the task is to move the mountain, we might find that we spend a lot more time checking out the nearby creek rather than picking up a shovel.

We also sometimes are doubtful that we can complete a task all at one time, which can be an accurate assessment. But there are very few tasks that have to be completed start to finish in the same chunk of time.

To get started, it can often help to break the task into smaller tasks.

Evie was skeptical, but offered that a smaller task was to take everything out of the suitcases. I encouraged her to think smaller. More ideas. Smaller still, I nudged. Smaller....

In the end, Evie decided to work on unpacking for 10 minutes a night. She even set a timer so she knew she wouldn’t be unpacking forever (which is how the task felt!).

When she came for her next appointment, Evie looked like a new woman. She was visibly more relaxed and rested, and clearly pleased with herself. Setting a timer for a manageable chunk of time had been the answer for her.

After our last appointment, she went home and set the timer for 15 minutes. She got all of the dirty clothes sorted and in her laundry baskets in just over 10 minutes. She only had a few minutes left, so she turned off the timer, ate dinner, watched some TV, and went to bed.

The next day, she set the timer, started a load of laundry, and started putting her clean clothes away. She was nearly halfway through when the timer beeped, so she went a little over to reach roughly the halfway point, then left the rest of it where it was for the night.

And so it went. Some days she worked a little longer, and some days shorter. As she got closer to the end, she didn’t mind working longer since she could see that she was nearly done. By our next appointment, she was finished, and so pleased with herself!

All of us get overwhelmed from time to time. When this happens, think smaller. Even smaller. Smaller still. Sometimes the first task is just to move toward the task.

So, when do you sometimes get overwhelmed and paralyzed?