Focusing

How to Fight Through Intellectual Discomfort

4 Ways to beat that "Damn, this is going to be hard" feeling.

By Carson Tate Illustration by atipus

For professional athletes, facing and overcoming pain, adversity, and discomfort is all part of a day's work. Knowledge workers, the majority of the workforce today, encounter a different type of adversity — intellectual discomfort.

You know the feeling of intellectual discomfort. It's that gut reaction you feel when you prepare to start a project, and, as you skim the document, you think to yourself, *Damn, this is going to be hard.*

This will push your intellectual capacity. And that feels challenging, overwhelming and scary. In this moment, you might stall. You might even choose to give up. Or worse – not even give it a shot, delegating it to someone else. This is the work you know you were born to break through to get to your best future self.

Just like how athletes must practice to be comfortable in discomfort, you must as well if you hope to improve your skills and advance your career. The hard stuff, the stuff you’d rather skip or do later is often the stuff that’s most necessary. Every time we choose to play it safe or bypass challenging intellectual prompts, we impede our ability to innovate and grow, waste our own (or our company’s) money, and squander our talent.
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So why do we avoid intellectual discomfort? Because it requires our deepest level of thought, attention, and presence – much of which we’ve lost touch with as a result of full inboxes, the growing number of social media platforms, and media content that updates constantly. Deeply intellectual work is soul work that takes more time and energy. And it goes against the ways we’ve conditioned ourselves to work – on autopilot. We observe life versus engaging in it, whether we mechanically scroll through our social media feed to distract ourselves or use apps to make every step of our day more mindless.

But rarely do we improve when the task is easy. As a cross country runner in college, I detested the mile repeat workout that consisted of running four to six one-mile sets. You had to run each set, which was four laps around the track, as fast as you could with only one lap to recover between sets. It was a grueling and uncomfortable challenge for me every time. However, the speed and endurance that I developed through this type of workout prepared me for the challenge and pain of actual races. It was because I had experienced pain during these workouts that I knew in my gut that I could push through the pain when it truly counted. It was only after I chose to incorporate mile repeats into my workouts consistently that I started breaking my previous personal records.

Whereas runners can physically push through the pain, you need to mentally fight through intellectual discomfort. How? By concentrating solely on what is essential to complete the task at hand. Here are some go-to strategies to hone your focus:

**Work in timed-work intervals (but with a twist)**

This is the Pomodoro Method, or the Tomato Timer Method developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s, and it’s based on the idea that frequent breaks can improve mental agility. The technique uses a timer to separate the work into intervals, traditionally 25 minutes in length, separated by short breaks. The trick here is to use time-work intervals to start building up your intellectual discomfort endurance. Set a timer for ten minutes to brainstorm and push yourself to work on the challenging project until you hear the timer. Here’s the added – but necessary – challenge to make this more effective and efficient: Make sure you give yourself ten minutes that are distraction-free – close out your email screen, silence your alerts, and put your phone on Do Not Disturb. Each week, add 10 more minutes to the timer until you can sit down and tick off complicated work for hours at a time.
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Tony Schwartz, author of *The Way We’re Working Isn’t Working*, employs the principle driving the Pomodoro Method because human beings are designed to alternate between spending and recovering energy. “I write in three or four 90-minute sprints now, and I am 100 percent engaged,” Schwartz says in the book *Overwhelmed*. “Then, I take a break, I either eat something, take a run or I meditate. I distinctly change channels. My first three books took me at least a year each to write. My last though, I worked less than half the amount of time each day, and I finished one in six months.”

**Commit to do one more set, especially when you’re tapped out**

To push us mentally and physically, my college cross country coach would occasionally add one additional mile, hill repeat or timed interval to our workouts. Brutal? No question. Effective? Absolutely. This strategy worked well because just when you thought you were finished, just when you thought you could not run one more step, you *had* to. And you *did*. And you survived it. So, right when the intellectual discomfort becomes unbearable and you want to quit, decide to do just one more set. Write just one more sentence, design just one more slide or complete just one more calculation. Then, take a break. This rest and recovery time is essential if you want to walk the fine line between working hard and burning out. If you’ve been pushing yourself hard over the course of the day or even the week, be prepared that you will need longer recovery periods between hard work sets. Yes, this is an exercise in getting just a wee bit more done, but it’s also a good test of mustering up the courage to push yourself that extra step.

Right when the intellectual discomfort becomes unbearable and you want to quit, decide to do just one more set.

**Combat decision fatigue.**

Florida State University psychology professor Roy Baumeister asserts this: *decision fatigue is real*. Decision fatigue means that we do get tired and emotionally or intellectually exhausted when we’ve made too many decisions. U.S. Senator Cory Booker manages decision fatigue by limiting the number of choices he makes, down to what he’ll wear that day. “I think it is important to get rid of distractions and miscellaneous choices,” he told me for my book *Work Simply*. “When I get up in the morning, I do not have a million clothing items to choose from. The more you limit your choices, thereby limiting thought, the more you can simplify your life and focus energy
elsewhere." [A practice also shared by Barack Obama] Recognize and acknowledge time periods or days when you’ve made a lot of decisions, and realize that that brain power will have an impact on your ability to push through intellectual discomfort. Consider doing your most intellectually-uncomfortable work for a specific period of time first thing in the morning – before the barrage of emails or calls or “asks” for a decision.

**Access your inner “why” and never settle.**

Kobe Bryant’s recent retirement from the NBA sparked a barrage of articles and testimonials highlighting his focused work ethic and intensity – 4 a.m. workouts and 800 shots before scheduled workouts began. Why did he work this hard? Because he knew that no matter how good you are, you should never settle if you want to stay consistently on top. So, ask yourself: *Why do you do the work you do? How does your work bring you meaning and align with your purpose? What’s at stake personally and professionally if you don’t push through your intellectual discomfort and settle for what is easy? And what do you lose out on, if you don’t keep going when things get hard?*

The goal is to not allow yourself to quit before you have given the task or project your absolute best effort.

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When you choose to shift your time and energy, you’re making a new commitment to yourself – to experience and fight through intellectual discomfort. Yes, it will always be challenging. It will always push you. But pushing through that intellectual discomfort makes intellectual freedom and growth more possible. It builds your self-confidence; it makes the reality of your next break-through idea more real. And that should be energizing and enlightening.

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