

Toothbrush vs. Graduation Problem

Curated by Simon De Los Rios

WHO IS THIS FOR

This practice is for anyone treating an ongoing responsibility like a project they should have already finished.

PAIN

Feeling like a failure every time you fall short of something that was never designed to be finished in the first place.

SOLVES

Helps you label each challenge as something to complete or something to maintain, so you stop judging both by the same standard.

TOPIC

BURNOUT & OVERWHELM

LIFE & MEANING

READ TIME
2 minutes

TIME REQUIRED
15 min

WHAT YOU NEED
notebook, pen

BEFORE YOU START

My invitation, take some time for yourself. Put your phone somewhere else and avoid distractions. Put on music you like and if you feel like it, brew yourself a nice cup of coffee or a tea. And lastly, but most importantly, try to have fun... this must be an activity to be enjoyed.

Step 1: Understand the distinction

Some goals have a finish line, diploma problems: earning a degree, completing a project, learning a skill to a functional level. Others need ongoing care, toothbrush problems: staying fit, maintaining a relationship, practicing gratitude.

- Which of my current frustrations have I been treating as finishable, when they are actually ongoing?

Step 2: List your current challenges

Write down everything weighing on you right now, big or small.

- What is on this list that I have not looked at directly in a while?

Step 3: Label each one

Go through your list and mark each item Diploma or Toothbrush.

- Does labeling this change how urgent or how heavy it feels?

Step 4: Respond to each differently

For diploma tasks, commit to finishing them. For toothbrush tasks, design a gentle, sustainable system instead of a deadline.

- What would a system look like for my toothbrush tasks, something I tend to, not something I finish?

Example. Someone lists everything weighing on them: get fit (Toothbrush, no finish line), finish an online certification (Diploma, clear end), be more present with family (Toothbrush), learn Portuguese (Diploma first, then Toothbrush), clean up finances (Diploma for setup, Toothbrush for maintenance). Once labeled, something shifts. The certification stops feeling like a lifestyle change and becomes a project with a deadline. The fitness goal stops feeling like failure every time they miss a week, because they now understand it is something to tend, not finish.

BEFORE YOU CLOSE THIS

Some things on your list were never meant to be checked off. That is not failure, that is the nature of the task.

CONTINUE WITH

The Energy Audit, once you know which of your challenges need ongoing care, this tool helps you see if you are actually giving them the space they need.

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Source: Adapted by SDLR; the academic toothbrush problem is a known concept in research communities

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