

Self-Help Tools: Toothbrush vs. Graduation Problem

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

Not every goal has an endpoint. Some things are diploma problems: they finish once solved. Others are toothbrush problems: they need ongoing care.

- Diploma Problems: finite tasks with a clear end (earning a degree, completing a project, learning a skill to a functional level).
- Toothbrush Problems: continuous practices that sustain your wellbeing (staying fit, maintaining a relationship, practicing gratitude).

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.

How to use it:

- List your current challenges.
 - Label each as Diploma or Toothbrush.
 - Commit to finishing the diploma tasks.
 - Design gentle systems to maintain your toothbrush tasks.
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