



Overwhelm Brain Dump and Sort: Clearing Mental Clutter

An explainer and dump-and-sort grid · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Unfinished tasks keep running in the background of your mind, draining focus and energy.
- Getting them out of your head and onto paper frees up mental space.
- Making a plan for each item, even a rough one, can quiet the mental noise.

Why your brain won't let go

Have you ever lain in bed suddenly remembering an email you forgot to send? Unfinished tasks tend to stay active in memory, nagging for attention. When dozens pile up, your mind feels crowded and overwhelmed, even if none of the tasks is big on its own.

The power of a plan

Research shows you don't have to finish a task to quiet the mental nagging. Simply making a specific plan for when and how you'll do it can be enough for your brain to let it rest.

What the research says

Making a specific plan for an unfinished goal can eliminate the intrusive thoughts and distraction it causes, even before the goal is completed (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011).

In a sleep lab study, writing a specific to-do list before bed helped people fall asleep faster than writing about completed tasks (Scullin et al., 2018).

Tool: My Brain Dump and Sort

Step 1: Dump it all (5 minutes)

Write down everything on your mind: tasks, worries, reminders, ideas, big and small. Don't organize yet.

Brain dump:

Step 2: Sort it

Do now (this week)	Schedule later	Delegate or ask for help	Let go

Step 3: Plan the top three

1. Task, and when I'll do it:

2. Task, and when I'll do it:

3. Task, and when I'll do it:

Strategies to try

- **Make it a habit.** Do a 5-minute brain dump each evening or every Monday morning.
- **Keep one capture spot.** Use one notebook or app so nothing gets lost.
- **Use the 2-minute rule.** If something takes less than 2 minutes, do it now.
- **Be honest in "let go."** Not everything deserves your energy. Letting go is a skill.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **End with a shutdown ritual.** At the end of your workday, review open tasks, write tomorrow's first step, and say a closing phrase like "Done for today." It signals your brain it can let go.
- **Make a "not-to-do" list.** Write down things you're choosing not to do this week. It's surprisingly freeing.
- **Put your top three where you'll see them.** Write them on a sticky note on your phone or laptop.
- **Batch decisions.** Make similar small decisions, like meals or outfits, once a week to reduce daily decision fatigue.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What surprised me when I saw everything written down?

Which items have been on my mind the longest?

What am I carrying that isn't mine to carry?

How did I feel after sorting?

When to reach out for support

If overwhelm is constant, you can't switch off, or it's affecting your sleep and mood, a therapist can help you understand what's driving it and find sustainable ways to manage.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Masicampo, E. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (2011). Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(4), 667–683.

Scullin, M. K., Krueger, M. L., Ballard, H. K., Pruett, N., & Bliwise, D. L. (2018). The effects of bedtime writing on difficulty falling asleep. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(1), 139–146.

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