

Mindsets that Block Us from Finishing Projects

Tell me you've done this before:

1. Get an amazing idea
2. Buy a sweet new domain
3. Tweet about your awesome new project
4. `git init`
5. Um...uh...do some planning?
6. You know what, I'm really busy right now.
7. (Secretly abandons dreams)

Why do we do this!?

The simple answer is of course that having ideas is *way more fun* than seeing them through. That would be adequate if it wasn't so *discouraging* to repeat this cycle all the time. It starts to creep from "I have a bunch of unfinished projects" to "I'm just not the kind of person who finishes things" and that can be really disheartening.

Like most behaviors, un-finishing (a word I just made up) stems from our beliefs about ourselves. Here are three that I've wrestled with over time:

- **Fear of failure:** I'll never succeed. I'm not good enough.
- **Fear of success:** What happens if this takes off? What if I get 1 million requests per second and I didn't plan for that? What if people call me a phony?
- **Perfectionism:** I have to make this perfect before anyone ever sees it.

Any of those resonate with you? These three have definitely kept me from hitting the

publish button or starting to build out an idea I had.

Let's dig a little deeper into **perfectionism**. In some ways it is the root cause of fear of failure and fear of success. I've struggled with perfectionism most of my life, probably until just a few years ago. It still rears its ugly head from time-to-time, but it's a lot less frequent and less paralyzing since learning some ways to get past it. I want to share those with you.

The Complexity Deception

Perfectionism is very closely related to feeling overwhelmed. They're often two sides of the same emotional coin.

It took me years to uncover one of the major thought patterns that reinforced my perfectionism:

I incorrectly believed that a painful and frustrating problem always requires a complex and difficult solution.

In fact, sometimes the solution can be quite simple; we just don't know what it is yet. As we try incorrect solutions, our pain and frustration increases. This leads us to believe that the answer must be mystical, elusive, or extremely difficult to implement.

As developers, we encounter this phenomenon all the time with code. We've probably all wasted many hours troubleshooting disastrous bugs that turn out to be caused by one line of code. I actually experienced this again recently with an app at work. I was spending hours debugging these weird CORS errors I was getting in Firefox and Safari. As the answer continued to escape me, I convinced myself it was due to something really complex. I was knee-deep into the AWS API Gateway docs when I finally decided to ask for some help. My teammate took one look and found the problem in the frontend: I had forgotten to encode the URI of the user profile call. Since this was one of the first calls made as the app loaded, its failure wreaked havoc on the rest of the app. A single line of code – in fact a single missing function (`encodeURIComponent`) – was responsible for wasting hours of my life.

I had fallen into the classic trap of assuming that a *confusing and painful problem*

required a *complex solution*.

I've made this mistake in other areas of my life, too, like my career, health, or self-care. The negative emotion caused by a problem, compounded with all of the ineffective things I've tried, led me to believe that the solution must be so complex and elusive that I had no hope of finding it.

Hunger is a great example of a complexity deception we've already figured out as a species. Hunger can cause all sorts of problems, right? It can make you angry, light-headed, or grumpy and that can have negative consequences like snapping at your boss or family. You can be mad about being hungry, you can yell at the universe, and you can come up with elaborate ways to deal with the symptoms, but the solution is quite simple: you just need to eat some food. The same happens with problems we're facing in improving ourselves and our careers. (Of course, this isn't applicable to the complexities of physical disease or systemic issues; there are no simple answers there.)

So, the cycle is this:

1. Experience pain, discontent, or frustration
2. Try lots of things that don't work
3. Grow the problem in our minds to require a grand, sweeping effort to overcome
4. Get overwhelmed by this massive effort
5. Give up and do nothing

After enough repetitions of this pattern, we start to identify with the pain. We start thinking, "I'm not the kind of person who does that" instead of thinking of the problem as external and solvable. We've developed deep neural pathways that condition those beliefs that we're powerless, like scripts we follow. Every time this happens, it reinforces our perfectionism, because surely something must be perfect to achieve the results we're seeking. The consequences become increasingly dire in our minds, which puts more and more pressure on us to not make mistakes.

So how do we start to free ourselves from this emotional quicksand and start making

progress?

Improving Your Odds

One aspect of perfectionism is *risk aversion*: "Is the pain of my current situation greater than the potential pain of this new situation?"

Let's say you're unhappy with your career. If you've built up in your mind that you need to write a 200 page book, get 25k Twitter followers, and give talks in 12 countries in order to be happy or get the job you want, you're going to feel a lot of pressure before you hit the publish button on a blog post. The stakes are really high. Even if you don't feel particularly happy where you're at, it might not be worth the risk to you of putting something out there for public scrutiny. You either polish it endlessly or abandon it altogether because it seems like a binary outcome of success or failure.

If we turn the risk calculation around, though, we can use this same psychology to our advantage.

Instead let's ask: "What happens if I do or change absolutely nothing?" What's the only way to guarantee that absolutely nothing improves? If I do nothing, my odds of improving anything are zero. If I do something, *anything* -- even if it's wrong -- my odds immediately get better.

You already know the outcome of your current situation, and whatever it may be, you're unhappy or want to improve it. If you do nothing, you know for sure that things won't get better unless a miracle falls from the sky.

This leads us to a beautiful discovery: we *don't know* what the outcome will be when we try something new. That spark of *not knowing* is what can move us to take action. We're not trying to find The One True Solution, we're trying to get just a little more data and go a little bit further down the path.

The result may be good or bad, but in either case *you* are in charge and can respond accordingly. You might find that:

- Writing short blog posts read by 20 people makes you perfectly happy

- Losing 10 pounds by walking every day clears up a bunch of your health problems
- Traveling and speaking once or twice a year scratches the itch for you

You *don't know* and that's enough to try.

The Experimentation Mindset

Embracing that nudge to try will cultivate an experimentation mindset. Instead of seeing all of your failed attempts as evidence of a complex solution or your failure as a person, look at them as experiments that have given you more data about what has worked and not worked. Once you shift your perspective, you can start creating your own experiments.

The key to working through fear of failure, fear of success, and perfectionism is **action**, which compounds into **experience**. The answer isn't to "just believe in yourself," but to *prove to yourself*, little by little, that those negative things you believe about yourself just aren't true:

- If you start getting some wins under your belt, you'll feel less like a failure.
- If you do rocket to success, you'll learn how to handle it and how to ask for help from people who've been there. (And if someone calls you a phony, you'll deal with it and move on with your life.)
- If you start shipping things a little bit earlier than you feel comfortable, you'll start realizing that you are your harshest critic -- and end up helping a lot more people than you realize.

We believe a lot of stories about ourselves that we've told and re-told a million times. Some of them are accurate, but most of them aren't. Arguing with the story doesn't work very well, but living out a different one day-by-day will gradually change the way you see yourself.

To that end, let's dig into the practical and help you rack up some wins.