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# Does Your Project Need Baby Steps or a Deep-Dive? How to Get Clarity!

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6 Comments



*I've said it a hundred times. Tiny, regular steps are the route to a sustainable creative practice.*

But even I've got to admit there's times when only a deep dive will do.

If you suffer from perfectionism and the procrastination it generates, I truly believe tiny habits pave the way to the big

achievements you secretly dream of.

**Sustainable creative practice** is the single biggest thing I help my coaching clients with. It's my signature program if you like. It's the way I help people move from stationary overwhelm to a feeling of increased competency and achievement.

I also think that **focussing exclusively on one thing**, eventually leads to a lowering of productivity.

But I'd be a liar if I said that tiny habits work all the time. If there's one thing the coaches I know all agree on, it's that there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution to anything.

And it's also the case that even the size we choose may not fit us ALL the time.

For most of the year I'm a sustainable practice kinda gal. I work a bit each morning on my artwork and then dedicate afternoons to a couple of other projects such as my blog and **eBooks** and, of course, coaching.

But during these **SAD months** I suddenly go into deep-dive mode.

I find that the maximum I can focus on each day is one major task. Even if I can't complete the task, I get as much of it done as possible and pick it up the next day.

That's not to say, of course, that I only do one thing a day! But certainly I do a much smaller range of tasks on a January day than I do in June. There are less hours of daylight in which to get the work done, and the darkness lends itself to the introspective nature of deep work

## The science behind deep focus

There's actually some brain science that makes this less weird than it sounds. Our average working memory capacity (working memory is what's used in mental tasks) is only three to five items. A cognitive task can only be completed if we have sufficient ability to hold information as it is processed.

So at our peak, we can only hold about five tasks in our active memory at any one time - which is why breaking down big projects into smaller tasks stops us feeling overwhelmed. Seeing the next five steps is enough!

But, when we're low-energy - the way I am during these SAD months - our ability to focus is reduced even further. Our thinking is foggier. So concentrating on just one thing cuts down the dissonance and, once we've got going, it feels easier to just keep plodding on with the thing we've started than to switch to something else.

When we work on multiple projects sequentially - which is what I do during most of the year - a residue of our attention remains stuck thinking about the original task. In other words, when you switch from Task A to another Task B, your attention doesn't immediately follow.

I don't think this is necessarily a problem as long as we manage the switching properly.

## How to manage task-switching

1. Don't focus on **TOO MANY projects** at one time.
2. Develop **regular habits**, so that your mental muscle-memory pings you into the right cognitive state at the right time. Something like, "It's 5pm, I'm now in blog-writing mode."
3. Mark the change between sessions by moving and taking breaks - stopping to make tea, go out for coffee or a walk or making/and eating lunch. If possible, also work in different seats, rooms and locations.

While these tactics work fine for me for 10 months of the year, it all this falls apart when the days are short and my cognitive ability is reduced.

I've said before that at this time of year I feel like a **big, lumbering bear**. So if you think of how anything of size takes time to get moving (a lorry versus a moped, for example), but then gradually gathers unstoppable momentum because of its mass, you'll get an idea of how mono-focussed, deep-dive energy works for me.

## How to decide between a regular habit and a deep-dive

The beauty of all of this is that, as I said, one size doesn't need to fit all.

Regular practice is an essential tool for a sustainable creative life/career because there are inevitably many commitments we need to balance.

But deep-dive focus definitely has its benefits. In fact in a world where people find it harder and harder to maintain focus, it's becoming a very valuable skill.

The two approaches are certainly not mutually exclusive. Regular and sustainable creative habits help us gradually increase our focus. Over time we become better able to shut out or ignore distractions and hone our concentration to its optimum. So that whether we decide to work for 45 mins or an entire afternoon, we don't waste half the time looking at Facebook or arranging our paints by colour groupings.

So how do you decide whether the most productive way to finish your project is by slowly chipping away a bit each day or immersing yourself for as long as it takes?

The key - as with all decisions - is to be compassionate and self-aware. Consider your energy, the complexity of the project and how many other commitments you have on your plate and make your decision intuitively based on these.

When you regularly tune into your intuition, you'll more readily recognise what's most appropriate to you at any given time.

Which is the only *real* route to a sustainable practice, right?