

Name the Top Three

When everything feels important, the brain can struggle to decide where to begin. Messages, appointments, household jobs, work, relationships and things you have remembered at the last minute can all compete for the same space. The result can be a strange combination of urgency and paralysis: you know there is a lot to do, but choosing the first thing becomes another task in itself.

Why three?

Choosing three priorities is not about pretending everything else is unimportant. It is a way of reducing the number of demands your brain is actively holding. Three gives you enough structure to identify what matters without creating another overwhelming list. On a difficult day, your top three may be very basic: eat something, attend one appointment, and reply to one important message. That still counts.

Start with the brain-dump

If your head feels crowded, write down what is circling in it without trying to organise it first. Include tasks, worries, reminders and things you are afraid you will forget. Getting them onto paper or into a note can reduce the pressure to keep rehearsing them mentally. Then look at the list and ask which three genuinely need your attention today. Not which three make you feel most guilty. Not which three someone else might choose. Which three matter most in the reality of today?

How to choose

Think about consequences, timing and your available capacity. Is there something with a genuine deadline? Is there something connected to your health or safety? Is there one task that would reduce pressure elsewhere? Also notice whether a task only feels urgent because it is uncomfortable to leave unfinished. Sometimes the most visible demand is not the most important one.

Make each priority smaller

Once you have chosen your three, turn each one into a clear action. 'Sort finances' is huge; 'open the bank statement' is a beginning. 'Clean the house' is huge; 'clear the kitchen surface' is specific. 'Deal with work' is huge; 'send the appointment confirmation' tells your brain what to do. Clear instructions reduce the amount of planning required before you can start.

Everything else needs somewhere to go

A top-three system only works if the other tasks are allowed to leave your immediate attention. Put them on a later list, calendar them, delegate them, or deliberately decide that they are not being done today. The aim is to stop your brain repeatedly pulling every unfinished task back into the foreground.

Your Top Three Check-In

Before choosing your three, notice your capacity today. Are you rested or exhausted? Are you already managing sensory overload, pain, anxiety, grief or a difficult interaction? Priorities should reflect the person doing them, not an imaginary version of you with unlimited energy.

1. What genuinely needs attention?

Choose one thing that has a real reason to be done today. Write the smallest useful action rather than the whole project.

2. What would reduce pressure?

Choose one action that would make the day feel lighter. Sometimes this is completing something; sometimes it is cancelling, postponing, asking for help or deciding not to do it.

3. What supports me?

Your third priority does not have to be productive. Eating, resting, taking medication as prescribed, going outside, having quiet time, preparing something that makes tomorrow easier, or contacting someone supportive can be a valid priority.

If three is still too many

Choose one. The number is a tool, not a rule. During high overwhelm, illness, burnout or shutdown, reducing the list further may be exactly what is needed. You can return to the other priorities when you have more capacity.

Message from Maggie

When your mind is full, a long list can make you feel as though you are already behind before you have even started. I want this exercise to do the opposite. Your top three are not another standard to meet; they are a way of giving your attention somewhere to land. Choose what matters, make it smaller, and let the rest wait for now.

When overwhelm keeps returning

If difficulty prioritising and overwhelm are regularly affecting everyday functioning, it may be helpful to explore what is driving the load. Stress, anxiety, burnout, ADHD, autism, sensory demands, trauma, sleep difficulties and physical health pressures can all affect planning and executive functioning. A GP, therapist or other appropriate professional can help you consider support that fits your circumstances.