Twitter Thread by Corey Wilks, Psy.D. ■

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You know how having too many open Chrome tabs bogs your computer down?

The same happens to your brain.

Unfinished tasks keep "running" in the background.

It's called the Zeigarnik Effect.

Here's how it works and what to do about it:

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Quick History:

Named after Dr. Bluma Zeigarnik.

While sitting in a busy restaurant in Vienna, she noticed the waiters had better memories of unpaid orders vs. paid ones.

Once the bill was paid, they struggled to remember the exact details of the orders.

But why?

1/ Our brains are wired to remember unfinished tasks better than completed ones.

Like a to-do list, once we finish a task, our brain checks it off the list to free up mental bandwidth.

The more unfinished tasks, the more resources our brain dedicates to keeping track of them.

2/ Storytellers leverage the Zeigarnik Effect with cliffhangers.

We keep reading/watching to find out what happens next because our brains are driven to seek closure.

Once resolved, we can forget and move on.

Until then, we lean in with rapt attention.

3/ It's another reason blocking uninterrupted time for deep work is important.

What most call "multi-tasking" is actually task-switching.

The ZE is one reason we suck at it.

When we're doing something and get interrupted, our brain keeps that "tab" open—draining our CPU.

4/ Perfectionists struggle with anxiety from obsessing over details and having unrealistic expectations.

Aka, they drown in unfinished tasks.

So the ZE keeps their brains bogged down, poorly focused, and stressed.

They can't let things go.

5/ The ZE is one reason we struggle to fall asleep.

For many of us, bedtime is the one time we're not surrounded with distractions.

So our brain goes into overdrive refreshing and resurfacing all the tabs we've kept open throughout the day.

6/ Here are two simple strategies to combat the Zeigarnik Effect if your brain is constantly bogged down:

1. Switch from a to-do list to a Needle Movers List

To-do lists are never-ending. Like fighting a hydra, for every task you complete, two sprout in its place.

A Needle Mover list only has the 1-3 highest ROI tasks for the day. Easier to remember, track, and complete.

2. Build a Second Brain, a la @fortelabs

The more tasks and info you can offload, the fewer your brain will have to constantly monitor.

You don't build a Second Brain to remember.

You build it so you can forget.

Wrap Up/

The Zeigarnik Effect unintentionally forces our brain to dedicate more memory and attention to unfinished tasks.

So if you want to improve your focus and free up your memory, minimize and offload unfinished tasks.

If you enjoyed this thread, I explore the psychology of business, creativity, performance, and fulfillment.

So follow me @CoreyWilksPsyD for more.

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