

SURVIVING THE MESSY MIDDLE

**HOW TO GET
REFOCUSED WHEN
YOU'VE GONE
OFF TRACK**

It's August. We are in the thick of Summer, the kids are home from school and for many of us, this is the time a year where it feels like everything pretty much falls apart. Our routine gets all out of whack and our best intentions go right down the drain.

It's also the time of year where all those goals we set back at the beginning of the year no longer feel very relevant, and we're tempted to just call it a day, especially if things have gotten hard or stressful. We might even start asking ourselves, "what's the point?"

There's actually a name for this phenomenon. It's called "the messy middle."

It's the period in the middle of a project where the shiny newness and enthusiasm has worn off, and where the roadblocks and headaches have begun to crop up. It's the part of the project that just doesn't feel like very much fun, and where we struggle with feeling completely burned out. And it's usually the part of the project where you want to quit.

Believe me, I've been there. More times than I can count. And if I'm being honest, I'd say I'm probably in a bit of a 'messy middle' phase right now. The temptation to throw in the towel is strong.

But here are two things I've learned about the messy middle: First, if we quit, it stops being the messy middle and instead becomes the messy end. Nobody wants to go out on a low note. And second, our biggest breakthroughs almost always come from breakdowns. If we can push through the frustration and come out on the other side, we WILL be better for it.

So how do we push through without making ourselves crazy in the process? Here are a few ideas that usually work for me—they might just help you too!

TAKE A BREAK

A break is not quitting. It is pressing the pause button so that you can come back refreshed, with a clear head and renewed enthusiasm. We all need breaks on a regular basis, because without them we become distracted and unfocused. We start spinning our wheels, feeling more and more stressed, when really the best thing we could possibly do is walk away altogether for a little while, and just recharge.

So make sure to give yourself some breaks this summer. Take a day off to go hiking or to the beach. Spend the weekend reading a novel in the backyard. Take your kids to the water-park. Have fun. Enjoy the sunshine. And stop feeling guilty when you do—breaks are good for you!

REGROUP

The messy middle is also a good time to revisit your goals to make sure they are still worth pursuing, and to tweak and make adjustments accordingly. It's very possible that something that seemed important 6 months ago no longer does,

or that a new opportunity has come up. That's okay! Regrouping is not quitting either, it is making sure the path you are on is the one you still need to be on.

Take some time to look at your big goals, but also to do a brain dump of everything on your plate right now. Get those tornadoes out of your head and onto a piece of paper, where you can sort them.

PRIORITIZE

From there, you'll need to prioritize! Give every single item on your brain dump list a number in order of importance. There can be no ties! If everything is important, nothing is, and that is why you need to force your brain to choose what matters most. The rule of 80/20 says that 20% of our efforts will result in 80% of our results. If you can start with the most important things, you'll feel a whole lot better a whole lot faster!

GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

If summer is throwing you off, know that you are in good company! Almost everyone feels that way. It's okay to take it a little easier this time of year, to take more breaks, and simply enjoy the longer days and better weather. Give yourself the grace to not do everything, at least not right now.

Robin Sharma pointed out that, **“all change is hard at the beginning, messy in the middle, gorgeous at the end.”** Winston Churchill said it a little more bluntly: “If you're going through hell, keep going.”

In other words, **the messy middle is almost always just that—messy.**

Sometimes the best approach is just to accept a season for what it is, then do the best you can! After all, once you know the middle is going to be messy, and that it is totally normal to feel this way, it makes getting through it just a little bit easier.

And so, my challenge for you this month, if you are going through your own messy middle, is to look for the breakthrough in your breakdown. How can you push through and come out better on the other side? Take a break. Regroup. Prioritize. And above all, give yourself grace!

You've got this, I promise!

STOP WORRYING ABOUT YOUR WEAKNESSES

FOCUS ON THIS INSTEAD

WRITTEN BY TANIA GRIFFIS

The single best piece of advice I have ever received was this: ***“Stop trying to improve your weaknesses. Play to your strengths.”*** It was my dad who told me this—I doubt he remembers saying it, but it rocked my world.

This simple concept he introduced me to literally changed my life. In fact, this concept has become the foundation upon which I have built my entire business..

So, what does playing to our strengths actually mean? And how can we implement the concept into both our businesses and our everyday life? How do we find the magic sweet spot we feel we were destined for?

CHANGING DREAMS ARE A GOOD THING

To explain all of the above properly, I need to go back a bit and share the situation that led up to my father uttering those fateful words. Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve always had BIG dreams. My biggest? I wanted to be a Broadway star. I loved to sing, dance, and act. And I was really good at it.

I followed my dream all the way through high school and college, where I auditioned at several schools and received multiple acting scholarships. I felt affirmed in my calling—schools were literally offering to pay me to come study acting!

TRUST YOUR GUT

After a single semester, however, I got hit with some hard realities. Between excruciating insecurity in my abilities (due to snide remarks), to being placed squarely at the bottom of the drama department food chain with the rest of the freshmen class, I made the choice to walk away. I only lasted a single semester.

My life felt shattered. My dream was broken.

So, I did the one thing I always do when life gets tough: I picked up my journal.

You see, the one thing I’ve faithfully been doing since childhood is writing.

As soon as I thought about what I was the best at, I knew what I needed to do. I made another call and followed my gut instinct—I was going to be a writer. I received my journalism degree and here I am, over a decade later, running a ghostwriting business, **The Creative Wheelhouse**.

Our mission at The Creative Wheelhouse is to serve bloggers and small business owners. We partner alongside them to create written content for their blogs, websites, social media, and marketing pieces. We have over 25 clients and a half dozen people on the team. I get to impact the lives and businesses of my clients and team daily, in positive ways.

A far cry from sobbing into a diary.

Why? **Because I allowed my dream to shift.**

As business owners and solopreneurs, it's no different. We have to adjust and align constantly. If we don't, our businesses grow stagnant. Our clients and readers leave and our confidence plummets. We lose our passion.

In short, changing dreams is a really good thing.

KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

To grow your business and have the opportunity to impact those around you, you first need to do as my dad suggested: **play to your strengths**. To do that, though, you must know what both your strengths and weaknesses are.

Strengths and weaknesses work in tandem with each other. You cannot have a strength without having a corresponding weakness. Here's a very practical example of what I mean using two fictional women, Jenny and Laura.

Jenny is the PTA president. She works a full time job where she is a head project manager, and has a pristine house. Her two children are always groomed impeccably, as is she.

Laura, on the other hand, is a stay at home mom. She has four children, who are often dressed in a mismatched array of colors and patterns. She loves to paint and makes incredible art pieces. She is teaching an online course that helps children learn how to do the same.

Jenny's strengths—punctuality, time management, and her organizational skills are in stark contrast to Laura's. Laura is not-so-great at all of the above. However, she is fantastic at utilizing her creative skills, being highly spontaneous, and able to go with the flow in any situation.

Do you see how these polar opposite women both have strengths and weaknesses? Now imagine Jenny trying to teach art classes, or Laura running an ultra-detailed project with crucial deadlines. It doesn't work.

Could the two women fill their respective roles? Probably. But would they do it well? Probably not. At the best, they'd be average or mediocre in their roles.

Even more importantly, neither would be happy. Their work would feel challenging and soul-draining. Not a good thing!

Laura could spend her time trying to learn how to be an ultra-organized Type A woman, or she could instead use that time and mental energy to pour into her art courses. She could become the greatest children's art teacher online and love her life—or she could become a struggling, mediocre project manager in a job she despises.

See the difference? The same amount of time and energy will net you very

different results when you play to your strengths.

HOW TO FIND YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The first step in implementing this is to figure out what the heck your strengths are. There are so many ways you can do this, but here are three exercises I have found to be most effective.

Make a List. Pick up a pen and paper and start listing things you are great at. In Elite Blog Academy, Ruth asks people to make a quadrant list of:

- A.** What they are good at and love
- B.** What they are good at and don't love
- C.** What they are terrible at but love
- D.** What they are terrible at and hate

List A is what you are both good at and enjoy doing—those are your strengths. List D are your weaknesses.

- **Ask your friends.** When I did this, I simply put out a Facebook post and asked my friends to tell me three words they would use to describe me. Not only is this an incredible confidence booster, but you might be surprised at the things they say, and the frequency the same words come up.

- **Take the StrengthsFinder test.** The name literally says it all! This test takes about 20-30 minutes to complete and you do have to pay for your results. But I promise you—it's worth every penny! Make sure to purchase the full results because knowing your strengths AND weaknesses is equally important.

STOP TRYING TO IMPROVE YOUR WEAKNESSES

By going through the three above exercises, you should have a fairly good idea of what your strengths are. You should also know what your weaknesses are. So what do you do with your weaknesses?

Stop worrying about them.

It's easier said than done, of course. And it isn't always possible. However, by letting your strengths take center stage and your weaknesses take the backseat, you will grow immensely in both business and life.

Here are some practical ways a blogger could stop focusing on weaknesses:

- If you are an incredibly gifted creative writer, you could hire someone to take over the back-end part of your website. Use the extra time you would have spent tearing your hair out over Wordpress' plugins to write articles that will make up the cost of outsourcing.

- If you love keyword research and analytics, but dislike writing, offer out your skills on a VA board. Use your earned income to hire a writer.
- If you are an incredible graphic designer, sell your designs or use them to build an instagram fan base that will lead to more sponsored posts and affiliate sales. Then, hire someone to link your affiliates in your older posts and continue to promote them with your awesome graphics and pins.

As you can see, the common theme above is outsourcing. As Ruth says, you can't do or be all the things all the time.

Outsourcing or trading skills comes naturally to us in our personal life. For example, if you dislike dishes, but are great at folding laundry, you might ask your husband to do the dishes while you fold.

In business, it should be no different. I learned this the hard way—I had been running my blog for six years before I ever let anyone touch it. I finally had to start handing off tasks when I was so exhausted and burnt out that it was either outsourcing or walking away.

Guess what happened the first time I let someone create a pinterest graphic for me and put it on Pinterest?

Nothing.

My audience didn't care (or realize). My traffic didn't tank (it actually improved). My business didn't sink—it started to thrive. And more importantly, I started to enjoy it again. Because while someone was making graphics and killing it on Pinterest, I got to do what I really loved—write.

HOW I BUILT A BUSINESS AROUND MY STRENGTHS

After going through EBA, and also joining the first EBA VIP group, I realized something important: my dream was shifting, yet again.

While I had someone managing my social media (who liked it and was good at it!), I poured myself into writing content, posts, and emails. My writing shined—and people noticed. I took on freelance writing gigs for a few other bloggers who approached me, all due to the time and energy I put into posts.

I realized I still wanted to blog, but I didn't necessarily care if it was on my blog. I wanted to write and use everything I learned throughout school, my work experience, my blogging career, and my time studying under Ruth, but in a non-traditional way.

I started a digital agency for bloggers built solely around the concept of playing to your own wheelhouse (hence the name The Creative Wheelhouse). I wanted to reach people who were struggling in their business and needed a hand or a boost—but only in a way that played to my strengths.

According to my (scary-accurate) Strengths Finder results, my top giftings are positivity, communication, empathy, strategy and includer. So I built my business as such—I run an agency comprised of women who are so excited to get to do the work we do.

I get to use my empathy daily with both my clients and my team—to ghost-write well, you really do have to put yourself in someone's shoes. I get to write, but I am completely fanatical about nailing SEO, which plays to my strategy side.

I get to do what I love, every single day. I have never felt more sure that I was doing what I was meant to do—not even being on Broadway would be this good (although I'd certainly welcome the chance). And it all happened thanks to letting my dreams shift, listening to my strengths, caring deeply about my customers and team, and investing in excellent learning resources like **Elite Blog Academy**.

Remember, ***stop trying to improve your weaknesses. Play to your strengths.***

HOW TO CATCH YOUR BREATH WHEN LIFE GETS CRAZY

It has been a whirlwind of a week, one that has followed a stressful, chaotic, and incredibly busy whirlwind of a month. To be honest, I have felt like I am being pulled in a hundred different directions all at once, wanting to be there for all the people who need me right now, and still take care of all the normal responsibilities that come with being a wife and a mom and a small business owner.

And I don't know if you have ever felt this way, but for the past week or so I have been struggling with this overwhelming feeling that I just can't catch my breath.

The ironic thing is that productivity and time management is something that I think about and write about a LOT. It is truly one of my passions, and I am constantly looking for ways to do things just a little more efficiently, ways to get more done in less time, and to stay focused on the things that matter most. It's why I developed the **Living Well Planner®**, and it's why the mission of our company is to eliminate overwhelm in the lives of women everywhere.

But I also know that knowing what to do and actually implementing it are often two different things, and that the reality of life is that no matter how productive we intend to be, there will always be seasons of crazy.

Your mom or your child or your husband gets sick. You move cross country, or even just cross town. You lose a key member of your team at work and suddenly have to take on a whole new set of responsibilities. You get asked to help out at church or your child's school and although you don't really have time, you feel like you just can't say no. You get blindsided by a legal battle or stressful conflict with a friend or family member.

Sometimes all at the same time.

Ironically, in the midst of all this chaos, I received a request to share my 3 favorite tips for better managing your time. The tips I shared are all techniques that I have been writing about and using in my own life for a long time. And yet, as I was sharing them, I was realizing just how badly I needed to step back and take some of my own advice!

And so, after I was done, I sat down and did just that. Immediately it felt like a load had been lifted off my shoulders, and I slept better than I had in weeks. Everything that felt so overwhelming just yesterday now feels manageable again.

I guess I just needed the reminder!

If you are feeling the same way right now, like you just can't catch your breath, here is a quick summary of what I shared (and the advice I then followed for myself!):

1 PRIORITIZE

When you are busy & overwhelmed, it is hard to even know what to focus on first, and that's when we end up spinning around in circles. The last thing we FEEL like doing is stepping back and assessing where we are at and where we need to go, but that is exactly the moment when you MOST need to take a step back!

Set the timer for 20 minutes and do a brain dump of everything in your head. It's amazing how getting it out of your head and onto paper will help create more clarity.

Then, once it is out there, it's time to evaluate—give every single thing on your brain dump sheet a number in order of priority. The reality is that not everything can be important so you have to choose. Give EVERY SINGLE ITEM a number. There can be no ties.

2 PLAN

Once you are clear on your priorities, it's time to start planning. The first thing I would do is rewrite your list so that it is in order and then draw a line between the top 20% and the bottom 80%. So if there are 20 things on your list, you would draw a solid line between the top 4 and the bottom 16.

And then (and this is the important part) make your plan for just those four things! The rule of 80/20—also known as Pareto's principle—says that 80% of our results will come from only 20% of our actions. This means that if you can cross off the top 4 things on your list, you will solve 80% of your stress. So block out time on your schedule as soon as possible to get those top 4 things done.

3 EXECUTE

This is where the rubber meets the road! Once you've blocked out your time and created your plan, you need to implement it. That means buckling down and getting serious and reminding yourself, sometimes over and over WHY this is important.

When you execute, try to work in focused time blocks of 60-90 minutes. Set the timer if you have to, and give yourself a break. But while you are focused, BE FOCUSED! Turn off your phone, messaging, etc. Turn off the Internet. Get off Facebook. Give yourself the gift of no distractions, and then give yourself a time limit to get it done.

Mother Theresa once said **“Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.”**

Along those same lines, Ashley Ormon once pointed out that **“You can’t make up for lost time. You can only do better in the future.”**

In other words, **no matter how stressful or busy our week or month has been, we have the opportunity to turn things around, starting right now.**

My challenge for you, if you’ve been feeling busy and overwhelmed, is to **take some time TODAY to follow these three steps.** Get all those tornadoes out of your head and onto a piece of paper, where you can prioritize them and create a concrete plan of action. I promise you’ll feel much better!

FILLING THE TIME JAR

***Ever feel like there isn't any time or energy left
to accomplish your big goals & dreams?
These 5 time management steps to change your life can help!***

After three years of balancing stay-at-home-motherhood with building my own business, my daily routine was well established. I started early—usually around 4 a.m.—so that I could get at least four or five uninterrupted hours of work in before the kids woke up. I am at my best in the morning, so those quiet pre-dawn hours were always the most productive. The rest of the morning was spent tidying the house and then homeschooling. After a late lunch, the girls would settle in their room for a quiet time and I would sneak in another hour or two of work before starting dinner or rushing off to all those afternoon activities. Every day was jam-packed and I was often exhausted, but the routine was set and it was mine.

And then my husband left his job to become a stay-at-home dad. Suddenly my carefully regimented routine was turned upside down. Having him at home was a major goal we had been working towards for years, one we had talked at length about beforehand, and a change we really, truly wanted to make for our family. I thought I was prepared. I thought I was ready.

I was so not ready.

The reality of having Chuck home and in my space all the time was so much harder than I had ever imagined. For months I just felt “off.” I would try to wake up early, but then he would wake up too. I would sit at my desk to work, but almost instantly get distracted. Sometimes it was the noise around me, other times it was email or Pinterest or the latest status update on Facebook. I began spending an inordinate amount of time glued to my laptop or phone, but I wasn't really accomplishing anything. To make matters worse, the more time I spent “working,” the more frustrated my husband became. You're always on the computer, he would say. You're here but you're not present. We need you to engage.

Though I didn't want to admit it, I knew, deep down, that he was right. My life was out of whack. I lacked a clear direction and focus, and as a result I was wasting far too much time on the things that didn't matter at all, and not finding any time for the things that did. Something had to give.

It wasn't the first time in my life I've devolved from competent go-getter to utter disaster, seemingly overnight. Unfortunately I'm pretty sure it won't be the last. I think we all suffer from these “slumps” once in a while, those days or weeks or months where we feel completely overwhelmed and hopelessly unproductive. We all have those moments where it feels like no matter what we do, we simply can't pull ourselves together or get caught up. The treadmill is moving just a little too fast and there are one—or ten—too many things pulling us in all directions. The demands and stresses of the everyday become just a bit too much to bear, so we start looking for a way to escape. We respond

by getting distracted, wasting time, and procrastinating the things that are most important. This, of course, creates a vicious cycle, because the more we procrastinate and allow ourselves to be distracted, the more behind and more overwhelmed we feel.

Perhaps you are even feeling like this right now.

There is a very famous story about a professor who held up a jar of rocks to his class. Perhaps you've heard it, but it bears repeating. He asked them, is this jar full? They all agreed that it was. Then he took a bag of small pebbles and poured it into the jar. The pebbles filled in the space around the jar and he asked, now is it full? Everyone again said yes. He then took a bag of sand and poured it into the jar. The sand filtered through the rocks and pebbles until all the space was filled. What about now, he asked, do you think it is full? For the third time the class said yes. Finally he took a pitcher of water and poured the water into the jar until it was all the way to the brim and began spilling over the top. Now, he said, we can say the jar is really full. He then asked his class an important question: Do you think, he said, if I had started with the water, then the sand, and then the pebbles, there would still be room for the rocks?

If we think of our lives and our time as a jar of rocks the illustration is pretty clear. We have to fill it with the big stuff first, before we tackle the easy and the mundane.

Although I had heard that illustration before, this time, as I was searching for a solution to my time management issues, it stuck. I started applying that strategy to my life. Almost immediately I started getting more done in less time, and having more time to do the things I really wanted to, like swimming with my kids, going on date nights with my husband, and spending more time with friends.

These five simple steps can change your life too!

1 LIST YOUR PRIORITIES

You can't prioritize your time if you aren't clear--even if just to yourself--about what is most important to you. Is it your family? Your spouse? Serving your church or community? Getting your blood pressure under control or losing 50 pounds? Is it finishing your degree? Getting your house in order or remodeled or ready to sell? Getting in shape or training to run a marathon? Getting a promotion or establishing your own business? Getting your budget under control, paying off all your debt, or starting an emergency fund?

Your priorities can and will change based on your season of life, but the first step in taking control of your time is determining what matters most right now. Take ten minutes to write down the 5-10 things that are most important to you in the season of life you are in right now. Don't base them on how you

have been spending your time, but on what actually matters most to you.

2 SET SPECIFIC GOALS

Close your eyes and imagine your life in detail five years from now. Where do you live? Where do you work? What is your job title? What do you look like? What does your house look like? How much money do you have in the bank? Where did it come from? What is your relationship with your kids and spouse? How do you spend time together? What do you do in your free time? What are your hobbies? Where do you volunteer? Spend a few minutes day-dreaming about what your ideal life would look like five years from now, then write it down.

With this vision of the distant future fresh in your mind, it is time to set your long term goals. List five major things you would like to accomplish by this time next year. Be as specific as possible. Use dates and locations and quantifiable goals whenever possible. Thus, if you want to run a marathon, write down which marathon on what date. If your goal is to read more, write down how many books, or better yet, how many fiction, non-fiction, biography, etc. Don't list more than five or you might forget some of them.

With your long term vision and goals in place, give some thought to your short term goals. What is it that you want to get done in the next month? Is there any small chunk of your long term goals that you could do right away? Set five manageable goals for the things you would like to accomplish in the next month, then repeat this process every 30 days.

3 EAT THAT FROG

I read a book several years ago that totally changed the way I approached my daily task list. It was called *Eat That Frog: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get Things Done* by Brian Tracy. It got its name from a quote by Mark Twain, who famously once said something to the effect of "if you eat a frog for breakfast, chances are that will be the worst thing you have to do all day." The point of the quote—and the book—was that if you start your day by tackling your hardest but most important tasks, even if you don't do that much for the rest of the day, you will still have accomplished a lot.

Life moves fast and it is really, really easy to get sucked into mundane--though essential--tasks of the everyday. We spend our time putting out fires or escaping into the time-wasting vortex of social media and email. It all seems so important, so urgent, but before we know it, we've spent the whole day reacting to other people rather than proactively reaching our own goals.

My own life changed dramatically when I changed the order in which I com-

pleted my task list. Most importantly, I stopped checking email first thing in the morning, and instead focused those first few hours of my day on long-term projects and goals. As a result, my productivity skyrocketed and I was finally able to start accomplishing the things I really wanted to.

4 RESET YOUR HABITS

I read another book more recently called *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* that has also greatly impacted how I structure my day. One of the many interesting points the book made is that our brains are wired to form habits. These habits can become good or bad, but once something has become a true habit, a different part of our brain takes over and we begin to perform that particular habit on autopilot. This means we no longer have to use mental energy to perform the task, which leaves our brain free to focus on getting other things done.

I used to get frustrated with myself because it seemed like I would start out my day so well, but at the end I would just fizzle, with no energy left to put towards any sort of productive endeavor. After reading this book, I realized that because my willpower in a given day is limited, the more good habits I create for myself, the more willpower and energy I will have leftover to use towards other things.

I decided to make a list of the things I wanted to do automatically every morning. My list included drinking a glass of water, planning my day over a cup of coffee, having personal devotion & prayer time, then writing for at least 90 minutes. After several weeks of doing this every day, I finally stopped thinking about it. I would find myself in the kitchen drinking my water before I was even fully awake. It takes almost no effort to get my day started off right, and at the end of my writing session, when I take a morning break, I still feel refreshed and ready to conquer the rest of my day.

5 ELIMINATE THE UNESSENTIAL

I think for me getting rid of the things I don't really need to be doing is probably the hardest part. Everyone has a few time fillers they could probably eliminate from their day, whether it be baking something from scratch when it could be store-bought, spending an hour watching TV or drooling over Pinterest, or even taking on a few too many commitments.

This is where the priority list and goal setting becomes so important! If when you look at your day, you find that much of your time is filled with things that don't match up to your priorities or your most important goals, then something has to give. Start small--eliminate 3-5 things in your life that are taking up time but not adding much value. Just stop doing them. Yes, I know it is easier said than done, but making a conscious decision paves the way for change.

To recap, here are five simple steps that can change your life: first list your out your priorities, second set specific goals, third eat that frog (do the hard thing first), fourth reset your habits to form new ones and finally eliminate the unessential from your day. Following these 5 tips will help you accomplish your big goals & dreams and bring about the change you desire.