

# HOW I LEARNED TO ACTUALLY GET SH\*T DONE

Bats? Caves? Procrastination nannies? Cave Day, a productivity retreat in Manhattan, promises to help you get stuff done. Esme Benjamin, 32, puts it to the test

**T**here's an important thing I need to do. But before I can face tackling it, I'm going to walk down the street to the coffee shop and get a large dose of caffeine. I should also book the weekly food shop online, water my succulents, and Skype my mum, because I won't be able to focus on the important thing that needs doing unless those errands are out of the way first.

As I sit down to finally do the thing, I check my inbox and notice an email about a flash sale, which reminds me – I still haven't bought a dress for my best friend's wedding, and since this sale is only on for 24 hours it makes sense to have a browse now. And by this point it's almost lunch time and I have a call scheduled after that, so I may as well wait until tomorrow to do the important thing. Tomorrow I will definitely be ready to get it done.

This is how I irrationally waste time and get my own way. Psychologists believe procrastination is the result of hyperbolic discounting – the tendency to opt for instant gratification at the expense of a more worthwhile reward in the future. It's why we do happy-hour drinks even though we should be prepping for an important meeting, or colour code our bookshelves instead of filing taxes. There's a gap between intention and action, and it's filled by a gnawing guilt that's driving some people, me included, to seek the guidance of procrastination coaches.

At 9am on a Sunday I arrive at the loft-like co-working space in downtown Manhattan that will host the third



official Cave Day – a mini retreat with the aim of helping people get their work done, faster. This is not a day-long workshop of productivity exercises, more a space in which people can gather to ensure that things on their personal to-do lists are actually achieved.

## THE CONCEPT WAS DEvised BY THREE ENTREPRENEURIAL FRIENDS

– Molly Sonsteng, Jake Kahana and Jeremy Redleaf – after it occurred to them that “nobody teaches us how to work” effectively. Through a mix of research and their own experiments with off-the-radar productivity days, they formalised a structure that supports achievement. And it begins, predictably, with the confiscation of all mobile devices.

I give up guardianship of my iPhone and head to a small kitchenette at the rear of the room where strangers are clustered around

a buffet breakfast, exchanging introductions between mouthfuls of vegan wrap and organic yoghurt.

The crowd of roughly 50 people skews entrepreneurial – classic millennial ‘dreamers and doers’ who are willing to pay \$45 and sacrifice half their precious weekend for a little extra help with the doing part. Meredith Gray, founder of a quinoa snack company, >>

“There’s a gap between intention and ACTION, filled by a gnawing GUILT”



is hoping to complete some financial spreadsheets she's been avoiding for several months. "It's a bit like hiring a work nanny, a life coach and a healthy-eating chef in one," she says, sipping coconut water.

Wearing matching head torches for identification purposes, the Bats – as Sonsteng, Kahana and Redleaf refer to themselves – rally the group for some icebreakers.

"What's holding you back today?" Sonsteng asks, yoga-teacher style. She points to a metal box at the centre of our misshapen circle and tells us to mentally "place anything that doesn't serve you inside". A laundry list of character flaws ricochet around my brain for a few moments, until I settle on perfectionism – the biggest barrier to moving forward, in my experience.

The atmosphere feels exam-like, as everybody takes a seat, opens their laptop and waits for the signal to start. Kahana counts us down, and with the ding of a bell and a cacophony of typing fingers, the first sprint of the day begins.

## SPRINTS ARE SHORT PERIODS OF INTENSE FOCUS

designed to last exactly as long as our attention spans can manage – around 45 minutes. After that you take a quick break to recalibrate, before beginning the next sprint, and so on – breaking the task into bite-sized chunks that feel much more manageable than the marathon workdays most of us endure.

To my left and right people are busy scribbling on Post-it notes and creating digital mind maps. On my agenda today are six interviews, a cluster of statistics and a page full of unorganised observations and thoughts – the bones of a story I need to give flesh to. I've been working on it for more than three months, across both coasts of America, and still haven't managed to begin writing. Procrastination, for me, is rooted in a fear of my own incompetence. The more I care, the more I delay, because attempting something high stakes means risking failure. Or, more specifically, putting a rubbish piece of writing out into the world with my name on it. But there are no distractions here, and no more excuses. Every detail of Cave Day has been engineered to help me help myself, from the bottomless coffee to the soft fizzle of white noise emanating from nearby speakers.



Stretching and work sprints help focus the group, led by one of the 'bats' Molly Sonsteng, left



## HOW TO PRODUCE, NOT PROCRASTINATE

### HIDE YOUR PHONE

Keep it out of eyesight so you're not reflexively scrolling

### LET IT SUCK

Don't overthink things, just get something out there

### SAFGUARD YOUR TIME

Tell everybody you're unavailable during the hours you work best

### EMBRACE PLAY BREAKS

Let your mind go totally off task every hour to refresh

As the afternoon rolls on – punctuated by breaks for partner stretches where we push against one another for resistance and an excruciating two-minute dance party, where we all jiggle gracelessly next to our desks – the unconquerable story somehow comes together. I complete a pretty decent first draft and although there's definitely polishing to be done, that constant

low-level anxiety that goes hand in hand with procrastination starts to dilute. It turns out that behind the gimmicks – the head torches and the mantras – Cave Day is actually an incredibly wise way to approach work.

Satisfied with the day's achievements I visit The Energy Room – a glass-walled office where "cave dwellers" can take a break and regain their mojo with the help of Lego bricks, snacks and advice from the Bats. As experts in productivity, I'm curious to know what they've

learned about the nature of procrastination.

"There are lots of reasons why we don't do things," Kahana says. "Because it's hard, we don't know how to start, we think it's this whole mountain. It's part of our job to help people learn the skills and the habits to do better work, and part of that becomes the sprints and productivity tricks... and just giving them permission to let it suck."

"Don't worry about finishing," Sonsteng adds. "Finishing seems scary. But just ship it, ya know, get something out there."

Owning my own imperfections, I've learned, is really the only way to beat procrastination. I probably won't nail it on the initial attempt – virtually nobody does – but at least I will have taken an imperfect step in the right direction. It's the job of the first version to merely exist, so the next iteration can be a little better, and the one after that can actually be great.

As Cave Day comes to a close the group reconvenes to discuss our successes and debrief on the whole experience. Even before anybody speaks it's obvious from the sea of proud faces that to-do lists have been vanquished over the past eight hours.

One woman, casually perched on the kitchenette counter, raises her hand. "How do I become a stalagmite, because I want to live in the cave?" she says, and us cave dwellers all nod in agreement. ■