Clear Mind, Effective Action

How to get more done with less stress in a world of ever-increasing complexity using the organizing power of fractals

By Jim Stone

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I. Introduction

Consider This:

What if I told you that you are surrounded by unseen structures in the universe, and that, if you had your eyes opened to this hidden realm, you would move through the world with less effort.

You would see connections other people can't see. Where others see only chaos, confusion, randomness and noise, you see clear order and structure. And this newfound awareness would empower you to get more done in a week than most mere mortals get done in two -- and have less stress in the process.

And what if I told you this was all completely rooted in science, not science fiction?

I wouldn't blame you for being skeptical, but I want to encourage you to go along for the ride anyway. Keep reading, prepared to have your eyes opened. Be ready to start seeing hidden connections that have been there all along, and to use these to your advantage.

The hidden structures I speak of are fractals. And I'm going to teach you first how to see them, and then how to use them to get more things done.

I warn you, though. Once you see your first fractals, you'll start to see fractals everywhere. And you'll move through the world in a different way than you do now. You'll see connections you've never seen before. You'll have more insight into nature, your own mind, politics, history, and, perhaps most importantly, the nature of creative productivity.

This is no joke. There is no turning back. If you keep reading, you will no longer be the same. You will see the world in an entirely new and more powerful way.

My Story

It all began with a set of three introductions.

First, I "met" the world's leading productivity guru.

Then I "met" an economist, Santa Fe Institute fellow, and one of the world's leading authorities on complexity theory.

Finally, I introduced them to each other (in a sense), and everything fell into place.

Jim Stone, Meet David Allen

I read David Allen's book, "Getting Things Done", in 2003.

At the time I was teaching Philosophy at Washington State University, finishing up my doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington, helping my wife raise our two young children, and dabbling with product development and marketing in my spare time.

I was often a little frazzled.

David Allen's system helped me get (and mostly stay) "unfrazzled". More specifically, he helped me realize the following two big benefits (plus a lot of little benefits):

B1. David Allen helped me establish a "clear mind" habit. Allen showed me how easy it is to collect everything in one place, and get it organized, so you don't have any loose ends tugging on your mind as you're trying to work on the thing you're trying to get done at any given moment.

If you don't personally know how to get the freedom of a clear mind any time you want, you soon will, because I'm going to share a modified version of Allen's technique for getting a clear mind later in this document.

B2. David Allen gave me permission to start my planning "from the bottom up", rather than from the "top down", which is what most productivity experts before him recommended. And this can sometimes be very liberating.

Working and planning in the David Allen way made a big difference in my life. I now had a way to clear my mind anytime I felt overwhelmed. And I now felt like I had the freedom to "discover" along the way what a project wanted to become, rather than having to plan it with confidence from the outset.

However, as great as his system was (and it was by far the best I had ever implemented up to that time), it still didn't fit me quite right.

Here are some of the friction points I still felt (these will make more sense if you have used David Allen's system, but, even if you haven't, I think you can understand some of what I'm saying):

FP1. For me, the "Getting Things Done" system uses too many disconnected lists, and meta-lists. When you clear your mind, and process all the open loops that were floating around in your mind, Allen has many places to place those items for "safe keeping". He advocates using several separate project plans, a "meta" project list, and potentially many "next action" lists.

Having a place for everything works like magic, but having so many lists to maintain ultimately began to feel a bit unwieldy.

In theory you were supposed to restore order once a week in a weekly planning session, but I found it difficult to establish that habit, and the lists would get away from me somewhat.

FP2. The "Next Action" list was not the ideal structure to work from (for me). The core of productive action in David Allen's system involves working from something he calls the "next-action list". The next-action list was supposed to contain your next action from each of your current projects for a given context (at your desk, in your car, etc), and nothing else. When you finish an action, you should write down the next action for that project (perhaps after consulting your project plan for that project), and then decide whether you want to do that next action, or work on a next action for another project.

Typically, I like to stay on one project for the duration of a work session, or sometimes even for days at a time, so I usually kept working on the same project. But this made the next action list a poor structure to work from during a work session. So I wound up working from my project plans, rather than a next-action list most of the time.

FP3. Next-actions were sometimes not necessary, and sometimes not sufficient: The point of focusing on "next actions" is to facilitate working with a clear mind. If you don't have a good system, and you have many projects going, you'll find that, as you're trying to work on one project, thoughts about your other open projects will keep pushing their way into attention, making it difficult to work on the task at hand.

Allen found that, when someone listed the next action for a project, that was usually enough to get it off their mind – and it made it easy to start working on the project when the time came, because the next action was already clear.

However, I've found that, while this often works, sometimes it is **_not necessary_** to list a next action. Sometimes you can just plan the project out "a little bit more",

and that would get it off your mind. You didn't have to get down to the level of a next action.

Also, sometimes it was **not sufficient** to simply list a next action. Sometimes you needed to plan out the whole structure of a project a little bit more to get it off your mind. It just depended on what problem your mind was detecting with the project at the moment.

FP4. "Bottom-Up" planning was not always best: While "bottom-up" planning is often very powerful (and liberating), I found that sometimes you had to go top-down as well. And sometimes you had to start from the middle, and go up and down. It all depended on your current understanding of a given project. In fairness, Allen does not exclude other modes of planning, but I don't think he emphasizes enough the synergy between top down and bottom up approaches. I think we need both (and middle-out planning as well).

Now, again, let me re-iterate that David Allen's system was a tremendous advancement in the history of personal productivity. And the friction points did not bother me too much (especially at first), partly because the benefits his system delivered far outweighed the friction, and partly because I hadn't yet seen a way to get all the good parts of Allen's system, while solving all the friction points. More on that shortly . . .

Jim Stone, Meet Brian Arthur

I have long been fascinated with the power of fractals to organize chaos. If you don't know what a fractal is, don't worry, you soon will.

My first fractal epiphany happened in 1996, when I read Benoit Mandelbrot's "The Fractal Geometry of Nature". That's when I learned to SEE fractals in nature. And, since that time, I have seen them almost everywhere.

My latest fractal epiphany happened in May of 2010 with a re-reading of Brian Arthur's fine book, *The Nature of Technology*. That's when I first learned to USE fractals more effectively to get things done. (As you'll see, you already use fractals in your planning, but AWARENESS of this fact will make you much more effective). And since that time I have been getting much more done with much less stress.

Where Mandelbrot showed me how widespread fractals were in the natural world, Arthur helped me see how widespread fractals are in the social world, and, more specifically, how relevant they are to human creativity.

"David Allen, I'd Like To Introduce You To Brian Arthur"

Though I didn't actually introduce David Allen to Brian Arthur in a flesh and blood sense, I did apply the insights I got from Brian Arthur to the system I got from David Allen, and, just like chocolate and peanut butter, the combination was delightful.

Once it became clear how creative productivity (like most business projects) grew via fractal processes, it also became clear that the right kind of fractal planning tool could solve most of the friction points I had experienced with David Allen's system.

So, I looked around for a planning tool that would allow me to plan with fractal awareness (and implement some of David Allen's other great techniques as well).

Unfortunately, I could not find anything close to what I wanted. So I started creating my own fractal planning tool.

The tool I created, while very simple in many ways, revolutionized my life. I estimate (very conservatively) that I get twice as much done, and have far less than half the stress as compared with before. And that's coming from a place of already being experienced with most of the main planning tools and planning systems out there.

At first I did not intend to offer the software to others, but, when I showed the software to friends and business colleagues, they almost all said one thing – "I need that!"

So I turned the planner into a service, and now offer it as the Fractal Planner.

I want to make it clear that I am NOT writing this document to convince you to use the Fractal Planner service, but, rather to teach you the principles of planning with fractal awareness. I do think the Fractal Planner is the planning tool that best fits this planning methodology (by far), and you should definitely

think about using it. But you can benefit from following the principles of fractal awareness, even if you don't use the Fractal Planner service.

Now, here's the thing. It would be natural to assume that I started with a full-blown fractal planning system, and then created a tool to match it, but that actually gets it backwards.

What actually happened was that, as I used my fractal tool to better implement David Allen's system, I **discovered** many of the principles of fractal awareness and the planning methodology I now use.

In the rest of this document, I will be teaching you the main ideas behind the Fractal Planning Method, which, in my humble opinion ☺, is the simplest, most effective, (and most natural-feeling) personal planning system yet devised.

In fact, once you see the fractal planning method, it might feel so simple and natural, that you'll be tempted to think you already knew everything I'm about to teach you. But, when you actually start working the way I suggest, and you see how easy it is to get things done, and to get unstuck whenever you get stuck, you'll realize you really had never quite worked like that before.

Preview

If your job (or life) is like mine in important ways, this document might provide you with the key to a lifetime of greater productivity and lower stress.

My life and work is very self-driven. Nothing happens if I don't figure out, first, what to do, and, second, how to do it. If you are a software developer, business owner, event coordinator, project planner, writer, or have large areas of your life given to creating and executing complex plans, these principles might change your life dramatically for the better.

If, on the other hand, you have a job that requires only that you carry out tasks other people bring you, and few or none of the tasks in your job, or in your personal life, require much planning, you will still get value from these principles, but perhaps not as much.

Also note that I will not cover in this document everything there is to cover with respect to planning and productivity.

For instance, I won't deal with scheduling, prioritizing, delegating or some other important topics.

What I will teach you is how to determine what to do, and how to get yourself to do it with less stress.

So, if you're ready, . . . let's go.

2. Fractals and Human Creativity

What is a fractal?

According to Wikipedia (at time of writing), a **fractal** is:

 "a rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole," a property called self-similarity. – Wikipedia ("fractals")

The name 'fractal', coined by Benoit Mandelbrot, suggests the notion of "breaking down" (or "fracturing") something into smaller units that resemble the thing just broken down.

The Koch Snowflake is a famous fractal.

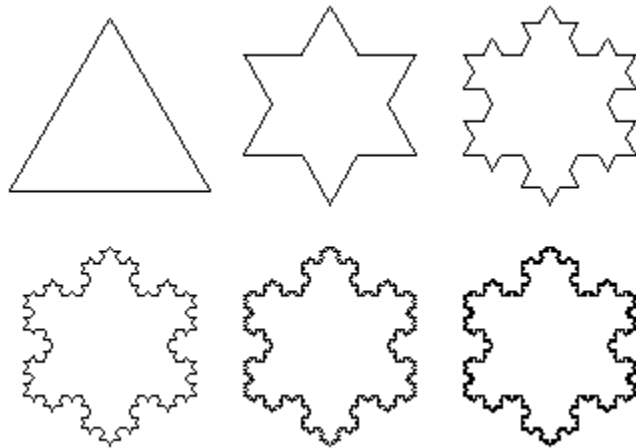*Figure 1: The Koch Snowflake fractal is best approximated by the last shape in the series.*

You start with a triangle.

Then you "break down" each line in a certain way. In particular, you add a smaller triangle in the middle of each line (breaking each line at the 1/3 and 2/3 marks).

But you don't just do it once. You continue to break the new lines down in the same way.

Then you do it again.

And again.

And, by the time you've done it an infinite number of times (not possible, but that's the abstract idea), you have a Koch Snowflake.

Now, the Koch Snowflake, in its entirety, is an infinite line, with an infinite number of angles and twists and turns. Yet, when we know how it is generated, it remains simple and easy to understand.

Fractals have many interesting properties, but one of the most important for our purposes is the fact that fractals usually contain an immense amount of complexity generated by very simple rules.

And here's the thing . . . if we can discover which fractal processes are generating the chaos and complexity in our lives, that complexity suddenly becomes something we can work with.

Now, purely geometric shapes like the Koch Snowflake are not the only things that can exhibit a fractal geometry. Physical objects (like trees), and social processes (like the economy as a whole) can exhibit fractal structures as well.

In fact, anything that can be better understood by fracturing it into self-similar parts counts as a fractal for most complexity theorists (like Brian Arthur).

To avoid confusion, I will tend to speak of fractal "structure" rather than fractal "geometry".

Also, while the name 'fractal' is related to **"breaking things down"**, a fractal process can also be thought of as a way of **"building things up"** through a branching process. Even with the Koch Snowflake, you can see how either metaphor ("breaking down" or "building up") can apply.

We will make use of both metaphors in our planning.

Let's look at trees for a moment. Trees are perhaps the most iconic real-world fractals we see every day. Take a main branch off a tree, and the branch looks like a smaller tree. Take a sub-branch off the main branch, and it, too, looks like an even smaller tree.
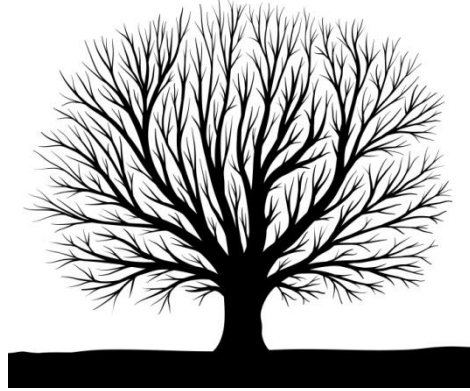
Figure 2: Trees have a fractal structure.

And, again, with a tree, we have a very complex structure that's generated by a very simple branching procedure.

So, in fact, there are many kinds of fractals.

Fractals can be completely symmetrical (as with the Koch Snowflake), or can involve some random variation at each step (as with a tree).

The sub-fracturing of a fractal can go on forever (as with the Koch Snowflake), or it can stop at some point (as with a tree).

Here are some common things that have a fractal structure:

- Geometric fractals (like the Koch Snowflake, Julia sets and the Mandelbrot set)
- Trees
- Mountains
- Human language
- The history of human languages
- The compositions we make with language (e.g., essays, blog posts, speeches, books, plans).
- Most conceptual schemes
- Normative systems (such as law and ethics)
- Most schemes of meaning and ways of framing reality
- Your circulatory system
- Your brain
- Embryology (the process by which we "unfold" as human beings)
- Individual technologies.
- "Technology" as a whole.

- An individual business.
- The economy as a whole.
- Individual projects
- Your life plan as a whole

Fractals, Technologies, and Plans.

We need a generic term for the things we are creating when we work on projects. Following Brian Arthur, I will use the word 'technology' for this.

Now, if you're building a spaceship, or writing a computer program, it might be easy for you to think of your project as one of developing a new technology.

But, even if you're writing an essay or a blog post, throwing a party, or remodeling your kitchen, the way you go about completing your project shares some very important features with the way engineers go about creating more stereotypical technologies.

So, humor me for now, and tell yourself that all your creative projects involve creating a new technology.

Say it with me:

"I am creating a new technology".

Good.

Here is an important insight about technologies:

Insight #1: technologies are built from sub-technologies.

When we create a new technology, we start with the idea of something that will perform a certain function. Then we build that thing out of parts.

These parts are themselves often just smaller technologies, because each of those sub-technologies may also be built out of parts — sub-sub-technologies. And so on, often many levels deep. That's what gives our technologies a fractal structure.

A blog post, for instance, might perform the function of informing business owners how to advertise with Google Adwords. And the blog post might be

constructed out of several sections of text that explain parts of the process. And these sections are composed of paragraphs that each serve a smaller function, which are composed of sentences, which themselves can be broken down still further.

In a very important sense all except the most basic technologies have a fractal structure. Parts are joined to parts. And the parts are themselves parts joined to parts.

Now, while **the technology itself** will have a fractal structure, that's not the only fractal involved when we work on projects. **The plan** we use to first understand and then build the technology also has a fractal structure.

Insight #2: plans are built from sub-plans, which are built from sub-sub-plans . . .

When we first start to plan a project, we work backwards, in a sense, from the mere idea of the finished technology, to a detailed plan for how to construct it. We break the idea down further and further until we get to a level where we can start taking action.

A plan is made of sub-plans, which are made of sub-sub-plans, often many levels deep.

So, returning to the blog post example, we start with the idea of the finished product: "a blog post that teaches people how to advertise on Google Adwords".

Then we break that down perhaps something like this: 1) Explain what Google Adwords is, 2) Explain why it's important, 3) Show them how to get set up, 4) Show them some results.

This is the first level of our plan, constructed (for now) with four sub-parts. We would then break each sub-part down further into sub-sub parts. And so on, until we are clear that the plan will produce the finished product we want.

Now, if you're anything like me, the initial plan will wind up being reorganized several times before the finished product emerges. And we also don't always know which parts to use when we start (that's where "free-writing" is a brilliant strategy – for helping us find the parts we need). But, ultimately, we are trying to arrive at a "plan fractal" (more commonly known as an outline or mind-map) that will tell us how to assemble the "technology fractal".

So, this is the simplistic picture of creative productivity I am painting:

We start with the **idea** of the finished product, whether it's a piece of writing, a birthday party, closing a sale, or whatever.

We "break down" the idea in a fractal manner until we get to the point where we feel the plan serves as a good guide for assembling the finished product.

We take action.

Our action "builds up" the technology in a fractal manner.

And then we have the finished **technology** which embodies the original idea we started with (to some degree anyway).

That's how we go from idea to finished product.

Idea → break down idea → start taking action → build up technology → finished product.

This is very familiar, as you can see if we use the blog post example.

Idea for post → outline → start writing → the post gets assembled → the post is finished.

That's a very simplistic model as the process is not usually as linear as might be inferred from the diagram. We usually go back and forth, from planning to writing, several times. And we sometimes have to start constructing some of the parts of the technology before we can even fully understand the true nature of the whole with all its interacting parts. So we must plan as we go, and adjust on the fly.

With that said, at this high level of description, this should sound like a very familiar process.

How Fractals Trip Up Those Who Can't See Them

We have seen two insights about the fractal nature of technologies so far. Here is a third:

Insight #3: it takes effort to combine sub-technologies into a technology.

You know how it goes. You sit down to plan out a new project, and your initial plan sounds quite easy and smooth. But then, when you start working on it, you realize it doesn't actually go as easily as you thought it would.

Imagine you're a caveperson, and you get the idea of combining a stick and a strip of bark with a stone to create a bludgeoning instrument. There are only three basic pieces, yet it might easily take a whole day of fiddling to get it to work well.

The projects we tend to work on these days have many, many more parts and levels. And that can make it even more difficult to make all the parts fit together well.

For instance, imagine you're writing an essay defending a certain tax policy, and the argument seems like a slam dunk. You think, "my policy of combining A, B, and C is superior because of X, Y, and Z." But, as you start to write about A and B, you see that parts of A are actually in practical conflict with parts of B. And, the thing is, you would never have seen this conflict without actually sitting down and describing A and B in detail.

Developing a website works like this, too. "We'll just merge Affiliate Software W with Shopping Cart X with Payment Gateway Y with Content Management Software Z, and throw in some custom features in PHP. And it will all fit together like perfect little modules that play nice together." Yeah, right!

The problem is that your sub-technologies interact with each other in ways you can't predict. And sometimes a sub-sub-sub-technology interacts with a sub-sub-sub-sub-technology in a way you can't predict. And that's what prevents the whole thing from working well.

The big-chunk solutions always sound easy. Guess what. It NEVER works that smoothly in practice -- at least practically never. You know there will be conflicts, but you don't know what they will be. We can call this the "Law of Unforeseen Complications."

It doesn't matter whether you're writing an essay, developing software, building a spaceship, or moving across town. Unforeseen complications (almost) ALWAYS crop up.

And the time needed to resolve these conflicts will range all over the map. Sometimes a resolution will actually turn out to be impossible, and you will need

to re-think the whole project. Other times it will just take a quick little work-around. And most resolutions will be somewhere in-between.

Perhaps all this complication would be less surprising if we changed our metaphor from one of "building blocks" to one of "building trees". Creating a new technology out of building blocks sounds simple. The blocks are misleadingly easy to fit together in our minds. If we more accurately thought of ourselves building a new technology out of wildly branching tree-like sub-structures, we might appreciate more what we're actually trying to do.

> **SIDEBAR:** *in software development and other fields the problems inherent in merging two many-tentacled sub-technologies together are well known. And measures are taken to make the sub-technologies work together more easily. The major tool for doing this involves making the sub-technologies as "**modular**" as possible. Increased modularity works spectacularly well when well-designed. And designing for modularity is one reason we are even remotely able to have a society as complex as we have today.*
>
> *When we try to make our lives more modular (to reduce interactions between our work projects and our other life projects, for instance), we call this "**compartmentalization**".*
>
> *Designing for modularity (or compartmentalizing), while often delivering great benefits, comes with costs, too. For this reason (and others), not every sub-technology you encounter will be modular with respect to every other sub-technology you might want to combine it with. And even things that are designed to be modular don't turn out to be as completely modular as intended -- and unforeseen complications still crop up.*

The take-home lesson is this: If you're not aware of the fractal structure of the technologies you build, these unforeseen complications can really trip you up. If you have fractal awareness, as we'll see, you can take unforeseen complications completely in stride.

Your Whole Life as a Fractal

Here is a fourth insight about fractals and technologies:

Insight #4: **Technologies are themselves sub-technologies.**

Suppose you are creating a new website for your business. A website is a technology, and will be built from parts (which are themselves built of parts).

But your website is itself a part . . . of your business. And it must work together with other parts of your business (and all of their sub-parts).

But that's not all. Your business (or your job) is itself also a part . . . of your life. And it must work together with other parts of your life (and their sub-parts and sub-sub-parts and so on).

So, any project you work on has a tree-like structure, and is itself part of a larger tree. So you're always working at some node in the middle of a tree.

The top node is your "Life Plan", or your "Master Plan".

Your whole life plan can be represented as a single fractal, and everything you want to accomplish in your life can be fit into the same tree. This fact will prove to be very useful, as you will soon see.

. . .

None of the ideas discussed in this chapter should feel overly strange. In fact, most of it should feel familiar – perhaps even obvious.

We plan by breaking ideas down, and then produce things by building them up according to the plan.

Check.

Plans can be written as outlines (or mind maps) that have a fractal structure.

Check.

Technologies (the things we create) are constructed from parts that are themselves often made of parts, giving them a fractal structure.

Check.

Parts of our technologies can come in to conflict with other parts of our technologies.

Check

Ultimately, you have to make all the parts of your life fit together.

Check.

But there's something new here. And I don't want you to miss it.

What's new is your awareness of the fractals involved in your life and in your creative projects. And being aware of the fractal nature our plans, our technologies, and our entire lives (having "fractal awareness") will help us work better – with more efficiency (and effectiveness) and less stress.

In the next chapter, I will present the Fractal Planning Method, which facilitates working with fractal awareness. Then, in chapter 4, with the methodology in hand, I will describe many ways in which Fractal Awareness helps us get more done with less stress.

3. The Fractal Planning Method

The Fractal Planning Method uses the insights of fractal awareness to make planning easier, and to keep things better organized with less time and effort spent keeping it organized.

Probably the biggest difference fractal awareness makes to personal productivity and project planning is that it allows us to collapse all of our scattered lists into a single organizing structure. No more dealing with several project plans, a "meta" project list, and several different next action lists or to-do lists.

Now there's just one main list to work from – the Master Plan. And, because of the way this plan is structured, it keeps all your projects organized in a way that allows you to plan faster, and with a stronger sense of meaning and purpose at all times.

Fittingly, the first step for getting started with fractal planning is to set up your universal master plan. Setting it up is easy, and keeping it organized is easy. In fact, you'll find that **it just kind of grows itself as you go.**

Setting Up Your Universal Master Plan.

Before the Fractal Planner, I used an Excel spreadsheet to manage my master plan.   And it worked reasonably well. But the Fractal Planner does make many things easier, so I'll primarily demonstrate techniques using the Fractal Planner, and will indicate at times how to do the same thing with a spreadsheet.

Here is an example of a Master Plan in action:
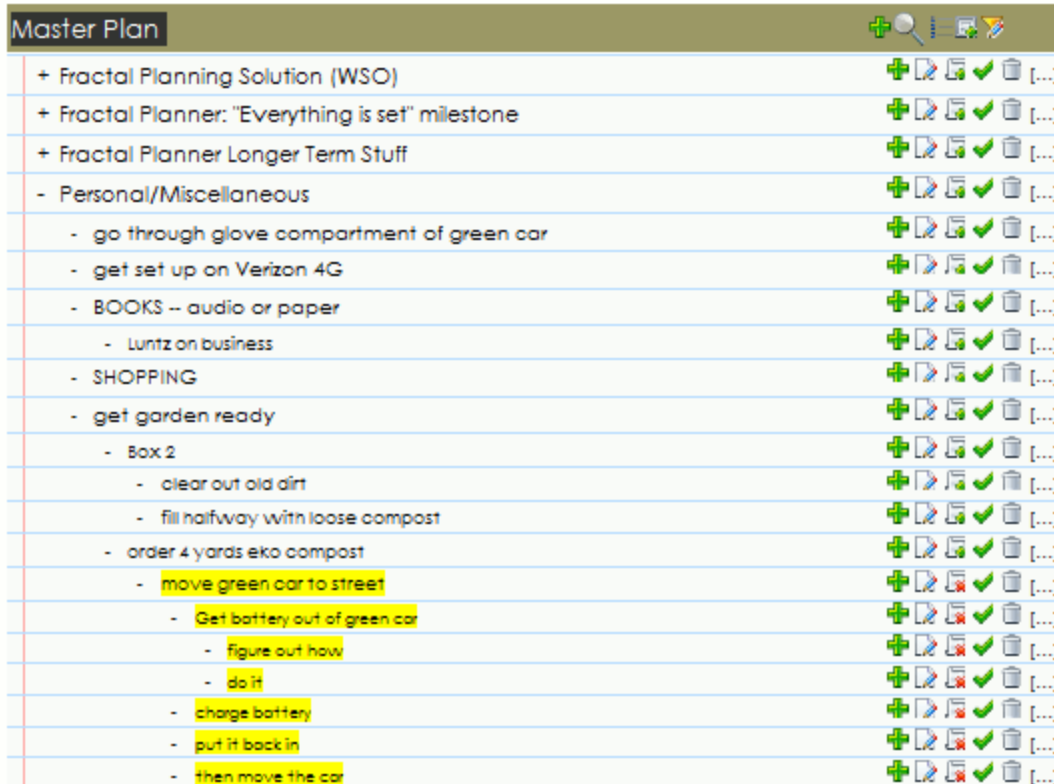
It's basically an outline (that you can zoom in and out of and show and hide parts of). It's very easy to set this up.

When you first start your Master Plan, you have a blank slate.

To get started just ask yourself what are the main work-related projects you're currently working on.

Also ask yourself if you have any big personal projects going on (like remodeling your house, or moving, or planning a big party, etc.)?

Just enter all those items, one per line, in the form, like this:

(As you can see, I also recommend creating a "personal/miscellaneous" category for errands and things like that).

If you forget a project, don't worry – at all. You can add new items at any level any time you want. In fact, that's how this is supposed to work. You just enter the items you can think of at the moment, knowing that if other things come to mind later, it's very easy to find the place for it and put it in then.

Here is what it will look like after you've saved your list of projects:
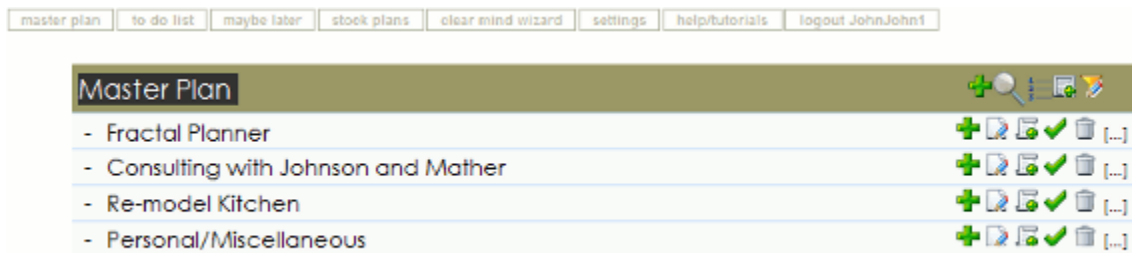
Now, if you want to break down one of the projects further, just click on the green plus sign next to that item:
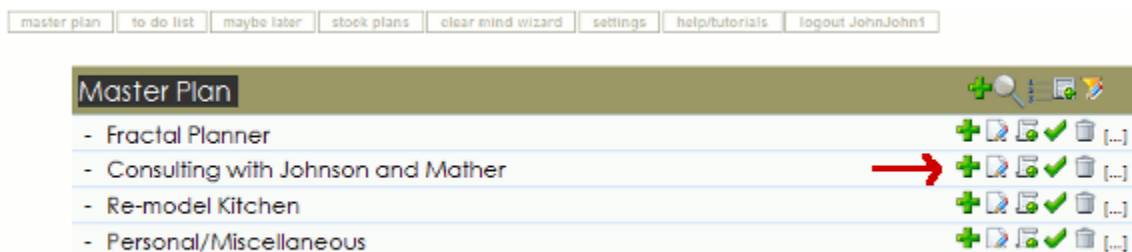
Now you can enter items in the text box, one per line again, like this:
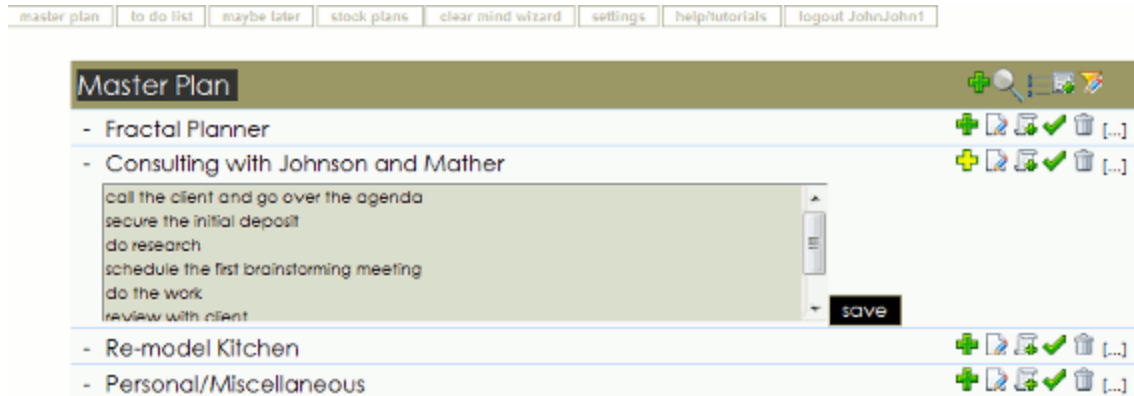
And you can keep breaking things down under any item, at any level, any time you want.

And your plan will start to take on more complexity. Yet it's all organized and easy to see what's going on.
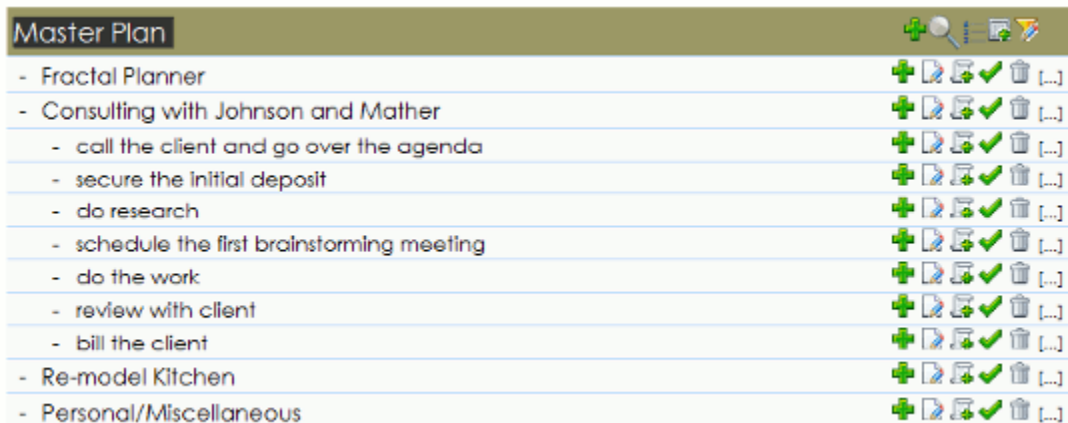
And it can also expand as deeply as you need it to, which, again, is the way it's supposed to work.

You could also do this with a simple word processing document, or spreadsheet. At its most basic level, the Fractal Planner is just a fancy outlining tool. And any outlining tool that allows you to go to an arbitrary depth could organize your tasks and projects in a similar way.

However, what made me develop the Fractal Planner, after using a spreadsheet for a while, were the following considerations:

- The Fractal Planner allows you to zoom in on any project to keep the other parts of the plan from distracting you.
- The Fractal Planner allows you to show and hide elements to enable better focus.
- The Fractal Planner allows you to easily process items with the buttons on the right hand side (you can highlight them as items to be done today, you can mark them as done, and you can do several other things).
- The Fractal Planner integrates with a "to do" list. All highlighted items will show up on one list (the "to do" list), regardless of where they show up in the master plan).
- The Fractal Planner integrates with a "maybe later" list, which you'll see is another important element of fractal planning (and one of the very good parts of David Allen's system).
- The Fractal Planner integrates with Google Calendar.
- The Fractal Planner allows you to define "stock plans" for complex tasks you repeat often, so you can add them to your plan all in one swoop (and make sure you don't leave out any steps).
- When you mark items as completed in the Fractal Planner, you can remove them from view, while still having them available to be reviewed as completed actions. You will have a tough time doing both with a spreadsheet or other outlining tool.
- And so on.

So, yes, it's really just a fancy outlining tool, but, in this case, all the bells and whistles actually make a pretty big difference.

If you want to use the Fractal Planning Method working from a spreadsheet, it's still a much better way to work than trying to work from disconnected project plans and next action lists.

Whichever tool you decide to use, **make sure** it has the following feature:

- You must be able to **break down tasks in a fractal manner** (any tool capable of creating an outline of arbitrary depth can work, and a mind map could work as well).

  Some planning tools only allow you to define projects and tasks – two levels deep. Those will not work.

And it's nice if it has the following features:

- It's easy **to break down tasks** (For instance, in the Fractal Planner, you just click on the green plus sign to break down a task, and then you can break it down as fast as you can type. (You can even indent tasks with a '-' sign to add one level of hierarchy inside the text box).
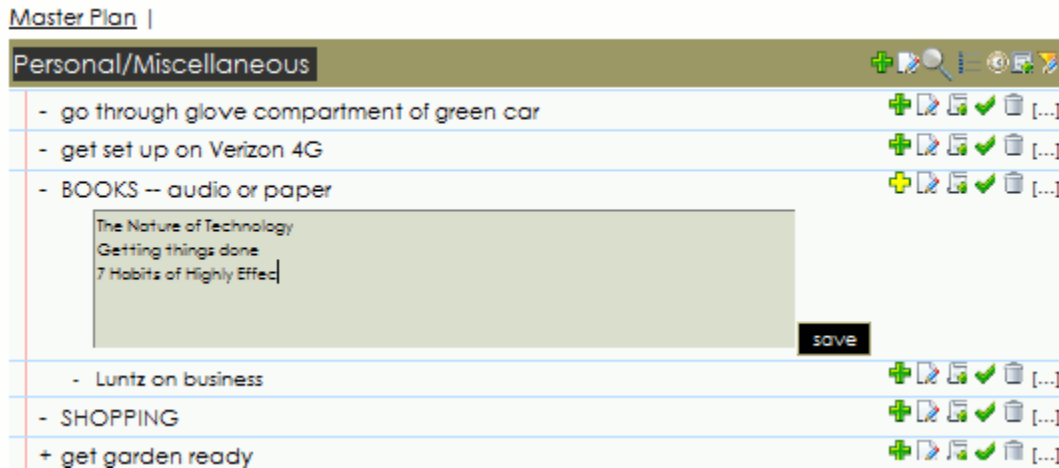
If you're using a spreadsheet, you have to insert new lines, and then move over one column as you type to indicate that the new tasks are "under" the old one (slightly more clumsy, but workable). On the other hand, some planning tools have you engage in a multi-step process to add even a single task. Avoid these, as they will slow you down noticeably.)

- It's **easy to mark the tasks that need to be done soon**. (Click a single button in the fractal planner, or highlight the text if you're using a spreadsheet.

- It's **easy to mark items as completed** (click a single button in the Fractal Planner, or strikethrough with a spreadsheet - with a spreadsheet you have to decide what to do with the completed item (keep it or delete it). With the fractal Planner, it will be hidden, but you can show your finished items if you want as well.

- It's **easy to zoom in and out of your plan.** (with the fractal planner, this happens with a single click. With a spreadsheet, you can do it, but you have to set up data groups that you can open and close.)

If you have a planning tool with those features, whether it's a spreadsheet, or the Fractal Planner, you can create a master plan of your life and manage everything in one place, and take advantage of fractal awareness as you work.

And, again, please note that you don't have to plan everything out at once. Just break down projects and subprojects **as you need to**, and your master plan will grow naturally and organically to be the perfect plan for managing your projects (and your life).

The Maybe Later List

The second list you should set up is the "maybe later" list.
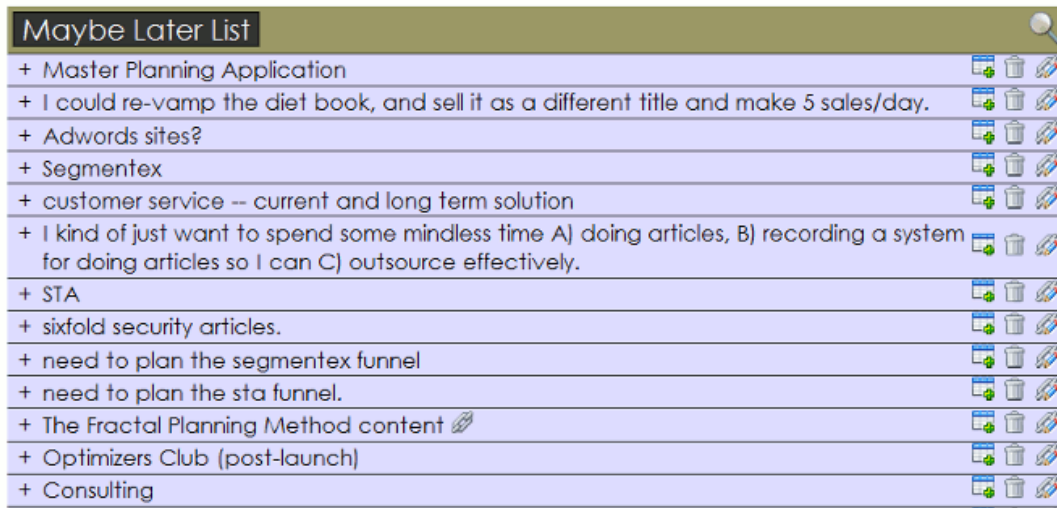
This is just a small portion of my "maybe later" list. As you can see, the maybe later list is set up the same way as the master plan. If you click on the '+' sign, it will open up more structure for each project. In fact, with the Fractal Planner, the maybe later list is really just an extension of the master plan, and you can easily move items from the master plan to the maybe later list, and back again.

The purpose of the maybe later list is to have a place for things that 1) come to mind, 2) are good ideas, but 3) are not things you have time to work on any time soon.

Or, they are items you will (probably) work on again, but you want to move them to a back burner, because there's no urgency to them, and you need to focus on other things right now.

By putting them on your maybe later list, your brain feels confident that you are not losing a good idea, but it also stays out of view, allowing you to focus on the work at hand as you work from your master plan.

(If you are using a spreadsheet, it's best to just have a second spreadsheet for your maybe later list. To move items between lists, you can just copy and paste.)

Set Up Your Daily "To Do" List.

David Allen doesn't like the typical "to do" list, claiming that "daily to-do lists and simplified priority coding have proven inadequate to deal with the volume and variable nature of the average professional's workload" (Allen, Getting Things Done, p. 8).

To deal with the "volume and variable nature" of our work, he advocates working from several "next action" lists instead.

However, when you draw your to-do list from a fractal master plan, you get all the benefits of having a to-do list, while dealing just fine with high volume and high variability. And you get all the benefits of the "next action" lists, without having to keep track of several disconnected lists.

Notice how I have highlighted items I want to work on today.
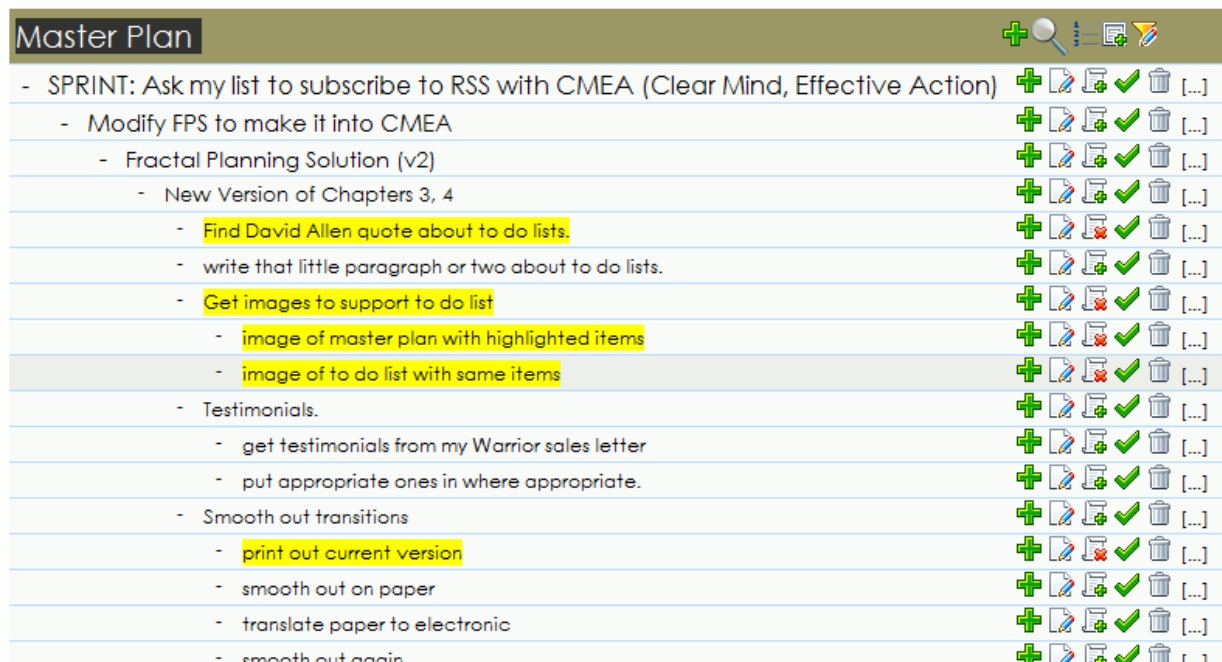
The items I'm showing on the screen are all part of one main project. But your to do items can be anywhere in the master plan.

When we view the "to-do" list view of the plan, we see all the highlighted items in one place. And we can do them and mark them done from either place – the to-do list or the master plan. It doesn't matter, because they're all items in the master plan.
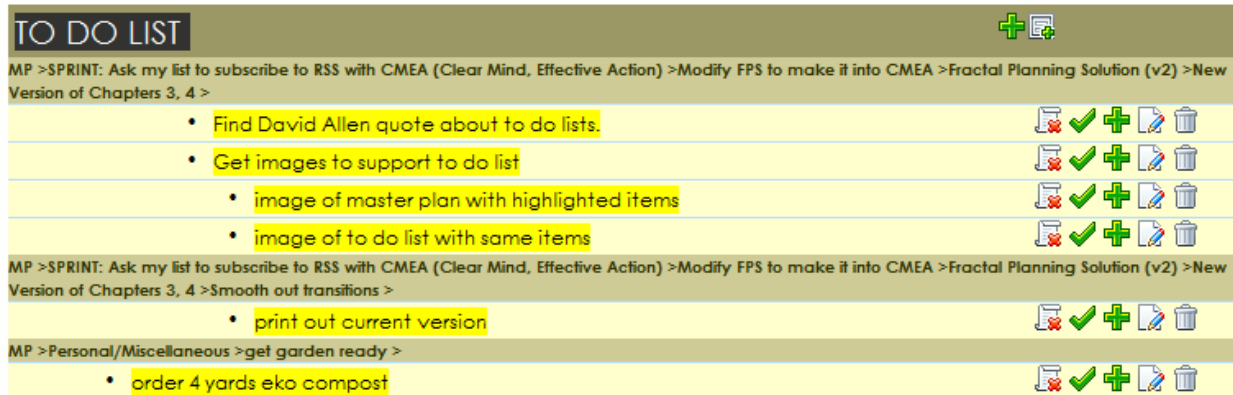
Notice in the image of the to-do list that we have context if we need it, and notice that the item labeled "order 4 yards eko compost" wasn't in view in the image of the master plan above. It was in a different part of the plan. The to-do list draws together all highlighted items from any part of your plan.

This kind of to do list is better than the traditional to do list, because it is extremely flexible and can accommodate a high volume workload.

And it is better than scattered next action lists, because it retains the context for each item, and it draws from one master list. Also, as you process items on your to do list, your project plan is automatically processed as well. No need to update multiple lists here.

(If you're using a spreadsheet, this can be a little tricky, but still do-able. One way to do it is to just highlight the tasks you need to do today, and work from your master plan. This is workable when your master plan is small, but becomes unwieldy when you get a few hundred items in it.

With this in mind, it's best to highlight the items to be done, AND move them to a separate to-do list. Then, when you mark things off your to-do list, you can also mark them off of your master plan.)

Follow the Fractal Planning Productivity Formula

Once you have your Master Plan (and your maybe later and to-do lists) set up, you're ready to follow the Fractal Planning productivity formula. This is the simplest productivity formula in the world:

The Fractal Planning Productivity Formula:

A. **Do stuff on your list, and mark it off.**
B. **If you get stuck, get unstuck, and get back to A.**

That's it.

I told you it was simple.

This is the shortest section of this book, but it contains the whole system in a nutshell.

Print this out, and pin it to your wall, because this is how you will now get things done every day.

Though it probably should like a natural (and maybe even familiar) way to work, this is not the formula most systems give you.

Most systems try to insulate you from getting stuck in the first place, and they wind up burdening you with too much structure in the process. The truth is, once you know the main ways of getting stuck, and how to respond to each, you can simply respond to each as they occur. And this saves a lot of time and energy.

Also, when working from a fractal master plan, you'll actually find that you wind up getting stuck less often as well.

Let's look at the main ways of getting stuck, and how to get unstuck, now:

Getting Stuck, Getting Unstuck

What do I mean by getting "stuck"? I mean those times when you find that you have stopped working, and don't feel able to work well with good energy.

Here are four of the biggest sticking points we face as we work:

- Too many things on our minds (leads to a feeling of overwhelm)

- Unexpected complications and interruptions (leads to discouragement and frustration)
- Lack of clarity (leads to procrastination)
- Physical tiredness

If you have an effective way to diagnose and treat each of these sticking points as they happen, you can stay on course as you work and get more done each day – and have less stress in the process.

Let's take a look at each.

Sticking Point 1: Too many things on your mind

Sticking Point 1 is having too many things on your mind (which leads to feeling overwhelmed).

Over time most people have so many projects going, and get so much new input on a daily basis, that they start to carry too many open loops around in their heads.

These open loops make us feel fuzzy-headed and overwhelmed. They make it difficult to focus when we work, as we wind up constantly distracted by many thoughts as we try to attend to a single thought.

Solution to Sticking Point 1: Just take a blank piece of paper (or digital document), and write everything down that's buzzing around in your head. This gets the ideas out of your brain, and onto the paper. That way your brain doesn't have to worry about losing the ideas, and it can let go of them while you focus on the work at hand.

But writing these ideas down is only half the magic. The full benefit comes when you process each item.

There are three kinds of ideas that you will identify on your list (different planning and productivity systems will have different categories, but I find these three to be the essential categories)

To Be Deleted: You should identify things that don't need to be done or thought about any more. Just delete those, and tell yourself to forget about them. (If

you're worried you won't let the ideas go, do a little ritual to send the ideas on their way. It can be as simple as saying to them "good bye silly thoughts.")

To Be Saved For Later (Maybe): You should identify things that are good ideas that you might want to do at some point, but which don't need to be done now or anytime soon. Put those in a special place for ideas like that (a "maybe later" list). That way your brain knows you still have the idea in a safe place, and it doesn't have to keep track any more.

To Be Done (by you or someone else): Finally, you should identify the things that probably should be done sometime soon.

So, **where do you put ideas that need to be done "sometime soon"? And when is the best time to do them?**

These are sometimes difficult questions when using David Allen's system. Allen had several places for items in this category. You could put them on one of your many "next action" lists. Or you could put it in your "meta project list" on the understanding that you would at some point move it into your project plan (and then back to a next action list. Or, if it took less than 2 minutes, you could just do it then, in the middle of the process of clearing your mind. Or, if it needed to be scheduled, you could put it on your calendar. Or, if you needed to delegate it, you would delegate it right then.

On the other hand, . . .

When you work from a fractal master plan, the answer is easy. You just place the item in your fractal plan, right where it goes.

And "where it goes" is always obvious, because of the way your master plan is structured.

Each idea will be part of an existing project. (At the very least it will be a subproject of your "Master Plan" project). That means you ALWAYS have a place for it in your plan.

And WHEN to do each item is also built right into the structure of the plan as well.

You will always just work on the task when you're working on the project the task is in. It will be right there waiting for you at exactly the right time when the time comes for it.

Some items do need to be scheduled, and you can schedule those, but for all those items that need to be done "sometime soon", you now have an easy and effective place to put them.

The "clear mind" procedure

1. Take out a blank piece of paper, open a blank word processing document, or, with the Fractal Planner, open the "Clear Mind Wizard".

2. Answer this question: "What's on my mind?" Write down everything, whether it's related to work, or your personal life. It all competes for mind-share.

3. With each item, determine which of three categories it falls into, and take the appropriate action for that type of item.
   a. If it's something that can be deleted and forgotten, delete it and forget it.
   b. If it's a nice idea, but doesn't need to be done anytime soon, put it on your "maybe-later" list.
   c. If it needs to be done (by you or someone else), put it in your plan where it fits. If it needs doing today, mark it as something for today's to do list. And if it needs to be scheduled at a specific date and time, then you can put it on your calendar.

The overall structure of the "clear mind" procedure comes from David Allen, but the third step is simplified considerably. The extra simplicity is made possible by the fact that we're managing our entire lives from a single fractal plan.

In my own life, clearing my mind is now a very fast and painless process. I go from overwhelmed to clear and productive in less than 5 minutes in most cases.

I've also found that I don't get overwhelmed nearly as often any more. The first week I started with the fractal planner, I sometimes needed to clear my mind several times each day! I was that overwhelmed and frazzled.

Now I find I need to clear my mind *less than once a week!* My mind stays clear most of the time because I tend to get things into the exact right place in my plan as soon as it comes to mind, and open loops don't tend to build up much

anymore.   That's what you should expect as well as you continue to practice this habit with your fractal life plan.

Sticking Point 2: Unexpected complications

Sticking point 2 is unexpected complications or interruptions (which leads to discouragement and frustration).

A second way of getting "stuck" is to be working happily on your plan, only to discover that things aren't really going to go down the way you planned them.

Here's the solution.

Solution to Sticking Point 2: Whenever you run into unexpected complications or interruptions you should do the following:

1. Admit that the project is probably going to take longer than you had planned.
2. Remind yourself that unexpected complications are part of the natural rhythm of most plans (a natural consequence of merging fractals together).
3. Plan a solution to the unexpected complication. Get it into your master plan and break it down until you get clarity. Usually you will put the solution to the complication very near to where you were in your plan when it occurred. It might even be a sub-project of the task you were working on at the time.

Some complications will require you to re-work other parts of your plan as well. Once your plan is re-worked, and makes sense, you will feel your energy return, and you will be able to work with vigor again.

Once in a while, you will find that you cannot find a solution. At that point you might need to abandon your project, set it aside for a while, or seek outside advice.

Most unexpected complications will be resolved fairly quickly and will require only minimal re-working of your existing plan.

Some unexpected complications might seem too small to put in your plan. For instance, you might realize you forgot the password to one of the online services

you need to use, and you have to look it up before you can keep going. It's just a 3 minute detour. Should you put it in your plan? This is a judgment call. If you don't put it in your plan, you will be keeping your place in your head for 3 minutes, and that will take some toll on your neurotransmitter reserves (believe it!), and will contribute some to being mentally exhausted later in the day. If you put it in your plan, the act of putting it in your plan will cost you 10 seconds, and you will avoid the toll of keeping your place in your head.

Personally, I sometimes put items like this in my plan, and sometimes don't. There is such a thing as a complication too small to put in your plan, and you'll have to determine for yourself what that level is. I would advise that at first you err on the side of putting too much in your plan as opposed to too little.

Interruptions should also go into your plan – if you have a chance to put them there. Let's say you're writing something, and Joe pokes his head into your office with a problem. You can just enter "Deal with Joe" into your plan right where you were working. Then deal with Joe. When you get back, you can mark off "deal with Joe" as completed, and then get back to the other parts of that project. You'll be amazed at how much this keeps you from keeping your place in your head for your own project while you deal with Joe's problem.

Sticking Point 3: Lack of Clarity

Sticking point 3 is a lack of clarity (often leading to an urge to procrastinate)

Solution to Sticking Point 3: I've come to think that most procrastination comes from not having clarity about your plan, and the solution is to regain clarity.

When you lose clarity, the clarity you lose usually pertains to the particular project, or part of a project you're working on at the time. Though sometimes you will start thinking about problems connected with a different project while you're working on the project at hand. Either way you need to have your focus on (or shift your focus to) the project you lack clarity on.

There are two main ways to lack clarity. You can lack clarity **up the tree** from the point at which you are unclear, and you can lack clarity **down the tree** from that point. Let's look at each situation and how to resolve the lack of clarity in each case.

1. When you lack clarity up the tree: this is a matter of losing your sense of bigger meaning or purpose. You will need to go up a level or two in your plan, and make sure everything makes sense in the context around your current project. Here is an effective procedure for getting clarity in this case:

   A. Go up a level or two in your fractal plan to see the bigger picture.
   B. Ask some questions, such as:
      - Is there a conflict between my current project and the other projects in my life?
      - Should I work on this project at all?
      - Are there things I should do first, before working on this current project?
      - Should I rearrange things in my plan, above and including the level of my current project, so the point of this project will feel more clear? (Does the story for how the project will be completed "make sense" at each level?)

   C. Then you make appropriate adjustments to your plan, so that everything makes sense and feels like a coherent plan again.

2. When you lack clarity **down the tree**. Sometimes your lack of clarity isn't about WHY you're doing the current project, but is about HOW to do it.

   In that case you just need to break the project down further until you get clarity.

If you do both those things whenever you feel like procrastinating, I think you'll find your motivation return most of the time (maybe after a short break).

Sticking Point 4: You're physically and/or mentally tired.

Solution to Sticking Point 4: Take a break. For more insight about how to manage your energy, see the next section.

You might discover that there are additional ways of getting stuck over and above these 4, but these 4 will probably cover well over 90% of the situations where you find yourself getting stuck.

Establish a Daily Work Rhythm

If you don't follow a daily work rhythm currently, you must start soon!

I was first introduced to this idea by Loehr and Schwartz, in their book, *The Power of Full Engagement*. But, for some reason, I didn't really take it to heart when I first read about it. It wasn't until I took Eben Pagan's course, *Wake Up Productive*, that I somehow got the message and started designing my work day according to my natural energy rhythms.

> **Sidebar:** *While I owe a great debt to Loehr, Schwartz, and Pagan, I've found I had to trim away some of their advice to make it work better for me. In particular, I found that doing a morning ritual, as they recommend, is more frustrating than helpful. Personally, when my mind is already clear, and I have a clear sense of purpose, I'm positively eager to get to work as soon as I wake up. A morning ritual just slows me down and seems to interfere with my most productive hours. If you read Loehr and Schwartz's book, or take Pagan's course, I would recommend you try a morning ritual, but feel free to drop it if it feels like it gets in the way rather than helping.*
>
> *I think much of the point of a morning ritual is to aid in regaining a sense of clarity and a sense of purpose. I think you'll find that when you manage your life from a single fractal, you are never far from that state anyway.*
>
> *With that said, most of their advice is spot on for me.*

Here are some principles well worth following:

Energy Principle #1: Find the time of day you have the most energy for working, and schedule your most intense work for that time.

The main parts of my own work-life involve writing, coding, written correspondence, and monkeying with websites.

I've found that writing is the thing that takes the most focus for me. And I always try to schedule it for the morning hours, between 9am -- right after I drop the kids off at school -- and 11:30 am -- right before lunch/exercise/nap (I don't eat breakfast, but that's a subject for another time ☺).

One reason morning might be best for me is because that's when I drink my coffee. If I drink coffee too late into the afternoon, I'll have trouble sleeping, so I've learned to do my most intense work in the morning, and save less intense work for the afternoon.

I typically don't write outside that 9am to 11:30 am window (as I really don't have as much energy for it outside that window).

In the afternoon I will do correspondence, monkey with websites, and tie up loose ends.

I might even do some coding (computer programming) in the afternoon. As with writing, I do code best in the morning hours, but I can code later in the day as well. Coding is different than writing for me, and, strangely enough, usually requires less focus than writing. When I code my outcome is usually more clear, and the methods of constructing the finished product are more regular than they are for writing. I find that (unless I'm working out a particularly complex algorithm) writing takes more raw creativity than coding.

The take home lesson is this. Understand what your most productive time of day is, and which parts of your work require the most focus. And match them up.

This is the biggest part of the puzzle for establishing your DAILY work rhythm. If you make only this change to your life you'll be doing well. But you can also get some benefit from breaking down your work time further.

Energy Principle #2: Establish a work-rest-work-rest rhythm for your major work blocks.

We will work more effectively if we rest a bit "during" our work sessions.

For instance, Eben Pagan recommends working for 50-90 minutes, then taking a 10 minute break, then repeat (kinda like school, right?).

I follow a version of this rhythm myself. In my morning hours, I will work for 60 minutes, then take a 10 minute break. Then I'll work another 60 and break for a workout and lunch before heading back to work in the afternoon.

That's only 2 hours of work in the morning, right? How lazy is that? Yes, but those are very productive hours. I am dialed in completely and turn out good work. I'll put the results of those 2 hours of focused work up against 4 hours of semi-focused fiddling around kind of work any day.

I also get 2-3 more hours of fairly focused work done in the afternoon as well.

And if you compare getting just 4 hours of Fractal Planning work done in a day to getting 8 hours of normal work done, there's no contest. With fractal awareness I probably get more work done in half the time, because it's all focused and well planned. I can work very, very fast, and don't have to undo much of my work because I was going in the wrong direction. I don't slow down and wear out from carrying open loops around in my head. I'm fresh most of the time, because I'm not burning through the neurotransmitters like I used to. In short, I spend very little time "stuck."

(I tend to work more than 4 hours per day, but probably get 4 "core" hours in each day. The remaining time is spent answering emails, reading work-related books and articles, fiddling around with stuff, and running errands. And I tend not to structure that time in the same way as the "core" hours.)

Now, you can break your time down **even further**.

On the website 43folders.com I ran across something called the 5x(10+2) method for writers. This is simply a way of breaking down an hour into five 12 minute chunks. In each 12 minute chunk you write for 10 and rest (daydream?) for 2.

If you're suffering from writers' block, this can be an extremely effective method for getting yourself to churn out a lot of writing in a short amount of time.

Personally, I use the 5x(10+2) method only once in a while, but it shows you how far you can take this notion of managing your energy.

And, are you noticing something else?

Yes, you in the back row with your hand up . . .

That's right. What I'm describing in this section is a way of breaking your day down in a fractal manner!

And that leads to a third principle of energy management:

Engergy Principle #3: Embed your daily work rhythm into the bigger rhythms of your life.

Your daily rest/work rhythm is a fractal organization of time. And, just as one of your projects can be seen as part of your business, and of your entire life, your

daily rhythm can be seen as part of a weekly rhythm, a monthly rhythm, a quarterly rhythm, and a yearly rhythm.

I like to think of my week being 6 days of working with a day off for fun.   And I like to take 1 week off every quarter. I don't do anything with the monthly scale or the yearly. But that's me. You can break it down however you want.

It's important to intersperse rest and recuperation with your work at different scales of your fractal life.

See, I told you fractals are everywhere!

Auxiliary tools

The Fractal Planning method simplifies personal planning and productivity. And, by way of reminder, your primary tools are:

- Your Master Plan
- Your Maybe Later List
- Your To-Do List

I also want to mention some auxiliary tools you might use to complete the system for you.

- **Clear mind wizard** – The fractal planner has a "Clear Mind Wizard" built in. This tool basically walks you through the process of getting a clear mind whenever you get overwhelmed. Since being overwhelmed is one of the main sticking points people face, this can be very useful. You can also print out the procedure discussed above, and follow it any time you need it.
- **Stock plans** – many people have complex procedures that they do on a regular basis. If you don't have a checklist written down for this, you will have to re-invent the plan every time, and will worry that you'll leave steps out. You should keep common checklists in a handy place, and develop them over time. These will serve as good guides for other people you might eventually hire to take over these tasks as well. The Fractal Planner has a built-in stock plan library that you can use to just insert common checklists into your master plan whenever you need to. That way you'll know it's the same standard procedure every time.

- **A rhythm timer** – Get a kitchen timer to implement the daily rhythm habit. Or, if you use the fractal planner, use the built-in "rhythm timer". There are several popular work-rhythm schemes built into it.
- **Google Docs** – I like using Google Docs for brainstorming, and for writing my documents. In the Fractal Planner, I can link tasks to these documents to get to them with a click as I'm planning.
- **Gmail** (or equivalent, but I really recommend Gmail). I never kept a clean inbox until I met Gmail. Considering the custom labels, the conversation threading, and the simple "archive" button, Gmail is the by far the best email client I've ever used.
- **Google Calendar**, or equivalent – I use Google Calendar to schedule my tasks that have a definite time associated with them. They send me email reminders as the time gets close as well. The Fractal Planner has a 1-way integration with Google Calendar as well.

. . .

So, that's the Fractal Planning Method in a nutshell:

1. **Use a Universal Master Plan to manage your whole life (plus a "maybe later list" and a "to do" list)**

2. **Follow the Fractal Planning Formula (the easiest productivity formula in the world)**

3. **Know the main ways of getting stuck, and how to get unstuck.**

4. **Match your working rhythms to your natural energy rhythms.**

Now, let's look at why this method of planning, and Fractal Awareness in general is so revolutionary . . .

4. Why Fractal Awareness Helps You Work Better

Having fractal awareness will give you several advantages as you work.

Fractal Awareness Makes It EASY to Get Your Whole Life Organized

Most people are not currently as well-organized as they can be. Often a person's organizational system is composed of several different to-do lists, separate project plans, scattered post-it notes, and ideas floating around in disparate email messages and word processing documents.   That's a recipe for confusion and wasted time.

But, here's the thing, . . . while the average person is not as well organized as they could be, I also know that they have probably worked hard to get and stay as organized as they are. So, when I sit here telling you to be "even more organized", it might sound like I'm telling you to do "even more work" to get and stay organized. And you might have some resistance to that.

However, I'm actually asking you to "let go" of your old way of doing things, and start fresh with a much more natural way of planning, that is simultaneously easier to maintain, and leaves you more organized. I'm suggesting you unite all your planning structures into a single, self-generating, fractal master plan.

And this will make things much easier, not harder.

Everything will be in its place, in the same plan, and will be easy to find when you need it. It will also be easy to find a place to put new things.

 "OK," you might be thinking, "That's great. *Once you have a master plan for your life*, it's easy to put things in their place, and easy to find stuff when you need it – *once you have the structure* – but doesn't it take a lot of work to build the structure?"

No. In fact . . .

Creating a fractal plan of your life takes almost no work at all.

Seriously. Almost no work at all.

In fact, it just kind of naturally **grows itself** as you go about your business.

If you set it up right, with a planning tool that allows you to break down projects to any level of detail, your plans will just grow **naturally** from your brain's innate desire to break tasks down as you go.

That's what fractal awareness does for you. It helps you see that your whole life can be represented in the same plan, and you can trust it to grow organically, just like a tree grows (because that's how plans grow, too).

Once you set up your life plan fractal, and start using it, you'll wonder why you didn't start years ago.

And don't worry. There is no "right" way to break down your life plan or your projects and sub-projects. There are many good ways to "fractalize" (or "factor") your life and all its projects. So there is no need to feel any pressure about doing it "right". If at some point you want to change the way you organize your life plan, you can do that whenever you want.

The important thing is that you have some fractal representation or other of your life to work from – a fractal that contains everything you want to accomplish in your life (both in your work and in your personal life). Just having a master plan, even if it's not the very best way to organize things at the moment will prove extremely important for low stress productivity.

Fractal Awareness Means You Break Tasks Down More Completely (because it's easy)

Think of the Koch snowflake we looked at in chapter 2. You can break down the lines of the shape over and over. There is no final level of detail.

We don't break down our project plans forever like this, though we could break them down much further than we do.

Intuitively we try to break our tasks down only until we get to a level at which we feel we can take action. And that's good. That's the main idea. However, as a general rule, I think we don't usually break down our tasks and projects far

enough. And that leads us to carry far more thoughts in our heads than we need to as we work. And that burns through our neurotransmitter reserves, which means we lose our energy for working earlier in the day.

When you break things down with a fractal planning tool, however, because it's so easy, you will find yourself breaking down tasks further than usual. You will get more of the details of your tasks out of your mind, and into your plan, so your mind won't have to keep track of where you are on a complex task as you go.

Fractal awareness helps you see that you can always break things down further, whenever there's the least little threat that you'll have to keep parts of your task in memory as you work on other parts.

If you make a habit of breaking things down further, you'll get much more done, and have extra thinking power available as you're working, so you will be more apt to have new insights as you go, too.

At some point a task is broken down far enough that there's no further benefit to breaking it down further. And there is such a thing as breaking a task down too far. But try erring on the side of breaking things down too far for a while, and see what happens. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Now, remember, in order to do this well, you need a fractal planning tool that that will 1) allow you to break down plans to arbitrary depth, and 2) allow you to break down the tasks about as fast as you can type – otherwise it will be more trouble than it's worth.

Fractal Awareness Helps Clear Your Mind Quickly

As discussed in chapter 3, clearing your mind is a matter of writing down everything on your mind, and then putting each item some place safe. The key is to put each item in a place that allows your brain to trust that it will be available when you need it, and easy to find.

Working from a single fractal master plan allows you to quickly put most things exactly where they need to be, so they'll be available exactly when you need to do them.

Fractal Awareness Helps You Handle Unexpected Complications Better.

Fractal awareness makes us much more realistic about what we are doing when we work on complex projects. We can see that we are merging tree-like structures together, not simple building blocks. And this helps us understand the vast potential for negative interactions among parts.

And we also understand that we sometimes have to start assembly before we can see what the problems are.

In a sense, we come to expect the unexpected.

With fractal awareness we get less discouraged not only because we expect complications, but also because we are equipped to deal with them.

When you run into parts of your plan that don't want to play nice together, there is a very sensible way to deal with the situation.

1. Admit to yourself that the technology you are trying to create had more structure than you thought at first.
2. Put the sub-project of resolving the complication into your plan, and start breaking it down, so you can implement a solution.

Plans can start with a very simple structure when we first outline them. Once we learn more fully what is actually involved, our plans can grow to many times their original size.

To illustrate this fact, I've created a little video that shows how one of my plans, which seemed like it contained only 3 things to do, grew to be much, much larger:

http://www.fractalplanner.com/blog/how-plans-grow/

This is a cold hard reality. And the solution is to admit our initial under-estimation, and then get back to planning a solution and executing it.

Without fractal awareness, unexpected complications can be paralyzing. They are discouraging, and leave us befuddled.

With fractal awareness, they are expected, and can often be much easier to deal with.

Fractal Awareness Means Never Being Far From Your Sense of Meaning And Purpose in Your Work

Have you ever sat down to work on a project, and suddenly thought, "Why am I doing this?" or "should I be doing this?" or "Is this going to make any difference?"

And have you ever found yourself suddenly losing all motivation for working on your current project, and started cleaning your office, checking email, or playing a game (or three) of Minesweeper or Angry Birds instead?

It feels crazy. You want to be productive. If you finish your project it will probably bring you many benefits. But there you are playing a silly computer game, which adds absolutely no value to your life.

Why do we do this?

I believe much of the time, when we procrastinate, we are actually having a crisis of meaning.

Not necessarily a big, fat, hairy crisis of "ultimate" meaning. But something like a cute, little crisis of "relative" meaning.

Procrastination makes more sense when I consider the following possibility. As we work, our subconscious mind is constantly scanning our plans (traversing our fractals), looking for conflict. It looks for conflict within the plan of the project we're currently working on. And it looks for conflicts between parts of the current project and the other projects that make up our lives.

And sometimes it finds points of conflict, or of potential conflict.

But our sub-conscious mind is not very good at communicating what it finds. Instead of helping us become suddenly aware of the details, it simply sticks us with that brooding, procrastinate-y feeling.

Fortunately, I've found that my sub-conscious mind, while not good at *initiating* communication, will often give up the goods when I interrogate it.

I've learned that, when I get that uneasy feeling that makes me want to procrastinate, I need to step back and get some perspective.

I need to see the bigger picture.

I need to pan out from the current project, and see how it fits with my bigger projects, and, perhaps, with my whole life.

Then I can ask some very productive questions, like the ones covered in chapter 3:

- Is there a conflict between my current project and the other projects in my life?
- Should I work on this project at all?
- Are there things I should do first, before working on this current project?
- Should I rearrange things in my plan, above and including the level of my current project, so the point of this project will feel more clear? (Does the story for how the project will be completed "make sense" at each level?)

When I ask questions like these, my sub-conscious mind will often take me directly to the point of conflict, and I can start planning how to resolve it.

And, once the point of conflict is identified, and the steps to solving it are broken down in my plan, I find I have a fresh sense of meaning and purpose, and can work with the wind at my back (and sunshine on my shoulder) again.

When you have a fractal life plan, re-gaining a sense of meaning and purpose in your work is often very easy.

Meaning and purpose are often simply a matter of understanding how the little picture we're focused on fits into the bigger picture.

With your whole life in one plan, all you have to do is jump up a node or two in the fractal, and you can see everything you need to see to quickly get the answers to your questions.

> **SIDEBAR:** *If you're the type who tends to "crack the whip" on yourself when you start to lose motivation, please note that this can actually waste time in the long run, because procrastination is very often a sign of a problem with your plans. If you just push through, you might be going further in the wrong direction (plus, forcing yourself to work when you don't feel like it isn't much fun, either). Try instead to use that lack of motivation as a sign that it's time to re-visit your* ***bigger***

> *plan and work some things out -- or as a sign that you need to break down your project into smaller chunks.*

Fractal Awareness Helps You Focus

We saw in the last section that sometimes we need to **pan out** and get more perspective.

Other times we need to **zoom in** and get more focus.

Focus is, in this respect, the inverse of perspective.

As David Allen would say, to get a sense of meaning and purpose we sometimes need to rise to the 10,000 (or 50,000) foot level and view our project from that perspective. (Eben Pagan would say we need to "Get Altitude").

But it can be difficult to work from such a high vantage point. We can see too much from this view, and it can be very distracting and difficult to make progress. If we try to work from the 10,000 foot point of view, every time we complete the tiniest task we will be tempted to see how it fits with everything else we can see. And that will make things take a lot longer than they need to.

In order to work efficiently, we sometimes need to put our boots back on the ground. We need to restrict our view to the particular sub-project we are working on, and treat it as if it is our only goal in the world.

The beauty of fractal planning is that fractals allow you to zoom and pan to whatever level is of most benefit at the moment.

While fractal awareness reminds us that negative interactions can come from just about anywhere else in our project, or even our lives, fractals also allow us to act "as if" this isn't so for a time.

Because fractals are self-similar, and the parts look like little versions of the whole, we can pretend the part we are working on at the moment is the whole world while we work on it.

And if, while you're zoomed in, and working on your little microcosm, you feel you need to remind yourself of the big picture, you're just a click away.

So, fractal planning makes it easy to focus when you need to, and it makes it easy to get perspective when that's required.

Fractal Awareness helps you understand the natural rhythm of a project.
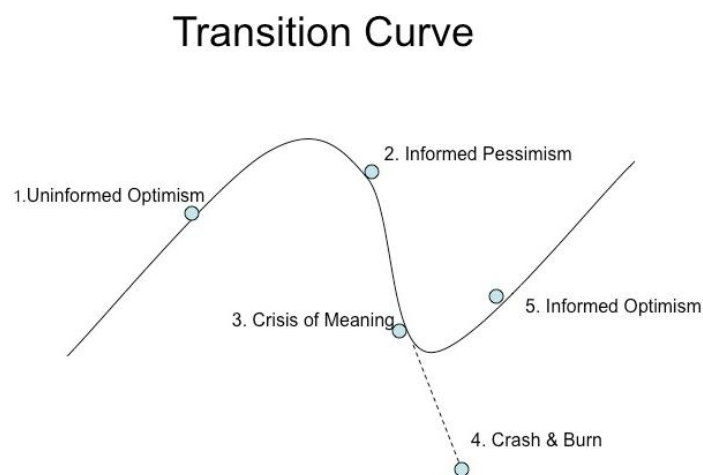
Consider the following diagram:

Transition Curve

Figure 4: Complex projects can lead to what Tim Ferriss calls "entrepreneurial manic-depression".

Take a moment to understand this diagram. It should feel familiar.

The diagram appears in a post on Tim Ferriss's blog. That post is very much well worth reading:

http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/2008/10/03/harnessing-entrepreneurial-manic-depression-making-the-rollercoaster-work-for-you/

Have you ever had an idea for a new project, and found your mind racing to all the possibilities, and how this was "IT". This was the thing that would change the world and bring you fame and riches in the process.

Then you started working on it. And you encountered problem after problem. You realized 5 other people were already working on a similar project. Or you ran into technical difficulties you didn't know whether you could solve or not. Or you found your market wasn't as enthusiastic about your idea as you were. And what started as simple project grew tentacles all over the place and became a sprawling mess.

When this happens, it starts to get discouraging. And, as the complications pile on more and more, you find yourself sinking closer and closer to a dark depressed state of mind.

That's when one of two things happens. You either get to the end of the complication and figure everything out and realize you can do it (though it will still take more time than you originally thought). Or you realize it isn't going to work at all, and you "crash and burn."

As a fractal planning practitioner, you'll be ready for this. First, you understand why this happens. Our initial plans hide all the details. And they hide all the negative interactions. So we are very optimistic at the early stages, because we are blissfully ignorant of the details.

The down slope is the period when we are working out the plan – breaking down the project, and discovering all the unexpected complications involved in the project.

Eventually, if the project is viable, we get the whole thing into our plan, and can start working on it, now fully aware of what we are doing, and probably a bit more realistic about both how long it's going to take, and how well the market will receive it. That starts the phase of informed optimism.

Or, we realize it won't work, and we have to bring ourselves to abandon the project and pick up another one.

I won't lie to you. Fractal awareness won't prevent you from going through this cycle. But it will help you get through it more quickly and with less angst.

Here's why:

- Your fractal awareness leads you to expect the cycle to happen, and gives insight into what's happening at each step of the process.

- You know how to deal quickly with unexpected complications: (a) admit the project is going to take longer than expected, and (b) start breaking down a solution to the complication right away.
- You will plan more quickly and discover the full extent of the project much faster than someone who does not have a fractal planning tool that allows you to break things down as fast as you can.

Because I think this point is very important, I've made another little video that helps you see the natural rhythm of a creative project.

This video shows the same plan I showed you when I demonstrated how much a project can grow. This time, however, we'll remove the tasks as they are finished, so you can see how the plan will grow and shrink on you as you go.

Every time the plan grows, imagine feeling depressed, and every time it shrinks, imagine yourself feeling optimistic. And that will give you a feel for this process.

And remember, the project I'm showing you is quite small compared to many of the projects we take on. So the effect will be even greater for bigger projects.

http://www.fractalplanner.com/blog/the-natural-planning-rhythm/

And remember, the point isn't to discourage you here. Without fractal planning, this roller coaster can be debilitating. With fractal planning, everything happens faster, and it feels as natural as breathing.

Fractal Awarenes allows you to Plan Bottom Up, Top Down, or Middle-Out.

Sometimes we sit down to plan, and all we have is our vision of what we want the finished product to look like. In that case we need top-down planning.

Sometimes, we sit down to plan, because we have a whole bunch of tasks to do that are kind of related, but don't have any structure. We need to arrange and rearrange the individual parts, grouping them together in different ways until they make more sense. In that case we need bottom-up planning.

And sometimes we have a project we want to do, because it's easy and will have some immediate payoff, but we also know we would like it to serve a bigger purpose in some way. In that case we need middle-out planning.

Fractal planning allows you to start wherever you are at the moment. You can start at the top, and break things down. You can start with the details, and build up from there, and, of course, if you can do those two things, you can start in the middle as well.

And you don't have to plan any more than you need to at any given moment. It's a "plan as you go" system that grows naturally as your brain solves problems on the fly. You start with where you are, and plan as much as you need to to advance the project as far as you need to for now. And you do it very quickly.

Fractal Awareness Allows For "Just In Time" Saw Sharpening

Steven Covey (in case you haven't heard) has written a wonderful book called "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People."

In that book he talks about the importance of "sharpening your saw".

Sharpening your saw is a matter of making sure your capacity to work remains high. In part this means that you need to stay physically healthy. In part it means you need to maintain good relationships with the people around you. In part it means that you make sure you don't have too many things on your mind. In part it means that you make sure you know your main purposes and values, and can see how all your projects serve your main purposes, and fit with your core values.

When all these things are in place, your saw is sharp, and you can work with the wind at your back.

So how do you make sure your saw remains sharp? The main thing Covey recommends is to have a weekly planning session to sharpen your saw. During this time you evaluate how you're doing physically. You consider how you can strengthen your relationships. You regain clarity and focus. You clarify your values and goals. You process open loops. And so on.

And Covey's not alone in this. David Allen recommends having a weekly planning session to do many of the same things.

Tony Robbins, in "Time of Your Life" recommends having an "Hour of Power" for much the same purpose.

Loehr and Schwartz (and Eben Pagan), take it even further and suggest having a "morning ritual" that, in some cases amounts to having a **daily** "hour of power".

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood here. I think there's a lot of value to having regular times of reflection, values clarification, and big thinking.

However, I also know that any time I've tried to follow any of these systems, I always love the "saw sharpening" sessions in the beginning, but eventually they start to become more of a burden. Or I have to miss a session here and there, and the habit never really gets formed.

I also know that, since I've been following the Fractal Planning Method, I haven't needed to do planned saw sharpening sessions as much, because I tend keep my saw sharp as I work. And for this I credit the fact that I have a single fractal plan for my whole life, and that I follow the Fractal Planning Productivity Formula.

Remember, in the Fractal Planner Productivity Formula, you just work, and then, whenever you get stuck, you get unstuck.

Getting unstuck "on the fly" winds up doing most of the work that is typically done in traditional saw sharpening sessions.

Whenever you feel overwhelmed, you get stuff off your mind and into your plan in about 5 minutes usually. There's no need to wait until the end of the week. You're stuck anyway, so you might as well sharpen your saw in exactly the way you need to right then and there.

When you lack clarity, you have stop right then and make sure your project fits well with your other projects, and that the plan makes sense. You're stuck anyway, so you might as well sharpen the saw right then and there.

So, with Fractal Planning, you wind up keeping your saw sharp "on the fly".

And, if you like the "saw sharpening" metaphor, this way of doing things makes more sense anyway.

If you're an actual lumberjack, you can't get away with sharpening your saw on a set schedule. If you're cutting soft wood, you may not need to sharpen your saw as often, and stopping to sharpen your saw "just because it's time" will waste time that's better spent cutting.

If you're cutting hard wood, you might need to sharpen your saw several times during the day. And, if you don't sharpen your saw when it's dull, simply because "it's not time yet", you won't work as well, and won't get as much done. (Plus, it's no fun to cut with a dull saw).

It's best to sharpen your saw right before its dullness starts to be a problem. Otherwise, you either waste time sharpening when you should be working, or you wind up working with a dull saw until the next planned saw sharpening session.

Now, with Fractal Planning, we can do "just in time" saw sharpening, and avoid both problems.

And if you still want to have a weekly session, you can spend less time doing maintenance on your current projects, and you can spend more time building new visions, and brainstorming completely new ways to make a difference in your world.

5. Important Concluding Thoughts

In this final chapter I want to do two things quickly: 1. Mention some topics not covered in this document, and 2) mention some resources for fractal planning.

Additional topics:

I think you will get over 80% of the value of the fractal planning method merely by implementing the advice contained in this document. But there are some other topics that are worth discussing. And some additional flesh can be put on the concepts discussed here.

These are some of the planning and personal productivity topics that I have more to say about:

- Which Goals and projects should you pursue? Tony Robbins will tell you to dream big. The Buddha will tell you to scale back your desires. Who is right?
- How should you prioritize your work?
- Framing, Meaning, Purpose, Scope of Attention, and Re-factoring: If you have a grasp on both fractals and framing, you will be unstoppable. We barely touched on framing in this document. I have much more to say about it.
- How do you schedule your life? Some people live by the calendar, while others don't even need to keep one. What is the best way for YOU to schedule your life?
- How do you delegate work to others? And how do "stock plans" help with this?
- When deciding what you should work on, how do you generate ideas?
- How do you go from a content-based outline to an "action-based" outline of your plan?
- How do you go from a conceptual outline to a "milestone-based" outline (this is an important skill used in "Agile" team productivity practice).
- Etc.

Each of these is an important topic, and I plan to cover them all at some point on the Fractal Heads blog.

And that leads me to the final part of this book. I want to mention two big resources for Fractal Planning. . .

Fractal Planning Resources:

Resource #1: The Fractal Heads blog – Are you on board with fractal planning? If so, you are now a Fractal Head! And, if you're a Fractal Head, you should definitely follow the Fractal Heads blog. If you use an RSS reader (like Google Reader), please subscribe. If you don't use an RSS reader, start now! Just go to reader.google.com, and get started today. And make sure you make Fractal Heads your first subscription. This blog covers all kinds of personal productivity subjects from a uniquely fractal perspective.

http://www.fractalplanner.com/blog/

Resource #2: The Fractal Planner – this is the planning service I created. I highly recommend it! It's super easy to use, and was built in harmony with the principles of fractal planning. (In fact, I discovered many of the principles while developing the software).

http://www.fractalplanner.com

That's it for now.

To success at every scale!

Jim Stone, Ph.D.