Episode 52: How To Do Things Right Without Being Stressed

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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Dinur: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 52, How to Do Things Right Without Being Stressed.

Adam: Now back in Episode 7, we talked about the trade-off, and how you only have two of three options available: You can be fast and correct, fast and stress-free, or correct and stress-free. And given that stress-free is the thing we're going to hold constant in this episode - that that's the goal - you have two choices. Do you want to do the work correctly, or do you want to do it quickly? 'Cause you can't have both.

Adam: Now, why? Well, in general, when we rush through something, we're really half-assing it. Okay? We're sloppy as heck. And think about going food shopping, or going to Target or Walmart, if you don't make a list ahead of time. You're tired; probably you're hungry; you want to get in and out of the store as fast as possible. Are you going to get everything on your list and not break your budget, or are you going to come in for a few items and stay for 150 bucks more than you planned on spending?

Dinur: Now, odds are, you care about your grades. And let's face it, you're probably not listening to this podcast if you didn't. So that means, odds are, you want to do your assignments correctly and stress-free, because no one likes being stressed. And if you care about your grades and your grade is based on doing the work well, you want to do it correctly. So that means that we've got to forget about doing work fast. We've got to take speed out of the equation.

Dinur: Now, Adam and I have done episodes on time management and breaking down assignments into smaller parts and that's really, really important to this. It's crucial. Because you want to break your assignments - your papers, your presentations, your group projects - into small chunks that you can consistently work on. And as hard as it is to imagine, don't think of the final paper or your final presentation as something done in one smooth motion. It's not done in one swoop.

Dinur: Instead, think of it as lots and lots and lots of building blocks layerd on top of one another. It's effectively academic Jenga. You're building, you're trying to move around, but you're trying to maintain your structure and you're trying to do the best job that you can.

Adam: Now, I also want to call out something that a lot of students don't really realize: Someone who's fast is not necessarily smart. There's a lot of students who, they'll be in an exam, and they see somebody finish and leave, and they're like, "Oh God, they finished before I did. They must be smarter than me."

Adam: Or they could've left half the questions with no answers on them. You don't know what they turned in. You don't know whether they did it right. You don't know whether they got a good score or not. Being fast and being smart have been conflated. They've kind of been smooshed together. But that doesn't actually mean it's the truth. Being fast does not necessarily mean you knew what you were doing. It may just mean you said, "I'm in agony. This is torture. I'm just going to randomly mark each one of these, because I have no idea what the answers are, turn it in, and get out of here, so that I can go have a beer or something," you know? "So that I can stop feeling like the biggest failure in this room."

Adam: So, don't assume that speed has anything to do with smarts.

Dinur: Absolutely. I mean, there are times where I've received - as a teacher, a student will finish or turn in a test within, like, 10 or 15 minutes, and it really just wasn't their day. So the reason they left fast was, they kind of looked and said, "Hey, this test isn't going to go my way. I want to get out of here as fast as possible."

Adam: Mm-hmm. I had a friend who was a biology teacher once, who showed me a pile of their - I was actually helping them grade because they were behind - and they had a student who turned something in where -you know, this was a biology test. So, here's a diagram of this body part and the diagram of that body part, or a diagram of this leaf or that leaf. You know, they were supposed to label parts - and there were entire pages of that test that had nothing written on them. Just nothing.

Adam: And I said to my colleague, I'm all, "Wow, they really didn't try." And my colleague says, "No, that's the problem. They don't try. But they think that if they don't do it fast, then they're stupid." And then, they handed me one and they said "This student left like two minutes before the end of the test time." That student had gotten, I think there was 117 points and they'd gotten 115, they had almost done a perfect test, because they took the time to do it right.

Adam: And that kind of brings us to the next thing that we wanted to talk about, which is: you've got to figure out how to take the time to do it right, so that it's done correctly. Because if it's not done correctly, it's not worth anything when it gets to your teacher, right? So some of our suggestions - and we're going right into suggestions, 'cause we've done a lot of episodes on this and so we're going to point you back at those episodes; we'll put them in the show notes - but here's some things you've got to think about first.

Adam: Again, speed is not smarts. We're taking speed out of the picture here, right? You don't get to rush through it. You don't get to do it and be done. You are not The Flash, right? This is not what you're doing here. We've got some suggestions for different kinds of assignments.

Adam: So, for assignments where you have a week or more to work on it, you need to set goals for what you want to have done each day, or maybe every few days, with the completed and edited or proof-read or tidied-up final paper and project done by the due date. So the easiest way to do this is to reverse-engineer it. We talked about backwards planning. So, you start at the end" When I've got a finished paper, what should I

have? All right, the day before that, what should I have? The day before that, what should I have? So you get yourself back to the start date, and then you say, "okay, this is what I have to do each day to get it done". And if you start with none of it completed, which is fine, your goal is to have it done and done well by the due date. So you need to know "what do I do today," "what do I do tomorrow," "what do I do the next day" until "I do the day of turning it in."

Adam: And doing a little work consistently every single day. It builds up and it builds up and before you know it you're on your way to getting it done and being done, but you can't rush it. We're going to keep stressing this all through this episode. You cannot, cannot, cannot rush it.

Dinur: I know that, for me, I've mentioned taking some qual exams on this podcast and for one of them - it was the criminology one - I was preparing with two other students. We were all in the same program. We were all taking the test around the same time.

Dinur: So we had this reading list, and the reading list is - I'm not kidding, it's about 19 or 20 pages, just listing different articles and books - but they're divided into sections. And there's no way that each of us, separately, could do that. So what we did is we said, "Okay, we know we all have to answer questions from the core reading list. So each of us is going to take one reading and we're going to summarize it." And then we would pick one or two other sections from the test, and we would take one or two articles each week from each section, summarize that, and we would put our notes together and we would discuss them.

Dinur: And so what that meant was, we were each putting in the time each week to go through between three and five articles. And that meant that it was a total of nine to 15 articles that we would cover as a group. And by the time that test rolled around, we may not have read absolutely everything on the list, but we had certainly read through enough to get a good sense of what we needed to do. And that gave us the start that we needed for the test. So we didn't just say, "Okay, here's this test. I'm going to start studying a week before, two weeks before, or the night before." We were doing this months in advance, but we were just taking it one small piece at a time,

Adam: And I'll bring this into a workplace situation - because this is one of the reasons you need to learn to do this in college, so that you can then take it out to the workplace - I had a semester, a few semesters ago where I was given, literally, out of my five classes, four of them were brand new preps. I'd never taught them before, and I had the summer to put all of them together. So that meant that I had to write lectures, record lectures, I had to create test banks, I had to create assignments, and I was looking at a lot of work to do over the summer. And so I backwards planned, and I said, "Okay, by the day that classes start, what do I want to have ready to go? What do I want to have done?" And I decided, because I'm a masochist, that I wanted to have all of my classes ready to go completely - that I did not want to be prepping into the semester.

Adam: And so I said, "Okay, so given that, what do I need to get done first? Well, okay, the syllabi. I have to create the syllabus first, because if I don't create the syllabus first, I have no idea what else I need to create. Okay, how long is it going to take me to create a syllabus for one of these classes?" So I was kind to myself and I gave myself four hours for each one of them. And I said, "All right, that's the first day - I'm going to do basically for the first three days of the summer. The first day is two syllabi. The next day is two syllabi. And the last day, the last one. Okay. And then what am I going to do for that last half of the week? All right, well then I'm going to start creating lectures. So I'm going to search through all of my material. I'm going to read books, I'm going to make notes, I'm going to work on creating, you know, main points and what am I going to, I'm going to make a list of all the main points I need to talk about."

Adam: And so, I kind of planned it out where I said, "Okay, this task is going to take me this long. So when am I going to put that into my schedule?" Well, my schedule was scheduled right up until, like, the day before classes, but the day before classes, all five of my courses were ready to go. They were on Blackboard, they were completely launched. I have - the syllabI were all sent to the department secretary. They were made available to the students. And so then, all I had to do was teach.

Adam: And was I rushing? No, but I was probably spending six to seven hours a day, six days a week, making sure that I had five classes completely prepped for the start of the semester. And those of you out there who are teachers, I know you're all nodding and going, "Oh, my God." You know, I've thought about putting together a class on "how to prep a class," because learning how to backwards plan just, it saved my life. It saved my sanity.

Dinur: For students, if you have a test coming up, you want a similar prep process as a one-week assignment, right? Your test day is your due day. It's when you've got to perform. So, work backwards from that due date and see what you need to study each day. Where are you really strong? Where are you comfortable with the material? Where are you a little weaker? How can you shore up, or strengthen up, the weak spots? Use this week or so to review or study in different ways.

Dinur: Adam and I've talked a lot about studying in groups, about making flashcards, about talking to different people, whether they're your classmates or they've never been to your school. Engage with the material in different ways, and do something a little different each day leading up to that test. Don't just try and read and assume that all of the material is going to stick perfectly.

Adam: Now, let's say you're given a study guide. All right, look at the study guide. What parts do you feel competent about, and what parts are scaring you? Work on the scary parts first for maybe 15 to 30 minutes and work on the competent parts for maybe 15 minutes, so that'll give you somewhere between 30 and 45 minutes of study time every day. It may not guarantee you a perfect score - in fact, let's put it out here right now. It won't, 'cause nothing guarantees a perfect score - but the effort, the engagement with the material, it means that you're going to get something out of those sessions and you're probably going to perform better than if you just did a cram session. If there are essay questions on the test, write yourself an outline for those essay questions. If your teacher gives you a list of essay questions, maybe they say, "Here are 10 essay questions, three of them will be on the test." Well then, prep each one of them. Write yourself an outline for each one, with bullet points, with ideas that you can use when the test shows up

Dinur: And one little note that students might not be aware of: those bullet points or those outlines can actually go a really long way for some teachers. Because for me, for example, when I've given essay exams, if a student ran out of time but they'd shown me bullet points or an outline with where they wanted to go, then I can say, "okay, they couldn't finish the entire thing but I know where they wanted to go with this, and I can give some partial points on that."

Dinur: And so, hopefully that helps you reduce stress, because you've thought through these questions before - and you may even get the bonus of, "Okay, even if I don't finish this, the teacher knows where I'm going with this paper or with this essay, and they might give a few points for that."

Dinur: Now, if you are allowed to use notes on your test, use some of your study time to write a cheat sheet. Give yourself the notes on the material that you're least familiar with, write down your formulas. If you've got short answer test questions or essay questions, rather, write yourself some outlines. Whatever is allowed to be on that cheat sheet, use it to your advantage.

Adam: Now, depending on your outside activities, like if you have a full-time job, or even a part-time job, or if you're in a sport, or if you've got family obligations, you may have to do more scheduling in order to accommodate all of your responsibilities. Now, we are not telling you to write a paper or study for a test in one long, stressful session. We're actually really cautioning you against that, because again, think about it. If you're trying to cram in a four-hour period for an exam that you've known about for three weeks, you're trying to do it fast, and we already know, trying to do it fast? What does that do to your quality? It tanks it, right?

Adam: So, we want you to slow down. And that means that if you know that you've got 25 hours of shifts at work for the three weeks leading up to the exam, then you've got to carve out five or six different 30- to 45-minute sessions in each of those weeks outside of your work time.

Adam: And we are not telling you to do this in a cram session. So what Dinur and I are suggesting, here, is that you take some time from each day for each of your classes to do just a little work toward your assignments and your tests. And I've read the science on this. I really, really strongly discourage you from doing more than 45 minutes per class per day. Don't do more than that per day.

Dinur: Now, you might feel like you're not learning, because 45 minutes doesn't seem like that much time. But a good way to think about this is: doing something half-assed is better than doing nothing at all. And for example, if you've ever been depressed and you didn't want to shower, well, washing your face and brushing your teeth is better than doing nothing, right? If you're too, if you're not in the mood to cook but you're hungry, and you make yourself a small sandwich, that's better than eating nothing at all.

And similarly, studying for 15 minutes isn't going to be as good as a 45-minute review session, but that's also way, way, way better than doing nothing. So it's going to sound weird, but if you want to do something well, you also have to be willing to do it half-assed because at least doing it half-assed gets you a little further than doing nothing at all. And obviously doing it whole-assed takes you further than doing it half-assed.

Adam: There's a prose poem that I read back when I was probably in grade school and it went, it wasn't exactly poetry, but it was definitely painting with imagery, and it said "Select a large box -" and this is, like, from the 1800s - Select a large box, and in it place as many cannonballs as it can hold. All right? And now it's full, in a sense, but there's still space in there. All right? So now get a quantity of marbles and dump them in and you will notice that they'll fit in, inside, you know, and between the cannonballs. But you can still fit more in there. So now get a quantity of shot - like little shot pellets, right? Like BB pellets - and pour that in, and you'll find that they fill everything up. Okay? But you can still fit more in the box. So go get some sand, and pour the sand in the box and it will filter in between all of the bigger, round things. And you will also find that if you go and get the jug in the corner that has the water in it, you can pour that in several times before it overflows.

Adam: So taking 15 minutes to go through your flashcards is a lot better than not doing any of it. And also, this sounds counterintuitive, but it actually works: limiting how much time you can spend on something, each day? It forces you to use that time more productively, too. So if you say, "I only have 45 minutes to do this," then you have to plan out what you're going to do because sitting in front of your books or your computer wondering where to start? Not an option anymore.

Adam: I had a student a few semesters ago, I was teaching methods and I was teaching theory, which are both four-unit classes, fairly heavy classes, and I had an older student who was in both classes and they came to me in, like, week five and they said, "Mr. Adam, I am spending four hours a day on each of these classes and I'm not understanding, I'm not, I'm not getting any studying done."

Adam: Well, what they were basically doing was sitting with the book open, and their computer open, and frantically trying to write every single thing in the book, and then they would listen to my video lectures, like, four or five times, and try to write down everything I'd said word for word. And I said, "No, no, no, no, no, no. No. This coming week you get to spend two hours a day. The week after that you get to spend an hour and a half, and the week after that you get to spend an hour per day, and that's it. I'm not letting you study more than an hour per day for my class starting in week eight."

Adam: And they went, "but I'll never learn anything!"

Adam: I said, "Yes, you will, because now we're going to plan out what you're doing during those times. And, you're going to take notes the way I told you to, which is write down the main points only. You may not write down every word I say, ever again."

Adam: All of a sudden their grades went up. They were pulling like a - maybe a C? - and suddenly their grades just skyrocketed. They ended the class, I think, with a B-plus in one class and a B in the other, and they were just overwhelmed with how much better it worked when they did focused work, instead of scattershot, "I've got eight hours to fill and I need to just do things," without any plan, without any kind of structure. When they structured it, it suddenly made so much more sense. Things began falling into place. You could almost hear the wheels going "click, click, click, click" as things were just clicking into place.

Adam: And they came back at the end of the semester and they told me "you've changed my life, because you made me study in small periods of time, and I would never have thought that would work, but it totally did, because it forced me to focus."

Dinur: Now, this episode has been really geared towards students, but some of the main suggestions that Adam and I have are: one, you want to set reverse-engineered or backward-planned daily goals for yourself and this goes both for your assignments, you know your short term and your long term ones, and also for your exams. You have a series of due dates that's given to you in your syllabus. You know how well you want to do in the class. Figure out what you have to do each week, or each day, to do well on those assignments and on those tests.

Adam: And another thing you've got to remember is that your assignment is not something that you're doing in one swell foop. You are not doing it in one step. Nothing in college is ever a one-step thing. You need to break the assignments into pieces and do one piece at a time, because if you're trying to do the whole paper in one night, it's going to be a crummy paper, folks.

Adam: You've got to say, "All right, I'm just going to do the intro," or actually you've got to say, "I'm going to do the main body paragraph about this topic. I'm going to get those body paragraphs done today, and then tomorrow I'll do the main body paragraphs about the second topic. And then I'm going to take the weekend off, and then on Monday I'm going to do the main body paragraph about the last big topic. And then I'll write a conclusion. And then I'll get to the intro later. And eventually I'll be able to tidy it all up." You've got to do it one piece at a time, because if you do it more than one piece at a time, if you try to do the whole thing at once, you're going to drown, and we don't want you to drown.

Dinur: Now we've talked about engaging your study senses, right? When you read, when you talk through the material, when you listen to a podcast about the material - you want to change your study practices and do different things in each study session. You don't want four sessions where you're just reading through the book

or through the slides. You want to read through the material one day, make flash cards the next, talk to a classmate or go into a study group on the third one, and get some sort of rotation going. But you want to do different things in each session, because that's going to help keep the material a little bit more fresh for you.

Adam: And finally, remember you've got to keep your study sessions short. No more than 45 minutes on any one class per day, because the longer your study session gets, the less it's a study session and the more it's a cram session. And it also becomes very, very frustrating, because after the first 45 minutes or so, your brain's probably going to say, "I really want to do something different. I'm really tired of this. I'm bored." And no matter how much you try to force yourself to focus, your brain is going to go off and gather daisies somewhere. It's not going to be paying attention anymore.

Adam: This leads into the familiarity trap, where you look at the book, you see the bolded words, you feel like you know them because they're familiar, they're bolded, and then you get to the exam and you're like, "Oh God, what the heck does reciprocity mean? I have no idea. I know that word. I mean, I saw it in the book, I remember seeing it in the book!" But if all you've done is read the book for hours and hours and hours right before the exam, you're not remembering anything effectively. So you've got to keep your study sessions short - no more than 45 minutes per class per day - so that your brain gets the variety it needs and also gets the rest it needs between study sessions.

Dinur: Yeah, and one thing that teachers can do is to show students how to plan their studying. You know, physically take a planner or take a calendar and say, "Okay, if you have a project that's due at the end of the semester here, here's what you want to look for by week eight of the semester," if you're in a semester system "or week five," in the 10 week quarter. "Here's what you want to do by week two or by week three." Things like that. If possible, give your students advance notice of due dates, both in your syllabus and, if you have an online learning system, whether it's the joy of Canvas or Blackboard or what have you - put your due dates on there, because students are going to see that pretty regularly and if they have the due dates facing them, it at least gives them advance notice of what they can expect and what they need to prepare for as they go through the class.

Adam: And you know, it occurs to me, we didn't have this written down, but it occurs to me too - that something that you could do is, let's say that you've assigned a big project, okay. A project that's going to take 15 weeks. And Dinur was saying, you know, "by this point you should have this done." Well, it might be a good idea to just create a project schedule, so that you say "by week three these things need to be done, by week five -" you know, maybe every couple of weeks, so you've got every week. Give them some flexibility, but say "by week three if you're working on the project, this is what you should have done by that point. By week five this is what you should have done by that point -" Because students, when we just say "do the project," that's kind of nebulous. And what I've found, over time, and I mean I'm doing more of it this semester, is giving the students a certain number of touch points helps, because then it helps them orient themselves about, "all right, by this point I should have this much done" instead of their only touch point being, you know, "December 1st project due" and that's it.

Adam: That's all they've got. But if you say, all right, "August 29th you should have this done" and "by September 15th you should have this done," "by September 30th -" so every couple of weeks, give them a touchstone to look at and say, "all right, it is now September 25th. What do I have to have done by September 30th?" Look at the list. All right, I still need to get these three things done so that I'm on track.

Adam: Allowing them to know that they're on track really, really helps a lot of students who are so used to being handheld and being guided, and it's not actually that difficult to say, "All right, for this project, here's what

you need to do. I'm giving you six weeks to do it. So by the end of week one, this is what you should have done. By the end of week four, this is what you should have done." So that they know pretty much that they're on track or that they're not.

Adam: And one of the things that I do is, I will ask students or remind students of what progress are they making. So I will just announce it in class, but I really think I should be writing it out too, and putting it in there and saying, "All right, so for the annotated bibliography, if you're doing that, you started on this date, you need to be done by this date. Here's what you need to be doing every week. You know, this needs to be done by this week." But I also do an announcement in class at the beginning of class and say, "Okay, so we are in week six and if you're working on the annotated bib, you should at least have these things done by this point. Okay? If you don't, make that a priority this week."

Adam: So ask them what progress they're making. Ask them what progress they're making on the assignments. Ask them what progress they're making on studying, either individually when they come to office hours, or just announce to the class as a whole, "Hey, how you doing? Okay, this is how you should be doing by this point if you want to get this grade, all right?"

Adam: And what that does is it allows them to know "I'm on track" or "I'm not on track." And I think that's far more important than we realize, because our students have not been trained in how to tell when they're on track. So if we start giving them ways to note when they're on track now, they may take that and transfer that and start using that when they get into their next class, 'cause they'll backwards-plan a paper in their next class and say, "Oh, so, looking at the paper that you know, Dr. Blum has assigned or that Dr. Sanford has assigned, they say that this paper will take eight weeks. Well I've got nine weeks to that paper, so I'll assume that I'm starting it next week. What do I have to have done?" And they can transfer that knowledge.

Adam: A lot of people say, you know, I've, I mean I've had, I've had professors, especially older professors, colleagues say to me, "I don't want to hold their hands." And I said, "Well, do you want them to fail?" You know, it's not handholding to just say "Here, you've never done this before and you don't know what the markers are, but when you're doing a paper and you have eight weeks, here's the tasks you should be doing at each point in that, in that structure."

Dinur: You also want to remind your students about the ways you've taught them to slow down and to plan their studying. You want to tell them, "okay, you've got a week until the test. How many of you are studying in small groups today? How many of you are making flashcards? How many of you are talking?" So, one, we're still - notice, we're still talking about engaging your study senses or also telling you to do something a little different each day and we're telling you to just slow down.

Dinur: One of the things we talked about earlier was, you know, it's better to do a little work than no work each day because a little work builds up and up and up until you get that finished - you know, that project, that paper or that test score that you're really happy with, but that's still meant that you were taking time. You weren't doing it all at once. You weren't trying to study the night before. You're already taking time a week in advance, a week out. Or if you're writing a paper, you're taking months or weeks in advance, you're getting that paper proofread by people, you're getting it edited, right? Even those steps, you know, they might seem like their burdens are annoying or they're nuisances, but those force you to slow down and they force you to think about the quality of what you're turning in.

Adam: So we might want to think about, what I was just saying is call them assignment schedules, you know, not just turning-it-in schedules, but you know, touchstone schedules. Here are the things that you need to do

and here's when you need to get them done by. And the thing is that a lot of our students are used to, they have to turn something in every week, and you could maybe talk about turning it in to yourself: "By this point, have you turned this in to yourself? Have you gotten this far? You know, have you made notes on all of those six sources that you've got for the annotated bibliography? Have you pulled out the main points? If you haven't done that yet, that's what you've got to do by the end of the week." Because giving them that guidance and reminding them how to do it, say, "Okay, go look at writer's workshop two and go through writer's workshop two and do each step.Maybe do step one today, step two next week. But you've got to get these things done."

Adam: And if you remind them, that also helps them. And again, this is not handholding, this is scaffolding - and scaffolding is necessary even at the college level. So, and the last thing is, teachers, give students a few minutes in class to check in on how well they're doing at slowing down or planning their study, or going through it and doing their study, and give them that chance to ask for advice if they're having trouble. Like maybe once a week, beginning of class, say, "Okay, five minutes of feedback. Who's having trouble right now with the annotated bibliography? Let's talk about this. Who's having trouble studying for the exam that's coming up next week? Let's talk about that." Okay, and maybe make it so that it's a Google form or a Socrative quiz, where they don't have to raise their hand and put themselves on the spot.

Adam: They can just send in, you know, for a minute or so. "I'm opening up a Socrative quiz and all I want you to do is tell me what's the thing you're struggling with the most right now in class or for this class. Send it to me and then we'll take a couple minutes to talk about it." If you have so tightly scheduled your lectures that you can't take a couple minutes out of your class to talk about problems that students are running into, you need to look at your own schedule and say, "do I actually need give them nine main points today or can I just give them seven and use the five minutes I would have used to talk about those other two points to let my students ask for help?" Because so many of us don't allow students any time to ask for help during class, and some of them can't make it to office hours, and so we need to provide that time.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 52. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 53, when we'll talk about one good way of slowing yourself down, when we discuss the 3x3 method of reading in depth.

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Adam: We look forward to seeing you next week!