

Five Steps to Less Stress



By April Perry and
The Power of Moms



Introduction

Here's a little quiz--just for you.

(1) When was the last time you danced in the kitchen? Said "Sure!" to a spontaneous trip to the park? Went out in the backyard with your children to lie on a blanket and search for shapes in the clouds?

(2) On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being most, how "present" do you feel when you're with your family?

(3) How often do you fall asleep quickly and peacefully--without one single worry about what needs to get done the next day?

(4) Are you able to devote your best energy to the things that really matter?

(5) Do you feel excited about your life?

If you'd asked me these questions a few years ago, I think I would have started to cry. I loved my family more than I can explain (and still do), but with four little children and lots of responsibilities, I would often describe myself as "overwhelmed, distracted, stressed, and tired." I'd see other moms who looked so happy, and I'd think back to my early visions of what motherhood should be and wonder, "What on earth is wrong with me?"

Over the past few years, I've learned that there was nothing "wrong" with me. I simply didn't know how to effectively organize the ideas, tasks, and projects on my mind. I needed a filing/list-making/calendar system that would work with what I had on my plate. I know what you're thinking: *What do file folders, lists, and calendars have to do with inner peace?* The answer? More than I could have ever imagined.

Getting a handle on all the “stuff” of motherhood has transformed my life. I dance in the kitchen several times a week, I feel present (and *really* listen to my children) about 90 percent of the time, I fall asleep quickly because I’m able to shut off the worries while I rest, I work on things that matter most, and I am excited to wake up every single morning to take advantage of the day’s opportunities. If you’d known me a few years ago, you would know how *huge* this is for me.

You know how when you find a great sale, a fabulous restaurant, or a life-changing book, you feel compelled to share it? That’s how I feel about this, and that’s why I have spent thousands of hours putting it into a program called *Mind Organization for Moms (M.O.M.)*.

M.O.M. is based on David Allen’s best-seller, *Getting Things Done®*, and it’s changing the lives of mothers all over the world--helping them finally get rid of their stress so they can enjoy their families. *However*, because the full program captures every single open loop in your head and essentially organizes your entire brain, it requires a serious investment of energy. It’s worth it, but it’s still a big project.

Five Steps to Less Stress takes the basic foundation of *M.O.M* and puts it into a simple “starter” format that anyone can implement--without any preparation, special purchases, or an office set-up. These steps aren’t rocket science, but chances are that if you’re feeling pretty stressed about all the things flying at you, these simple steps will really make a difference for you. Make a commitment to give this a try, and then let us know how it goes.

Once you master these steps, we encourage you to check out the full *Mind Organization for Moms* program available at The Power of Moms. We feel confident that it’s exactly what you’re looking for.

On the following page, you’ll find the five steps, and then we’ll go through them one at a time. Are you ready?

The Five Steps

Step 1: Use your calendar so it works for *you*.

Step 2: Create a Next Actions List where you can conveniently sort tasks by context.

Step 3: Keep your email inbox empty by using folders and filters to organize messages.

Step 4: Assign a Read/Review Basket to minimize “the pile” and hold non-action items you’d like to read at your convenience.

Step 5: Follow the “two-minute rule” when handling emails, phone calls, files, papers, or home tasks.

Step 1: Use your calendar so it works for *you*.



It might be tempting to keep all your engagements and commitments in your head, especially if you have a really good memory, but if you want to eliminate stress and start truly enjoying your family, you've got to get everything off your mind.

Keeping a calendar with you is a great start. It can be a pocket-sized calendar, a spiral-bound day-planner, or a feature on your cell phone. You choose what works for you, but you need one calendar that will hold all your necessary events and appointments. Technology has provided us with some beautiful resources to simplify calendaring, and there are plenty of excellent tools

to explore. Take some time to find the “right” calendar for you and your family.

The only things you put on your calendar are the items that must be done that day, such as doctor appointments, meetings, birthdays, or deadlines. I used to fill my calendar with all kinds of things I thought would be “nice to do,” like exercise, schedule a haircut, or go to the park. (These types of things are not deadline-driven, so they go on your Next Actions List, which we'll discuss in a moment). Now that I keep only the essential, absolute tasks on my calendar, I have plenty of freedom in how I spend my time.

Using a portable calendar is extremely important, in my opinion, but if you're the type of person who truly does not want to carry a calendar or really prefers to use a big wall calendar or an online service that the whole family can access, here are two recommendations:

- Use only one calendar--there has to be *one place* that holds your information
- Take an index card, a tiny spiral notebook, a cell phone with a "memo" feature, or something else that captures information with you whenever you leave the house. Then if something comes up that needs to go on your calendar, you can quickly jot it down and transfer it as soon as you get home.

All you need to do is review your calendar at the beginning of each week (when you do a quick plan and Weekly Review) and then be sure to check it each day.

Step 2: Create a Next Actions List where you can conveniently sort tasks by context.

The “Next Actions List” is one of the most brilliant ideas I’ve ever heard, and it is a key to helping you reduce your stress. Before I describe this list in detail, let’s go through the following exercise:

First, write down three projects that are causing you stress (a “project” is anything requiring two or more steps). Do you have a filing cabinet that is out of control? Have you started a business that needs to be expanded? Are there thousands of digital photos somewhere waiting to be organized and/or printed? I’m sure you’ve got at least three things you would like to work on. Got them? Have you written them down? (I’m trusting you, here.)

Next, identify the outcome you want for each of your three projects. For example,

- a neat filing cabinet, with only the essentials, that can easily accommodate any extra papers I need to file,
- a thriving home business that can bring in enough money to cover our mortgage payment, and
- all digital photos organized into dated, categorized folders on my computer that can easily be uploaded for printing.

Now that you have a vision of what you expect once these projects are “finished,” identify the very next action required to move each project forward.

These have to be “doable.” If I want my filing cabinet to look neat, my Next Action wouldn’t be “Clean the filing cabinet.” That’s too overwhelming. Instead, I would write, “Spend 30 minutes cleaning out the top drawer.” If I’m trying to build a home business, I would think seriously about the project and identify a Next Action like, “Call James for advice on a good marketing book.”

If my digital photos are a mess, and I desperately want them to look good, I might think the Next Action is “Sort photos from 2003.” But what if I haven’t done this because I want a better storage device? Then my Next Action would be, “Spend 20 minutes researching digital storage devices for photos.” The idea from David Allen’s *Getting Things Done*® is that you can’t do a project—you can only do actions related to a project.

For too many years, my task lists were full of vague things like, “Organize house, update wardrobes, work on business . . .” Those are all manageable projects, but they need to be broken down into more doable tasks. Otherwise, when thirty minutes become available, you look at your list and think, “Goodness, everything on my list needs ten hours of uninterrupted time,” and you’re never going to get that until your children grow up.

Now my Next Actions List has really specific tasks: “Clean out the cupboard above the dishwasher, look through Grace’s dresser and see what kinds of pants and tops we need to buy, email web developer about this month’s customer service issues . . .”

Those are all very doable, so I don’t feel stressed when I look at my list.

Take a moment and identify your next actions for your three projects. (I’m serious. It will only take a couple of minutes.) Wasn’t that fun? I loved doing that exercise because it helped me to see that I really *do* have control over my stress. It’s not the project that’s stressful; it’s how I managed it.

I mentioned that we're going to "conveniently sort tasks by context." Here's what I mean: When you have a big long list of things to do--even if it's made up of bite-sized, carefully decided "Next Actions," looking at that list can feel overwhelming. I'm sure you've made lists before. You probably have one sitting on your kitchen counter right now. Making a list is helpful, but sorting the list by *context* is revolutionary.

You can put your Next Actions List on your phone, in a planner, on a piece of paper, in a notepad--wherever you can easily reference it and carry it with you. You can have one sheet of paper with five sub-categories, or you can have five sheets of paper you keep together. I use a little card that fits into my FranklinCovey Day-planner's

bookmark, and to the left is an example of what Kelli, one of our "M.O.M. Moms" created for her personal system.

<u>HOUSEHOLD</u>	<u>COMPUTER</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>PHONE CALLS</u>	<u>TO DISCUSS</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>ERRANDS</u>	<u>OTHER</u>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

My five sub-headings she used are listed below. Of course you can tailor these to work for you--maybe you'll have more contexts, maybe you'll have less. Just make it work.

- Phone calls
- Errands
- Computer work
- Things to do at home
- Things to discuss (with your spouse, business partner, etc.)

Form Courtesy of www.3BoysandaDog.com

When my children are playing happily in the backyard, I make my phone calls. When we're in the "after-school" mode, we work together on the "Household" list. When my children are at school, engaged in playtime, or tucked in their beds, I work on the computer.

The errands list has eased my stress so much. I list essential items I need to pick or quick stops I'd like to make at the shops around town. If my children are happy and up for an outing, I have a whole list of possibilities, and I can sometimes get everything on the list done in just a couple of hours.

The "To Discuss" category is where you list things you need to discuss with specific people. If you have a PTA committee, this is where you write things you need to review at your next meeting. I mainly use this one to write down things to discuss with my husband. Our time together is precious right now, so having an agenda makes it easier to review the essentials (now I don't call him at work five times during the day to ask random questions).

One morning, I said, "Honey, I have a bunch of things to ask you about. When is a good time to talk?" He looked at his schedule for the day and said, "Probably right now. Today's going to be crazy." So I pulled out my Next Actions list that was sitting right by my bed, and we covered everything in about five minutes. Isn't that romantic?

Your Next Actions list is going to ease so much of your stress for a couple of reasons. First, it's made up of very doable tasks that will move your projects forward, so you know it's based on what is most important to you. Second, it isn't deadline-driven (those tasks go on your calendar), so you can get to it at your leisure.

If my calendar is blank on a particular day (I actually do keep it blank most days), I ask myself the following questions:

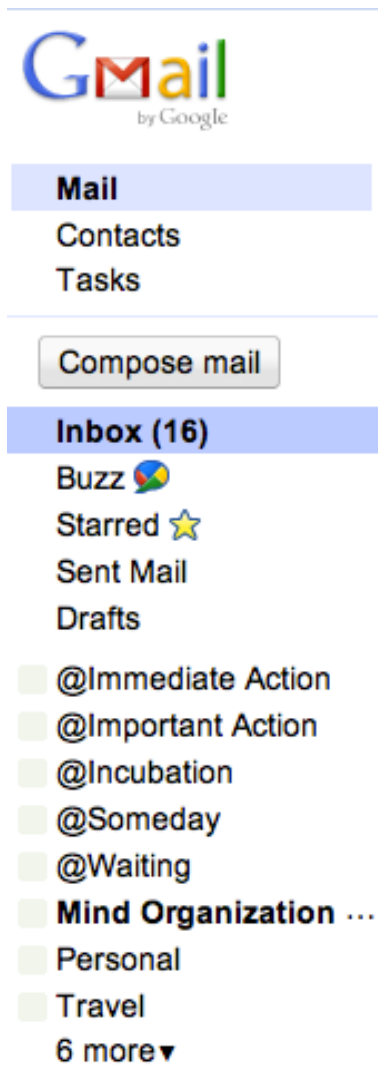
- Does my family need me right now?
- What "context" am I in?
- What is the most important thing on this list?

- How much time can I feasibly spend on a task?
- What do I feel like doing?

Usually, it's a no-brainer, and I zip through my list each week. We had a couple of weeks where the whole family was sick, and I didn't even *touch* my Next Actions list, but I didn't have to worry about it because all the urgent stuff was on my calendar, and it was simple to cancel or delay those events.

I want you to enjoy this list as much as I do--it will change the way you think, change the way you live, and give you the sense of control you need (so you, too, can be dancing in the kitchen with the people you love most).

Step 3: Keep your email inbox empty by using folders and filters to organize messages.



One of the most common, but easily-solved problems we encounter as mothers is a cluttered email system. You most likely have hundreds of emails that you're keeping around for one reason or another, but when you have a few quiet minutes to work on the computer, you feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information that's staring you in the face.

Here's a secret from *Getting Things Done*® that will make handling emails a pleasure. It centers around creating folders within your email account that help you identify which ones need your immediate attention and which ones do not.

If you don't know how to make folders, your email probably has a "help" button at the top, or you can ask a tech-savvy friend to assist you.

First, you'll probably want to create specific folders to keep emails from friends, receipts from online purchases, newsletters from organizations you follow, etc. These

serve the same purpose as a filing cabinet. However, you also have a ton of emails that need (or might need) your attention in the future.

For these, you create a series of folders as follows (the @ sign will put these folders at the top of the list because it's sorted alphabetically, and this sign takes the cake):

- @Action
- @Immediate Action
- @Incubation
- @Someday
- @Waiting

Let's say you have five emails in your inbox right now that need some sort of response. If it takes less than two minutes, just do it—then delete the email or file it in one of your file folders (we'll talk more about this two-minute rule later).

For our purposes today, suppose one email is a party invitation that requires an RSVP. You aren't sure if you can make it because you're waiting to hear if your daughter's field trip was cancelled, so you file this in @Waiting, put a little note on your calendar to remind you to RSVP by a certain date, and move on.

The next one is an invitation to buy season tickets to your local theater. You might want to do it, but you want to think about it some more. Stick it in @Incubation.

Your third email has a bunch of ideas for fun summer crafts. They are so cute, and you know you want to do them, but now is just not the time. Put it into the @Someday file.

The next email is a thoughtful note from a friend you haven't talked to for years. You need some quiet time to respond to this one, but it's not urgent, so place it in the @Action folder.

Your last email is a message from a customer at work, and it needs an immediate reply. Put it into your @Immediate Action folder, and when you check that folder--throughout the day when you're in the "computer" context, or most certainly before you close up for the night--you'll respond. Don't be worried about moving an important email out of your inbox. It might feel awkward at first, but trust the system (or make it work for you).

This was pretty simple—it only takes a few minutes to put your emails exactly where they belong. Then you just need to be sure to check your folders as often as is necessary to manage your workload.

When I started this process, I had 1600 emails that needed to be sorted. I put the most important ones into files, and then lumped all the other random ones into a folder called “To Sort.” I’ll do that someday. You will feel so excited every time you conquer your waiting emails. No more stress there.

Step 4: Assign a Read/Review Basket to hold non-action items.



Just about every mother I know has a pile of papers sitting on her kitchen counter. It's made up of fliers, school papers, invitations, bills . . . you name it. The full *Mind Organization for Moms* program will show you how to handle every single paper in this pile, but for our purposes today, let's talk about how to *minimize* the pile.

You're going to want to get a basket that we'll call the "Read/Review Basket." Mine can hold about a dozen magazines, two books, and a folder full of catalogs and papers. I keep it in the restroom. (I was embarrassed to say that, but it's true.) My husband uses a portable file box for his because he's in the car a lot. (This option might work for you if you constantly find yourself in the car with time to read.)

If you get a lot of magazines, catalogs, newsletters, or other kinds of information you want to read, this is where you put them. And this might be the time to cut down on how many reading items you've invited into your home.

The items in this basket have no deadline—it's just a nice place to keep all the things that you'd like to look through before you toss. I keep instruction manuals for new appliances in here and Spanish language cards. These kinds of things don't really *need* to be read, but if I have some free time to flip through the basket, it's nice to learn a new vocabulary word or figure out how to use the manual mode of my new camera.

You might like to keep a piece of paper and a pencil with this basket, in case some new ideas or tasks come to mind that you want to act upon. If you forget about this basket completely, it's no big deal—you can toss out the old stuff next time you get to it, but if someone asks if you've seen the latest Fortune magazine, you can respond, "Oh yes, it's in my read/review file. I'll run get it." See how nice that is?

If you get a lot of "read/review" stuff in your email, you can also have a corresponding computer or email file for those things. It's totally up to you, but this is another part of your brain that has just been freed up. Ta-DA!

Step 5: Follow the “two-minute rule” when handling emails, phone calls, files, papers, or home tasks.



This one little rule has saved me *hours*. I can't tell you how much time I've spent rewriting quick little tasks on my calendar or lists. It's just silliness.

There are ten pages in my day-planner archives that each read, "Send check and thank you note to so and so." Seriously? You just grab a quick post-it, write something short and sweet, and stick it in the mail with your check. Why did I make those kinds of molehills into mountains?

Let's practice:

- Your son brings home a flier asking for canned foods to be brought into school next Tuesday. *Don't even think about adding that flier to your pile. Note the food drive on your calendar, maybe add a reminder the day before to collect food from your pantry, and throw the flier in the trash. Two minutes.*
- Your computer needs a new ink-jet, but you can never remember the kind you're supposed to buy. *In less than two minutes, you can walk over to your printer, open it up, and make a note on your Next Actions/errands list telling yourself what you need to buy. You can also add a memo or note into your phone (TONS of apps are available to help you with this) so you won't have to guess ever again.*

- You really want to schedule a bowling night with your children, but you're not sure which nights the bowling alley is open. *Don't procrastinate something like this. It will just haunt you until it's done, and your children will keep asking, "When are we going bowling, Mama?" Quickly get online and check the bowling alley's hours. Two minutes.*

This two-minute rule is going to give you an incredible feeling of empowerment. It will shave so many non-essential worries off your task list, and you will start getting a little giddy when you realize how many projects and tasks are actually starting to move forward. That's a beautiful way to feel.

You can do this!

Did I promise you this would be simple? Can you feel that little inkling of hope starting to rise within you? I have no doubt that these five steps will ease your stress.

- Get a calendar--and use it well.
- Identify your Next Actions and keep them on a list organized by context.
- Take a couple of hours to empty your email inbox.
- Assign a Read/Review Basket to help minimize “The Pile.”
- Use the two-minute rule every day.

Following these five little steps will change your life--guaranteed.

Our families need us. They want to see us happy and free of stress. There is an energetic, peaceful, creative lady inside you who wants to use her talents and abilities as she was intended to do so. You deserve to be organized, but no one else can get inside your brain and make it work except you.

CHALLENGE: I challenge you to get started, but I *also* challenge you to do this with a friend. Take two minutes right now and email a friend of yours who could be your organizing partner. Suggest that she get this eBook, and then contact us through our website, www.powerofmoms.com, and let us know how it went.

When you're connected to The Power of Moms, we'll consistently send you empowering, free resources to help you be the kind of mom you want to be, and when you're ready for the full *Mind Organization for Moms* program, we've got it waiting on our website just for you. We wish you the very best!

April Perry and Saren Eyre Loosli