

On using pressure as a motivator



Journalist, author, and content creator Taylor Lorenz discusses her approach to focusing, managing ADHD, and how tight deadlines and a packed schedule fuel her productivity and creativity.

October 7, 2024 -

As told to Eric Steuer, 1829 words.

Tags: [Journalism](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Money](#).

Lately I've been feeling extra distracted when I'm online. There's such a ridiculous amount of stuff constantly competing for your attention. From an outside perspective, at least, it seems like you're pretty much always online! Did you have to make changes to your routine when you were writing your book?

Definitely. Having severe ADHD and managing without medication means my ability to focus is practically non-existent. I've missed so many deadlines, using last-minute pressure as a motivator. Writing a book under these circumstances was tough. But honestly I didn't end up having much of a structured process, just chaotic spurts driven by the fear of my editor's reaction if I didn't deliver. I ended up doing everything during nights and weekends—it was intense.

I noticed you seemed less active on certain social platforms for a while. Was that a strategic part of your process to enhance focus?

Somewhat. I took a break from Twitter and was actually banned from it at one point. But I still stayed active on TikTok and YouTube. My online presence fluctuates depending on whatever's happening in my life. I didn't have a "book leave" from social media per se. When I have too many things going on, those are my most productive days. I'd end up procrastinating on a project even if you gave me all day to focus on it. I need a limited amount of time, a deadline, to get things done.

Could you expand on how you use the pressure from deadlines to be productive?

Well, there's this idea: "A deadline is not a start time," but for me, it might as well be. It's 100% about the external pressure for me. I remember a tech executive I interviewed discussing anxiety as a motivator—it resonated very deeply. Without that anxious drive, I sometimes really struggle to accomplish tasks. During the book writing, I especially felt this. The stress and fear of missing a deadline or disappointing others are what fuel me into action. Planning doesn't work for me; piling on work and riding the wave of urgent necessity does. It's about creating a structure of chaos that somehow results in productivity.

How do you prioritize what gets done amidst that chaos? I think I would find that process maddening, but it seems to work well for you.

I think it's the lack of predictability that keeps me engaged. If my day is too controlled or stable, I lose interest. I need my schedule packed, full of back-to-back commitments, so when a rare free hour pops up, I know it's now or never for getting certain pieces of work done. Too much free time equals procrastination for me. By overloading my schedule, it forces me to manage time more effectively—even if it means I'm constantly putting out

fires, it's what keeps me moving forward.

How do you avoid burnout?

I don't really think about slowing down. Burnout happens, sure, but I honestly just power through it. I manage by shifting my focus. If one area wears me out, I pivot to something else. If I'm tired of making videos, I switch to writing. If I've just finished a long feature, I'll make TikToks or start a new project. It's all about diversification for me. Stepping away entirely doesn't work for me; it leads to depression and a drop in productivity. So I keep creative, often collaborating with friends on just-for-fun projects, like filming comedy skits. That kind of creativity, separate from work, is crucial for me. It's about balance and finding joy in the creative process, not the outcome.

What is it about non-work-related creative projects that rejuvenates you? Is it the different stakes, or something else?

I thrive on new challenges and learning. That's partly why I'm a journalist—I love to learn. It's the same with hobbies; I dive into them, like I've been doing needlepoint recently and it's become a big part of my day. It's possibly an ADHD trait, this hyper-focusing on different skills, but it's also how I keep my creativity flowing. Hobbies like that feel low-stakes because they're not tied to my professional work, and yeah, that helps.

Have you taken on projects that you've had to abandon?

Oh, absolutely. Lots. I've left behind everything from TV shows that were in development to podcasts that were already several episodes in. Abandoning projects is part of the process for me. Even if a project doesn't end up coming together the way I hoped, I get so much out of just having put in the work on it. I always approach projects like "let's just see where this goes." It's important to manage expectations, too. High hopes can sometimes lead to disappointment, so I try to learn and have fun regardless of the outcome.

Has your approach to setting expectations evolved with your career experiences?

Definitely. I've come to appreciate that the best work isn't always the result of intense effort or big expectations. Effort is important, but it doesn't guarantee that others will resonate with your work. You have to do it for yourself first. A valuable lesson from art school was to always create art for yourself, as it might end up being just for you—and that's okay. You have to try to enjoy the process of creating. Of course that isn't to say you shouldn't get paid for your work, but its value to you shouldn't only depend on whether it's commercially successful.

I wanted to ask about the financial side of your work. As a journalist, you study how online creators make money, and you're also a content creator yourself. What insights from your journalism have helped you in the content creator side of your career?

One thing about money is that I don't actually make any from my internet content because of my role as a journalist. I'm make a lot more money if I wasn't a journalist.

From starting out as a blogger I learned how important it is to interact with your audience, which is not at all like how traditional journalism worked. I work on stories together with my audience, asking for their feedback and sources, which makes them feel more involved and actually improves the quality and accountability of my work. Sharing my work process and thoughts openly has also improved my work due to the interaction and feedback from the community, which is something traditional journalism could benefit from learning more about.

How do you approach using social media positively for audience interaction for your work despite all the toxicity out there?

For me, it's about really engaging with people and making them a genuine part of the conversation. Not just

treating them like an audience, but like people. I ask for input because I genuinely want it and it helps my work. It's about creating meaningful dialogue and connections, even with all the negativity online.

What's your personal work environment like? Do you have a specific place or tools you prefer for your best work?

I've said this before, but I do all my writing from bed. That's where I'm able to focus and be most productive. I need that quiet, cozy environment. If I have to edit video, especially on Premiere, I might use a desktop for the convenience of a bigger screen, but all my writing happens in bed. Desks make me feel like I'm supposed to be on a call or something—it's just too formal and stressful. Back when I was in a newsroom, I couldn't write at my desk; I could only socialize or manage emails and messages. My best writing happens away from a desk.

Does working from bed affect your ability to disconnect from work during off hours?

The boundary between work and life is pretty much gone for me. Being on social media is such a big part of my work that I check my phone first thing in the morning in bed. It's probably not ideal, but that's how things are. I do have a "work side" of the bed, if that makes sense [laughs]. If I could, I'd have a separate daybed in an office just for work and keep my own bed for rest. But for now, I just switch sides.

Does it ever worry you that you don't do more to separate your work and personal life?

Honestly, I don't dwell on it. I've tried different productivity methods before that were supposed to help deal with that stuff, and they just added stress. I found that when I stopped worrying about following a set of "shoulds," I was less dragged down by stress. I fully realize my approach isn't for everyone. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, but it works for me.

Your point about productivity methods adding stress really resonates. My wife and I listen to productivity podcasts, almost as a weird form of comfort listening, but it's funny how they can make optimizing efficiency feel like a second job. The other day I was listening to a guy talk about using all these tips and tricks in Gmail, and I thought, this is definitely more work than just replying to your emails!

Oh, totally! I've actually thought a lot about this topic. My approach to email is "inbox infinity." I refuse to let email become a stressor.

That mindset of not trying to over-manage everything also applies to my general outlook on making things. I've accepted that I'll drop the ball sometimes. That's just how it is. A story might not work out. I might have an unproductive day. I've learned to be at peace with it. The alternative, trying to keep up with everything, just adds too much negative pressure.

With your projects, especially the book, but also with all your content creation online, how do you decide when something is finished? Is that where deadlines come into play, because it's "done" simply by necessity?

Exactly, it's the deadline that calls it. I'll be deep into something right up until the moment it needs to be submitted or I need to publish it online. Sometimes, it's just a matter of being so tired of interacting with it that I can't stand to look at it any longer—that's when I decide it's finished.

There's also this sense of urgency tied to the internet. Creating content for the web, I feel this constant push against time. I'll think, "Could I redo this video and improve it? Sure, but it'll lose traction if I delay. Better to just release it." I try to remember to not let perfect be the enemy of good.

Taylor Lorenz Recommends:

404media.co

[Berlin Buyers Club](#)

Kareem Rahma's new longform YouTube show, [The Last Stop](#)

This website [looks bonkers but is the best place to stock up on KN95 masks](#)

[Button stealer](#)

Name

Taylor Lorenz

Vocation

journalist, author, content creator

□