

Checklists “Я” Us

BY RON SANDGRUND



I rarely notice or complain about the effects of age on my memory because of one thing: I’ve always had a lousy memory. I left for college wanting to become a doctor. Two years of pre-med rote memorization courses—and not doing well in them at all—pushed me into a double major in psychology and English, where intuitive thinking and writing were emphasized.

Because of my poor memory, since I started college I have made checklist after checklist to keep track of what I needed to do and what I had finished doing. I found these checklists relaxed me by forcing me to remember *only two things*: to write stuff down on my checklist that I needed to remember to do, and to review the checklist every few days and check off what I had done. That was it—no dining on my digits, no sleep deprivation, and no missed deadlines. Once I developed this habit, I became Mr. Mellow overnight. (Okay, maybe I was simply feeding the obsessive-compulsive beast in me—but that’s for a different column. See “Practicing Law With Blinders On,” *Colorado Lawyer* (July 2019).) These checklists have been so freeing, so helpful to my legal practice over the years, and so good for my marriage (e.g., honey-do lists and vacation planning) that I’ve decided to evangelize check listing to as many readers as I can.

Of course, there’s something Tantalean about checklists. You remember Monsieur Tantalus, don’t you? The ancient gods punished him by imprisoning him with a gnawing hunger and thirst, but every time he reached for the grapes hanging above his head, they rose higher, and every time he stooped for the water below him, it receded. That’s the seeming downside of checklists: as soon as you whittle one down,

another starts to grow. But that small detail pales against avoiding constant doubt, insomnia (just leave a pad and pencil on the nightstand), and missed deadlines.


My all-time favorite birthday card says, “If you didn’t know how old you were, how old would you be?” I’m not sure I would have fully appreciated the sentiment as much when I was young, but when I hit 50 (15 years ago!), it hit home. As long as I didn’t look in the mirror when answering the question, my response was always “in my early 30s.” Even though New Year’s Eve ends for me before 10 pm (most years), and I gave up full-court basketball and dropped from 4.5 to 4.0 in the USTA after I got a new hip at 52, and I weathered a pulmonary embolism that laid me up for a couple of months, my answer has not yet changed: I am the same age as Steph Curry and not nearly as old as LeBron James. I feel very fortunate. But, of course, feeling physically fit is only half the battle—there’s the mental part.

All around me, my contemporaries are bemoaning the ravages of aging (I hate the euphemism “maturing”), in particular, self-described “senior moments” (another euphemism I loathe). Trying to recall who played the leads in *Jaws*. Naming every president who served during your lifetime. Who *did* the Broncos beat in the last Super Bowl? Where is the butter?! But with smartphones and search engines at your fingertips, who cares? Bada bing: there’s your answer (except for the butter). It takes a few extra seconds, and now you know what a moment ago you thought was lost to the ether. But all this is just trivia. What about the important things in life?

Here’s the real magic of checklists: they offer a Fountain of Mental Youth. Anniversaries, birthdays, catching up with friends, packing for a

ski or camping trip or overseas vacation, traveling with the new baby, estate and financial planning, writing upcoming columns for *Colorado Lawyer*, working up a lawsuit, or putting together a buy-sell agreement: you name it—just make a checklist that first time, with a final line item for “things to add to this checklist next time,” and you’re set. And incredibly, today, you don’t even have to write down your checklist—you can just say, “Alexa, add the following to my checklist.” And in a few more short years, when you get your cognitive brain implant, you can just think it!

One last thing. There is a minor adjunct, a kind of accessory to checklists that you need to keep in mind when a checklist is too bulky or not handy. The sticky note! Thank you to Spencer Silver of 3M, who stumbled upon the Post-it® adhesive in 1968 while working on a problem for the aerospace industry. You can bet that Spencer was working off of a checklist when he made his discovery. And thank you to Spencer’s colleague, Art Fry, who found a purpose for this weak adhesive while searching for a solution for bookmarking his place in a church hymnal book because he kept forgetting where he was.

Checklists and sticky notes. You’ll feel like you’re 32 years old for the rest of your life. 

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