

The Rock Pile Problem: Why Getting Started Feels So Hard

Last night, before I fell asleep, I saw it as clear as day: a massive rock pile blocking the path forward. Not pebbles you can kick aside, but giant, awkward boulders stacked in front of the way you want to go.

The rock pile is getting started.

It's that mountain of effort standing between you and the thing you say you want—whether that's getting fit, writing a book, eating better, or starting a side hustle. And the cruel trick? Once you do get over it, the path beyond is smoother. But from the bottom, staring up at all those jagged shapes, it feels impossible.

Some people get so overwhelmed by the rock pile that they sit down, sigh, and never take a step. They talk about wanting change, but stop at the first sight of effort. Others scramble up, get bruised, slide back down, and convince themselves it's not worth the climb.

So, how do you actually negotiate the rock pile without giving up or breaking your ankle on the way?

1. Shrink the Rock Pile (Break It Into Pebbles)

Your brain is wired to overestimate how hard something will be—especially at the beginning. Psychologists call it “task initiation anxiety.” The trick? Stop looking at the entire rock pile. Look at the *next handhold*.

- Want to work out? Just put on your sneakers.
- Want to eat better? Chop a single veggie, not an entire meal prep.
- Want to write? Open the doc and type a single messy sentence.

Once you’re in motion, momentum kicks in (Newton’s law applies to behavior, too). Tiny actions are “pebbles” that get you onto the first rock without freezing in fear.

2. Play Mind Games With Yourself

Our brains hate friction and love rewards. Hack that.

- **Implementation intention:** Instead of “I should work out more,” say “After I brush my teeth, I’ll walk for 10 minutes.” Anchor it to something you already do.
- **Temptation bundling:** Pair the hard thing with something you enjoy—watch your favorite show *only* when folding laundry, listen to that juicy podcast only on walks.
- **The 5-minute rule:** Promise yourself you’ll just do it for five minutes. Nine times out of ten, you’ll keep going.

You're basically tricking your brain into stepping onto the rock pile without triggering full-on rebellion.

3. Reframe the Rock Pile as Training

Every awkward, weird-shaped boulder is practice for the next. When you approach it that way, failure stops being proof you “can’t do it” and becomes a rep in your mental gym.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) calls this *cognitive reframing*: swapping “this is impossible” for “this is practice.” The more you climb, the stronger you get.

4. Silence the Rock Pile Heckler in Your Head

There's always that internal heckler yelling, “You’ll never make it up there.” That’s just your amygdala—your fear center—trying to keep you safe from discomfort.

Talk back. Literally. Say out loud: “Thanks for your input, but we’re climbing anyway.” Mel Robbins calls it “stop listening to yourself, start talking to yourself.” Science backs it: self-distancing language (“You’ve got this, Leanne”) lowers stress and sharpens focus.

5. Visualize the Path Beyond

Motivation research shows that it’s not enough to picture the *goal*—you need to picture the *process*. See yourself getting over each rock, not just standing victorious at the end. That way, when you actually climb, it feels familiar.

The truth is, the rock pile never goes away. Every new beginning has one. But if you expect it, if you plan for the climb, and if you've got your hacks ready, you don't sit down and quit. You get scrappy, you find footholds, and you keep moving until you're on the path.

Because the path is where the good stuff is—energy, confidence, momentum. And the only way to get there is through the rock pile.

So here's your challenge: pick one rock today. Don't look at the whole pile. Just step onto the first one and let momentum do the rest.