

What to Do When You Feel Like Quitting

Have you ever thought of quitting your Ph.D. program? I doubt that any graduate student has weathered the whole process, particularly the dissertation-writing part, without wondering whether it was worth it. Here is an essay by one of my favorite motivational writers, Suzanne Falter-Barnes, on the topic of how to handle that quitting feeling.

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By Suzanne Falter-Barnes

Sooner or later, I can guarantee there will come a day when you decide the results aren't shaping up quickly enough, or neatly enough, or clearly enough, and you entertain thoughts of quitting.

Most likely, this is your dark night of the soul. Things won't be going well and you'll question whether God or Whomever really wanted you to do this work, or the idea just showed up like some mutant cell in the gene pool.

Since we all know the evils of quitting, I'll focus instead on what to do to

help you hang tough. Here are steps to make sure your decision is the right one.

1. Take a break . Take a weekend or a week off from your project to think about what you're doing. Often just some absence from the work, especially if you've been chipping away at it every day for a long time, is enlightening. You can gain just enough perspective to evaluate what's truly going on. You might even want to take time to ask yourself the questions at the end of this chapter. (See "Ten Hard Questions To Ask Yourself When You Feel Like Quitting.") Then, instead of acting rashly, you can act rationally.
2. Take a spiritual retreat . In the spirit of all the great religious seekers who ever wandered a desert, take a day, weekend, week, or even more time if you can, to tune in, spiritually. This could be a friend's weekend house by the beach (if you go, make sure you've got some time to get away by yourself), a yoga retreat, a nearby nature sanctuary or state park that permits camping, or even a monastery or spiritual sanctuary. By removing yourself from the hustle bustle of everyday life, and going into a contemplative quiet place, you can really make the deep, life-altering decisions such times demand. I urge you to choose a place that is not only nurturing and soothing to your spirit, but one that allows you plenty of space, time and quiet to sort out your thoughts. There is an excellent list of such places at the end of this chapter, as well as key questions to ask yourself while you are there. (See Chapter X, "When, How, and Why to Disappear for a While.")
3. Write down what's going on . Your journal could be your greatest ally in this process, if you make time to empty your brain of all those frightened, frustrated thoughts that are kicking around in there. There is nothing worse for the creative flow than 'brain jam', the condition where your thoughts become so intense that they clog up your ability to think rationally. Indeed, too much thinking can paralyze you from any kind of action, and so you miss the opportunity to move forward. Again, take a look at the list of questions that follow and answer them for yourself in writing.
4. Get support . Just like an AA member contemplating going on a bender, you need to call your 'sponsor' or greatest supporter and get help. This is precisely why you lined them up in the first place -- so when the chips are down, they can talk you on to the next victory. If you feel squeamish about appearing in front of them in your most bedraggled state, remember that you would want them to come to you if they needed help this badly.
5. List the pros and cons . If none of the above seem to work, sit down with a piece of paper and evaluate the pros and cons of quitting your endeavor. Be brutally honest with yourself, and make sure each list is complete. Don't leave a single pro or con unconsidered. Then walk away from your list. Take a look at it again in a few days, when you've had time for your thoughts to settle. Your perspective should be clearer and the answer obvious.

Try This ...

Ten Important Questions To Ask Yourself When You Feel Like Quitting

1. What have I learned from my work in the past?
2. What am I learning now?
3. Have I generally been a quitter in life?
4. What would I leave behind if I quit?
5. What will I never know about if I quit?
6. How will I feel about this at the end of my life?
7. What do I need to keep going?
8. What do I still need to learn?
9. How will I feel if I can achieve my goal?
10. How will achieving my goal help other people?

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I hope that Suzanne's thoughts have helped you decide to stay in your Ph.D. program, continue writing the dissertation,
or even to move on to other pursuits. Whatever you decide, be kind to yourself. Guilt and self-flagellation don't help
anyone, least of all you. Best of luck in your dissertating or career!

Gina