for the things you are actually doing. (If I’m enjoying my routine, I write it down, for inspiration in times where I feel less productive.) Third, after too long a working day, your productivity will be down the next day—so it’s really not more efficient to work late (whatever “late” means for you).

Emails
Email is such a big thing that it deserves its own section. Writing emails is not a goal in itself, and you cannot plan when someone will write to you. Emails come in continuously and the more you write, the more you receive. In other words, you will never be done with email, but can only hope to stay on top of it, without spending too much time on it.

I personally don’t allocate time for writing emails, although I typically start and end the day with it. There will always be a few minutes between meetings, or when I’m taking a short break from thinking about math, in which I can write some quick emails. To reduce stress, I do not receive work emails on my phone and have turned off most notifications, so that I only see emails when I actively choose to do so. But strangely, it is less stressful for me to check my emails regularly, even outside of working hours, so that I know they are not secretly piling up.

COVID Craziness
All of the above applies at any time. But we live in exceptional times, and this is reflected in how we manage our time. You may be mourning—if not losing someone or something specific, then at least a sense of normality. You may be very distracted by everything that is going on.

I think we should accept that we may have less energy or mental bandwidth than usual, and simply plan to do less. Now that everything is all online, a lot of idle time has been cut out of our schedules, but we need this time to not overexhaust ourselves rather than squeezing in yet more work. It helps me to work standing some of the time, to keep my body active. I also balance my extra screen time with completely different things (socializing, sports, music, reading).

Listen to your body and cut yourself some slack. If you are working too much, “because there is nothing else to do,” maybe the solution is to plan more non-work things that you then commit to. (I have put “sitting on the couch” on daily to-do lists, to make sure it actually happens.) If you feel like you are trying and failing to do something, take a break and do something else. While going on a nice walk, you may just suddenly have a great idea. If not, then at least you will have taken a nice walk.

Credits
Author photo is courtesy of Pasfoto Utrecht Centrum.
and sent them to my old advisor so that I could get some nice kudos that would keep me going. A quick reply was not forthcoming. Finally, he wrote back, and the subject line said it all: “Ugh.” I’ll skip the sordid details. I thought I had results. He said they were obvious, not interesting, and not research. But professional development at my institution was the name of the game, and I thought about taking myself in lots of other directions, giving up research, and sticking with things I knew I could do. So, what was my next move? I moped. Yeah, I felt sorry for myself. Then I got better. Then I got mad.

And now I had a goal to focus on. An angry goal, but still a goal: to show to my advisor (and others) that I could get something done.

I started by reading lots of journal articles. Specifically, I was looking for articles with open problems in them. This way, I could get my hands on some problems rather than determine my own, and I could start to learn what are good questions. I got some decent results about the metric space of metrics. Boom! Paper. I realized there’s no harm in asking others, so at a meeting, I asked an older friend if he had anything we could work on together. He did, and that was another paper. Boom, again! Then, I lucked out. I found a paper on metric-preserving functions that had an open question, and one of the authors was at a school about an hour away from me. I emailed to ask if the question was still open, and it was. It took me over a year, but I answered it with a really nice, deep counterexample.

Getting to know this person gave me the opportunity to (a) go to his school to both attend and present at their mathematics colloquium, (b) have someone to talk with, and (c) have a place to go to when I took a sabbatical. Let me point out that this took years. It was a marathon, not a foot race. It’s ongoing today.

So, I learned how to ask and answer questions. Sometimes, I’m the only one interested in them. I give talks, and nobody has anything to say, but that’s OK. I think they’re good. I’ve moved on from my first tenure-track job, but for the decades I was there, I averaged a research paper a year and have branched out into many topics (analysis, topology, number theory, recreational mathematics, etc.). I have also written expository and pedagogical papers and a book. My perseverance paid off. I’m sure that yours will, too.