

Understanding and Overcoming Procrastination

Why do so many people procrastinate and how do you overcome it?

For most people procrastination, irrespective of what they say, is NOT about being lazy. In fact, when we procrastinate we often work intensely for long stretches just before our deadlines. Working long and hard is the opposite of lazy, so that can't be the reason we do it. So, why do we procrastinate and, more importantly, what can we do about it?

As suggested above, some say they procrastinate because they are lazy. Others claim they “do better” when they procrastinate and “work best” under pressure. I encourage you to be critical of these explanations. Virtually everyone who offers this explanation habitually procrastinates and has not completed an important academic task in which they made a plan, implemented it, and had time to review, etc. before their deadline. So, in reality, they can't make a comparison about the circumstances under which they work best. If you pretty much always procrastinate, and never really approach your tasks systematically, then you can't accurately say that you know you “do better” under pressure. Still other people say they like the “rush” of leaving things to the end and meeting a deadline. But they usually say this when they are NOT working under that deadline. They tend to make such statements long after cramming when they have forgotten the negative consequences of procrastinating such as feelings of anxiety and stress, fatigue, and disappointment from falling below their own standards and having to put their life on hold for chunks of time. Not to mention, leaving things to the end dramatically increases the chances something will go wrong – like getting sick or a computer problem – and not being able to pull off the desired grade. So, procrastination can be hard on us and actually increase our chances of failing, but we do it anyway. How come?

Procrastination is not a matter, solely, of having poor time management skills, either, but rather can be traced to underlying and more complex psychological reasons. These dynamics are often made worse by schools where students are constantly being evaluated, and especially in college where the pressure for grades is high and a lot can be riding on students' performance. In reality, procrastination is often a self-protection strategy for students. For example, if you procrastinate, then you always have the excuse of “not having enough” time in the event that you fail, so your sense of your ability is never threatened. When there is so much pressure on getting a good grade on, say, a paper, it's no wonder that students want to avoid it and so put off their work. For the most part our reasons for delaying and avoiding are rooted in fear and anxiety—about doing poorly, of not having control of our outcomes, of looking stupid, of having one's sense of self or self-concept challenged. We avoid doing work to avoid our abilities being judged. And, if we happen to succeed, we feel that much “smarter.” So, what can we do to overcome our tendencies to procrastinate?

Awareness: The First Step

First, to overcome procrastination you need to have an understanding of the REASONS WHY you procrastinate and the function procrastination serves in your life. You can't come up with an effective solution if you don't really understand the root of the problem. As with most problems, awareness and self-knowledge are the keys to figuring out how to stop procrastinating. For a lot of people acquiring this insight about how procrastination protects them from feeling like they are not able enough, and keeping it in mind when they are tempted to fall into familiar, unproductive, procrastinating habits goes a long way to solving the problem. For instance, two psychologists, Jane Burka and Lenora Yuen, who have helped many people overcome procrastination, report in their article, “Mind Games Procrastinators Play” (*Psychology Today*, January, 1982), that for many students “understanding the hidden roots of procrastination often seems to weaken them” (p.33). Just knowing our true reasons for procrastinating makes it easier to stop.

Time Management Techniques: One Piece of the Puzzle

To overcome procrastination time management techniques and tools are indispensable, but they are not enough by themselves. And, not all methods of managing time are equally helpful in dealing with procrastination. There are some time management techniques that are well suited to overcoming procrastination and others that can make it worse. Those that reduce anxiety and fear and emphasize the satisfaction and rewards of completing tasks work best. Those that are inflexible emphasize the magnitude of tasks and increase anxiety can actually increase procrastination and are thus counter-productive. For instance, making a huge list of “things to do” or scheduling every minute of your day may INCREASE your stress and thus procrastination. Instead, set reasonable goals (e.g. a manageable list of things to do), break big tasks down, and give yourself flexibility and allot time to things you enjoy as rewards for work completed.

Motivation: Finding Productive Reasons for Engaging in Tasks

To overcome procrastination it's critical that you stay motivated for PRODUCTIVE REASONS. By productive reasons I mean reasons for learning and achieving that lead to positive, productive, satisfying feelings and actions. These reasons are in contrast to engaging in a task out of fear of failing, or not making your parents angry, or not looking stupid, or doing better than other people to “show off.” While these are all reasons – often very powerful ones – for doing something, they are not productive since they evoke maladaptive, often negative feelings and actions. For example, if you are concerned with not looking dumb you may not ask questions, delve into new areas, try new methods, or take the risks necessary to learn new things and reach new heights.

A good way to put positive motives in motion is to set and focus on your goals. Identify and write down your own personal reasons for enrolling in a course and monitor your progress toward these personal, intrinsic goals as well as your grade goal. Remember to focus on your own reasons and your goals. Other people's goals for you are not goals at all, but obligations.

Staying Motivated: Be Active to be Engaged

Another key to overcoming procrastination is to stay actively engaged in your classes. If you are passive in class you're probably not “getting into” the course and its topics, and that weakens your motivation. What's more, if you are passive you are probably not making as much sense out of the course and course materials as you could. Nonsense and confusion are not engaging; in fact, they are boring and frustrating. We don't often want to do things that are boring or frustrating. Prevent that by aiming to really understand course material, not memorize it or just “get through it.” Instead, try (1) seeking out what is interesting and relevant to you in the course materials, (2) setting your own purpose for every reading and class session, and (3) asking yourself (and others) questions about what you are learning.

Summary of Tips for Overcoming Procrastination

- **Awareness**—Reflect on the reasons why you procrastinate, your habits and thoughts that lead to procrastinating.
- **Assess**—What feelings lead to procrastinating, and how does it make you feel? Are these positive, productive feelings: do you want to change them?
- **Outlook**—Alter your perspective. Looking at a big task in terms of smaller pieces makes it less intimidating. Look for what's appealing about or what you want to get out of an assignment beyond just the grade.
- **Commit**—If you feel really stuck, start simply by committing to complete a small task, any task, and write it down. Finish it and reward yourself. Write down on your schedule or “to do” list only what you can completely commit to, and if you write it down, follow through no matter what. By doing so you will slowly rebuild trust in yourself that you will really do what you say you will, which so many procrastinators have lost.

- **Surroundings**—When doing school work, choose wisely where and with whom you are working. Repeatedly placing yourself in situations where you don't get much done and are easily distracted— such as “studying” in your bed, at a café or with friends – can actually be a kind of procrastination, a method of avoiding work.
- **Goals**—Focus on what you want to do, not what you want to avoid. Think about the productive reasons for doing a task by setting positive, concrete, meaningful learning and achievement goals for yourself.
- **Be Realistic**—Achieving goals and changing habits takes time and effort; don't sabotage yourself by having unrealistic expectations that you cannot reasonably meet.
- **Self-talk**—Notice how you are thinking, and talking to yourself. Talk to yourself in ways that remind you of your goals and replace old, counter-productive habits of self-talk. Instead of saying, “I wish I hadn't...” say, “I will...”
- **Un-schedule**— If you feel really stuck, you probably won't use a schedule that is a constant reminder of all that you have to do and is all work and no play. So, if your many attempts to make a schedule have failed miserably, make a largely unstructured, flexible schedule in which you slot in only what is necessary. Keep track of all the time you spend working toward your goals, tally it up, and reward yourself for it. This can reduce feelings of being overwhelmed and increase satisfaction in what you get done. For more see the book *Procrastination* by Yuen and Burka.
- **Swiss Cheese It**—Breaking down big tasks into little ones is a good approach. A variation on this is devoting short chunks of time to a big task and doing as much as you can in that time with few expectations about what you will get done. For example, try spending about ten minutes just jotting down ideas that come to mind on the topic of a paper, or skimming over a long reading to get just the main ideas. After doing this several times on a big task, you will have made some progress on it, you'll have some momentum, you'll have less work to do to complete the task, and it won't seem so huge because you've punched holes in it (like Swiss cheese). In short, it'll be easier to complete the task because you've gotten started and removed some of the obstacles to finishing.