

OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION:

A NEW LOOK

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Everybody procrastinates—at least some of the time. They put things off until tomorrow, and when tomorrow comes they put them off until the next tomorrow. Life would likely be a good deal more pleasurable without having to repeatedly face the “tomorrow problem.”

The illusion behind this tomorrow outlook is that later is better and the avoided actions will magically get done or disappear. This illusion has self-defeating consequences. People who procrastinate to excess are prone to nagging guilt, self-downing, anxiety, and a numbing feeling of powerlessness.

Procrastination is not a trivial problem. At the milder end of the scale, procrastination mirrors a capricious way of being that appears at different times amidst acts of timely accomplishment. At the extreme, you might feel caught in a procrastination rut, spinning your wheels, going nowhere fast.

In this article we'll look at these questions: (1) What is procrastination? (2) What causes procrastination? (3) Why do we resist change? (4) How do you stop procrastinating?

WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION?

Procrastination is a habit of needlessly delaying or putting off relevant activities until another day or time. These activities fall into two overlapping categories: maintenance and development procrastination.

People who put off *maintenance* activities do such things as prepare their taxes at the eleventh hour, let dirty dishes pile up, pay credit card bills late, turn in overdue library books, delay paying traffic fines, or wait until their property becomes an eyesore before pruning bushes and cutting grass. A pattern of maintenance procrastination can lead to inconvenience and feeling out of control.

Development procrastination occurs when you routinely put off self-improvement activities that can lead to improved physical health, psychological health or other forms of personal advantage. Development procrastinators might also stall on finding ways to enjoy their lives and improve their self-acceptance, social, or career skills. At the extreme, people feel depressed, immobilized, or frustrated.

Both maintenance and development procrastination involve a *decision to delay*. This decision may lead to temporary relief because of the whimsical belief that someday something will be done. The decision is self-deceptive because there is no more of a commitment that the task will get done tomorrow than there is to getting it done today. The problems that result from these deceptive delays are legendary.

WHAT CAUSES PROCRASTINATION?

In the world of the practiced procrastinator, it is the useful, necessary, but temporarily unpleasant activities that normally get put off. Some of these activities could lead to advantage but might entail risk, possible conflicts, challenges to one's sense of self-worth, frustration, or uncertainty. Procrastinators may even put off largely pleasurable tasks that involve some minor inconvenience or discomfort. But there is more to procrastination than simply delaying the unpleasant.

A spectrum of complications

People procrastinate for various reasons. The following describes six procrastination styles: (1) Some people have legitimate difficulty organizing their efforts and keeping on track with their priorities. These people are frequently forgetful and procrastinate on making the special effort needed to keep on track. Unless they carefully manage tedious activities and schedules, they will face a double hassle: the original activity plus possible new complications due to the delay. (2) Procrastinators can feel powerless, hopeless, and self-pitying. This group believes that whatever they do is an act of futility. Because of this delusion, they hold back. (3) People who feel hostile and who put things off to get back at someone, often disadvantage themselves—like the child who breaks his or her red wagon to prevent others from playing with it. (4) Some self-indulgent people rebel against routines and schedules because they want to live by their own rules and they expect others to adapt to their wishes. This self-absorbed group procrastinates on advancing their enlightened self-interest. (5) People who worry too much about what other people think of them may procrastinate to avoid disapproval. To avoid feeling embarrassed or worthless when they believe they will not present themselves adequately, they often withdraw. In a misguided attempt to maintain their public image, some will excuse their failings by claiming they didn't have the time to do a good job. Sadly, many do get the disapproval or disrespect

they want to avoid by running from opportunities where it is clearly appropriate to be assertive. (6) Some procrastinators make dedicated efforts to keep their image polished. Their motto is, "It is not what you can do, but how you look and who you know that leads to power and money." Their problem solving efforts almost exclusively go into the endless pursuit of covering up what they put off doing.

These six procrastination styles overlap with, and are explained by, four common cognitive, emotive, and behavioral themes: self-doubt, discomfort avoidance, guilt, and problem habits.

Self-doubt procrastination

Self-doubters are prone to second-guess themselves, hesitate and delay. Some prefer to avoid new challenges and opportunities unless guaranteed success. Some perfectionistic self-doubters fear failure. Others routinely make themselves anxious when they view everyday challenges as too tough or overwhelming. Members of this group may make halfhearted efforts while deluding themselves into thinking they could do better if they tried harder. Workaholics may treat themselves like perpetual motion machines, ruthlessly driving themselves lest if they let down their guard, they will lapse and not recover. Through these frenzied efforts, they procrastinate on finding ways to have a relaxed, fun-filled existence. Although there is variation around the self-doubt theme, the common thread is that to obtain security, certainty, and human worth you must successfully meet rigid standards. The result is often the opposite.

Discomfort-dodging procrastination

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara remarked, "Tomorrow is another day." True—but do you really prefer to face tomorrow with what you put off today? Do you prefer to make the same New Year's resolutions year after year? If you are like most people, the answer is no! However, when trapped in a procrastination pattern, your actions suggest that you prefer to do something else—such as avoid discomfort.

The discomfort avoidance procrastination process comes about because of a low tolerance for activities that the procrastinating person believes will evoke discomfort, uncertainty, or difficulty. In some cases, the person feels strained, has a low threshold for stress, magnifies the effort required to get going, often falls behind, and then feels even more stressed as the burdens pile up.

Here is one way the discomfort-dodging procrastination process escalates: You feel uncomfortable as you anticipate facing a troublesome situation. You are sensitive to stress, and focus your attention partially on your *tension*. This attention to tension magnifies your feelings of stress and this magnification process leads to agitated feelings that can disorganize your thinking processes and behavior.

Discomfort-dodging activities can interact with the self-doubt process. People who are inclined to dodge challenges and responsibilities because of the discomfort associated with them frequently doubt their ability to tolerate discomfort. Sadly, when we use discomfort as a signal to avoid a legitimate maintenance or developmental challenge, we may fertilize self-doubt.

Self-doubt and discomfort-dodging patterns lead to a phobic reactions, avoidance, and escapist impulses.

Self-doubters and discomfort-dodgers often don't see that the avoided activity is not so much the problem as the highly prejudicial and emotionally charged negative view they take of their own abilities to tolerate frustration, persist, and manage challenges.

Guilt-driven procrastination

Some procrastinators also may feel guilt when they believe they did something they think they should not have done: they condemn themselves for their procrastination. Although procrastination can be regrettable, guilt is an inner distraction that robs time from corrective efforts.

Guilt over procrastination is an irrational conclusion with paradoxical consequences. People who periodically fertilize a procrastination pattern through guilt normally don't stop to look at the consequences—emotional anguish and probably *more* procrastination. The disturbance a person feels from guilt is rarely constructive. Guilt is irrational because there is no universal law that says one should not err by procrastinating, nor that if one does, one should be condemned.

Guilt over procrastination is a disabling disturbance that would preferably be understood and challenged. Once guilt is worked out, the person who wants to stop procrastinating will normally have a clearer mind, feel more relaxed and be better prepared to take responsible corrective actions.

Problem habits

Procrastination can be a symptom of a spectrum of complications, self-doubts, discomfort-dodging, or guilt. Procrastination may also involve the belief that an *urge* to procrastinate is the same as a *command* to procrastinate. With practice, this connection becomes stabilized.

Procrastination has other features. Faced with an unpleasant situation, the procrastinator's mind may habitually slip into a primitive whining—a defiant flow of thought that stirs and supports the procrastination habit. This "slippery thinking" process includes such reactive ideas as "I don't want to," "It's too hard," "I don't know where to begin," "I won't do this." "Oh no! This is too much (too tough, too unpleasant, too bothersome). I'll do it later," "I'll do it when I'm rested and better prepared." Unless the person is alert to these reactive perceptions, higher problem solving mental processes lose ground. Procrastination continues until the person makes a responsible effort to use his or her reasoning abilities to *override* these primitive, diversionary, comfort seeking evaluations.

Awareness of this procrastination habit process is often the first step toward change. However, it is not always easy to see the obvious.

WHY DO WE RESIST CHANGE?

Feeling a lack of accomplishment, surrounded by incomplete projects, losing opportunities, experiencing many unpleasant emotional consequences, and feeling irresponsible, why don't procrastinators just act effectively and rid themselves of these unwanted outcomes? The explanation is this: We are complex, inventive creatures who do not always act in our enlightened self-interest. We can, and do, distract ourselves from our problems and reconstruct them to make them temporarily more digestible. When it comes to procrastination, we normally live in a twilight zone and avoid changes when it comes to our cherished procrastination-evoking assumptions and beliefs. Here are some action, emotional, and mental distractions that support procrastination patterns that you can watch for and change.

Action diversions

Action diversions involve substituting a low priority activity for legitimate maintenance or developmental work. For example: you want to clean your living room because you see scattered newspapers and dust balls everywhere. In a procrastination mode, you instead call a friend or go to a movie. You want to enjoy the benefits that come with improved social skills, but rather than work to develop these skills, you call an acquaintance and complain about your life. An important report is due, so you doodle or visit the local pet store.

Emotional diversions

People who fall into the emotional diversion trap wait for the moment of inspiration to strike where they "feel right"— i.e., can happily and effortlessly deal with their outstanding projects. For those of you who fall into this "feel right" trap, here is a revolutionary perspective: *You don't have to feel inspired to get things done.* How many of us feel inspired to scrub a dirty floor or face a difficult confrontation? Although some complex challenges may require time to think out and to "work up to" a solution, most activities can either be started or accomplished in the present.

Mental diversions

Procrastinators often play a variety of mental tricks on themselves. One trick is the *mañana ploy*, where you think tomorrow it is going to be easier to do what you feel like putting off today. When tomorrow comes, the project keeps getting put off to a later time until it turns into a crisis. The *contingency mañana ploy* is a bit more sophisticated. Here you make one action depend on the completion of another, then you put off the preliminary activity: e.g., you think you need to do research about losing weight before you start to develop new eating habits.

The *Catch-22 ploy* is even more pernicious. Here you quit before you begin because you have created an impossible condition for yourself. You declare that you need an M.B.A. degree to have the career you secretly desire, then you declare yourself to be not intelligent enough to obtain this degree. Result: you don't take the steps to improve and feel frustrated with what you do. Finally the *backward ploy* is one where you dwell on real or perceived mistakes from the past. This is a variation on the Catch-22 ploy: you believe you can't go forward unless you can change what has already happened. Since you can't change the past, no amount of mental rehashing will help.

Although recognizing how these diversions work won't automatically reverse your procrastination, a rational awareness of what is going on is a start in the right direction. The chief value in recognizing diversionary actions is that once you are aware of how and why you procrastinate, you can start to change your thinking, emotions, and actions by following some of the basic strategies listed below.

HOW TO STOP PROCRASTINATING

To varying degrees, most of us can learn to replace many of the unpleasant consequences of procrastination with the results of accomplishment. Although this takes effort and persistence, our self-improvement actions can lead to what Stanford University professor Albert Bandura calls *self-efficacy*. This is a fact-based belief that you can exercise control over events that affect your life. This constructive belief motivates and regulates the actions that you take. To change from a pattern of procrastination to a process of self-efficacy may involve many false starts, advances, relapses, and backsliding. Change rarely follows an uninterrupted course!

Developing procrastination problem awareness and problem-solving actions are important steps on this path of change. Here are some rational *action*, *emotional*, and *mental* steps to overcoming procrastination.

Action change steps

¹ Start with clear, measurable, achievable goals. It is better to say you are going to work on your income taxes two hours each Saturday morning for the month of February, than to say you are going to stop procrastinating on your taxes.

¹ Take a "bits and pieces" approach. Even the most complex of tasks have simple beginnings. Break the activity down into "chewable bits" where you can tackle each phase