

PROCRASTINATION

Why we procrastinate and how to overcome it

By Elizabeth Trew

DO YOU USUALLY DO THINGS AT THE last minute? Do you wait until you feel like doing projects before you tackle them? Do you spend more time *thinking* about doing tasks than actually *doing* them? Then you could be a procrastinator! Procrastinators avoid or put off tasks. They fully intend to do them but do not motivate themselves within the expected time frame. Discomfort, stress, and guilt are associated with procrastination, further adding to one's malaise.¹ Procrastinators need to find out why they procrastinate and develop constructive solutions before their problem gets out of hand.

Why do people procrastinate?

Some people rationalize that they work better under pressure. Often tasks are put off because one doesn't feel like it

¹ Ackerman, D.S., & Gross, B.L. (2007). I can start that JME manuscript next week, can't I?: The task characteristics behind why faculty procrastinate. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29, 97-110.

today and maybe one will feel more like it tomorrow. Others like the rush and excitement of doing things at the last minute. Sometimes we procrastinate simply because we don't know how to do the job. We procrastinate because we feel like a failure and don't want to risk rejection. Or we are perfectionists and fear criticism from others. Then, once we get feedback on our work, we rationalize that we couldn't have done a good job because we didn't have the time to do the work properly. What self-defeating prophecies!

Dr. Timothy Pychyl, associate professor of psychology and director of the *Procrastination Research Group* at Carleton University, learned about procrastination the hard way, as he once was a procrastinator. Instead, he now helps others with procrastination through his work. He explores the factors that lead to procrastination and provides self-help techniques, practical advice, and tools for change, challenging procrastinators to explore the choices they make to act or to

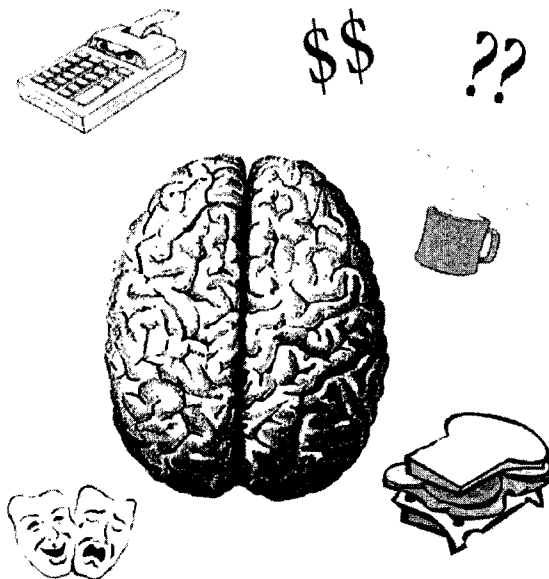


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postpone acting on their intentions. Dr. Pychyl's Procrastination Research Group Web site (<http://server.carleton.ca/~tpychyl/>) includes research, self-help, and intervention techniques, links to resources and a series of podcasts. Pychyl says procrastinators are masters of self-deception. They spend more time thinking about a task than doing it. He says we lie to ourselves to excuse ourselves from the lack of action. Chronic procrastinators use procrastination to define their well-being. "That's just the way I am", they say. Procrastination is often used as a futile attempt to escape responsibility and to avoid getting on with life itself. He notes that procrastinators, just like gamblers and substance abusers, do not self-regulate their behavior. It's as if they feel they do not have a choice over their behaviour.

In *The Problem of Procrastination* at www.webhome.idirect.com/~readon/, Toronto-based therapist Dr. Timothy Quek indicates that certain behavioural characteristics are common to procrastinators. Firstly, procrastinators have four main areas of disorganization. They have a poor distinction between urgent and priority tasks as they tend to focus on tasks which are convenient, interesting or close by. Other tasks pile up and then they become urgent and the procrastinator must give these tasks priority. It becomes

increasingly difficult for the procrastinator to distinguish between tasks that are priority/urgent, priority/non-urgent and non-priority/urgent, while the comfort level of the non-priority/non-urgent tasks lurks close by. Procrastinators are also easily distracted and leave tasks unattended to because "something



else came up". Procrastinators are often forgetful. They try to overcome this forgetfulness with either more than one appointment book or scheduling device or none at all. The last part of procrastination-oriented disorganization is in the form of "lumping" tasks or believing that tasks come as a whole and cannot be subdivided and dealt with systematically. An office worker with a messy desk and filing system may not think of breaking the task into parts and tackle one drawer at a time; and so, she would procrastinate over starting to clean her desk as she feels she has to do it all at once.

Procrastinators are often motivated by fear, notes Quek, and delay doing tasks or wait until after they are due, so they no longer need to be dealt with. Procrastinators have internal struggles. "I know that I should, why can't I just do it?" or "I *planned* to do it, but when the time came, I *just didn't feel like it*" plays over and over again in their heads. Attempts to resolve this conflict means confronting these fears. Quek says many procrastinators are perfectionists, but they don't usually think of themselves as such. This type of perfectionism is marked by three major characteristics: the desire to do things yourself because others just can't do it right; the attitude that one cannot start to do something if one can't do it well; and the need for closure, indicated by discomfort over an uncompleted task.

How does one overcome procrastination?

Just being honest with yourself and realize that you procrastinate is the first step in overcoming procrastination. Recognizing the fear and what accompanies that fear is necessary in taking charge of procrastination. Here are ten tips from a variety of experts you can use to overcome procrastination:

1. Identify clues that you are putting off doing something. Listen to your "self-talk." If you feel you are avoiding the task, don't give in to your self-doubt and remove yourself from the situation. Realize that you are having an emotional reaction and deal with the task at hand.
2. Jump into your work by promising to work for 15 minutes. Don't delay doing tasks until you are in the mood. Once you get started, your mood brightens, your self-esteem increases, and the momentum to finish the task takes over.
3. Do unpleasant tasks first thing in the morning. Then reward yourself by doing more pleasant tasks.
4. Minimize disruptions like e-mail and the telephone by turning them off for a specific time.
5. If you don't know how to do something, ask for help instead of stewing over it.
6. Tell someone about your deadlines. Once you are accountable to someone,

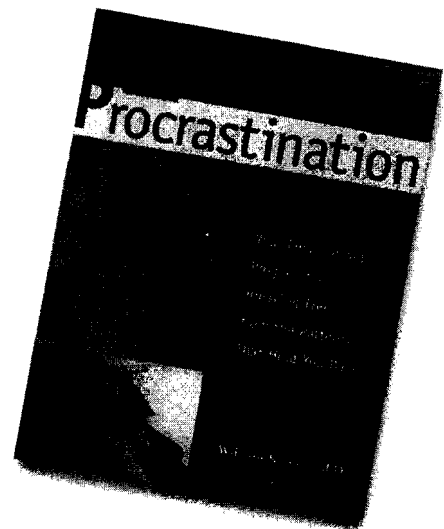
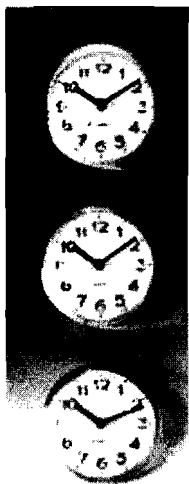


you will find it easier to meet your deadlines.

7. Make mundane tasks more challenging, rather than using the fact that time is running out, to increase your motivation to do them.
8. Engage in mindfulness meditation. Proponents of meditation believe that willpower is like a muscle that needs exercise to develop.
9. Use one daily appointment book to write down things you are going to do or have already done. Use your book to break tasks down into tangible goals with reasonable deadlines and write these in your appointment book. Write your daily "to do" lists in your book and check off the tasks completed as you do them.
10. Break tasks with distant deadlines into manageable "chunks" and set sub-deadlines for these small tasks. Start by

breaking down tasks into 15 minute chunks to begin with and then increase the time. Use your appointment book to plan this "dechunking."

Procrastination has a way of ruling our lives, sabotaging our careers, and hindering our relationships. If you need help with procrastination, there are



many resources available to you, such as Pynchyl's *Procrastination Research Group* Web site, which can direct you to many sources of information on this subject. Pynchyl also highly recommends William Knaus's workbook, *The Procrastination Workbook: Your Personalized Program for Breaking Free from the Patterns that Hold You Back*, by New Harbinger Publications. This workbook includes a self-assessment, an individualized plan and tips and techniques to keep procrastinators motivated to get to the root of the problem and overcome it.

Overcoming procrastination is about tackling lifelong fears and habits and making choices to engage in a full and productive life. So, why not start now?! ■■■

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