

Source: Yamauchi KT 1987, '*Procrastination: ten ways to "do it now"*'. In P.A.Keller and S.R. Heyman (Eds), *Innovations in clinical practice: a source book*, Vol. 6. Professional Resource Exchange, Sarasota.

We've all been plagued by procrastination at one time or another. For some, it's a chronic problem. Others find it hits only some areas of their lives. The net results, though, are usually the same - wasted time, missed opportunities, poor performance, self depreciation or increased stress.

Procrastination is letting the low priority tasks get in the way of high priority ones. It's socialising with your colleagues when you know that a certain work project is due soon, watching TV instead of doing the things that need to be done, or talking about superficial things with your partner rather than discussing your relationship concerns.

We all seem to do fine with things we want to do or enjoy doing for fun. But, when we perceive tasks as difficult, inconvenient or scary we may shift into our procrastination mode. We have very clever ways of fooling ourselves. How many of the following excuses hit home for you ...

- I'll wait until I'm in the mood.
- It's OK to do ??????? now, I'll do my work later.
- There's plenty of time to get it done.
- I don't know where to begin?
- I work better under pressure so I don't need to do it immediately.
- I've got too many things to do first.
- It will get done I can relax now.
- I'll do it when I get "around to it".

Once exposed, these self-defeating statements don't sound so convincing. But, when we privately tell ourselves these excuses, they seem quite believable. Don't be fooled by how innocent they sound. They get us to postpone important tasks and duties.

Causes

Procrastination is a bad habit. Like other habits, there are two general causes. The first is the 'crooked thinking' we employ to justify our behaviour. The second source is our behaviour patterns.

A closer look at our critical thinking ('crooked thinking') reveals three major issues in delaying tactics - perfectionism, inadequacy and discomfort. Those who believe they must turn in the most exemplary work may wait until all available resources have been reviewed or endlessly rewrite draft after draft. Worrying over producing the perfect project prevents them from finishing on time. Feelings of inadequacy can also cause delays. Those that 'know for a fact' that they are incompetent often believe they will fail and will avoid the unpleasantness of having their skills put to the test. Fear of discomfort is another way of putting a stop to what needs to be done. Yet the more we delay, the worse the discomforting problem becomes.

Our behavioural patterns are the second cause. Getting started on an unpleasant or difficult task may seem impossible. Procrastination is likened to the physics concept of inertia - a mass at rest tends to stay at rest. Greater forces are required to start change than to sustain change. Another way of viewing it is that avoiding tasks reinforces procrastination which makes it harder to get things going. A person may be stuck too, not by lack of desire, but by not knowing what to do. It is important to use strategies which have been shown to defeat procrastination.

Remedies

<p>1. Rational self talk</p>	<p>Those old excuses really don't hold up to rational inspection. The 'two column' technique will help. Write down all of the excuses on one side of the paper. Then start to challenge the rationale behind each of the excuses. Write down your realistic thoughts on the other side of the paper. Here are some examples:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="552 788 1369 1120"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="552 788 906 824">Excuse</th> <th data-bbox="906 788 1369 824">Realistic Thought</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="552 824 906 936"><i>I'm not in the mood right now</i></td> <td data-bbox="906 824 1369 936">Mood doesn't do my work, actions do. If I wait for the right mood I may never get it done.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="552 936 906 1120"><i>I'm just lazy</i></td> <td data-bbox="906 936 1369 1120">Labelling myself as lazy only brings me down. My work is really separate from who I am as a person. Getting started is the key to finishing.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Excuse	Realistic Thought	<i>I'm not in the mood right now</i>	Mood doesn't do my work, actions do. If I wait for the right mood I may never get it done.	<i>I'm just lazy</i>	Labelling myself as lazy only brings me down. My work is really separate from who I am as a person. Getting started is the key to finishing.
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<p>2. Positive self statements</p>	<p>Incorporate a list of self-motivating statements into your repertoire of thought. Consider ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>There's no time like the present</i> • <i>The sooner I get it done the sooner I can do what I like</i> • <i>There is no such thing as perfectionism. It's an illusion that keeps me from doing what I have to do right now</i> • <i>It's cheaper and less painful to do it right now rather than wait until it gets worse</i> 						
<p>3. Design clear goals</p>	<p>Think about what you want and what needs to be done. Be specific. If it's getting that assignment completed by the deadline, figure out a timetable with realistic goals at each step. Keep your sights within reason. Having goals too big can scare you away from starting.</p>						
<p>4. Don't catastrophise</p>	<p>Jumping to the conclusion that you will fail or that you are no good at something will only create a wall of fear that will stop you cold. Recognise that your negative predictions are not fact. Focus on the present and what positive steps you can take toward reaching your goals.</p>						
<p>5. Set priorities</p>	<p>Write down all of the things that need to be done in order of importance. The greater the importance or urgency, the higher the priority. Put "messing around" distractions in its proper place - last. Start at the top of the list and work your way down.</p>						

6. Partialise the tasks	Big projects feel overwhelming. Break them down into the smallest and most manageable sub-parts. You'll get more done if you do it piece by piece. For example, make an outline of a written report before you start composing. Partialising works particularly well with unpleasant jobs. Most of us can handle unpleasant duties as long as they are for a short time and in small increments. This is sometimes called the salami technique.
7. Worst first	Linked to the previous remedy, once you have divided the task into small pieces, look at what has to be done and do the worst parts first. In that way you only have more pleasant parts to do.
8. Get organised	Have all the materials ready before you begin the task. Use a daily schedule and use it all the time. List the tasks of the day or week realistically. Check off the tasks as you have completed them.
9. Take a stand	Commit yourself to doing the task. Write yourself a contract and sign it. Better still, tell a friend, partner or supervisor about your plans.
10. Use prompts	Write reminders to yourself and put them in conspicuous places like the TV, fridge, bathroom mirror or car dashboard. The more we remember our plans the more likely we are to follow them through.
11. Round Tuit	This involves cutting out a round piece of paper and writing on it all the tasks you need to complete today and this week. It is good to use in conjunction with remedy six.
12. Five minute plan	This involves setting a goal for the next five minutes to work. Often you end up doing more than five minutes work because you get into the task and lose track of time. A great way to start something unpleasant.
13. Switching	When faced with several tasks that are boring to perform, particularly for long periods of time, switch between tasks on a regular basis and maintain a good work ethic. This way you don't get bored with any one task. Remember it is essential to go back to the tasks until they are finished. If this is not done this technique becomes a very effective procrastination technique. Not what we want!
14. Reward yourself	Self reinforcement has a powerful effect on developing a "do it now" attitude. Celebrate, pat yourself on the back, smile and let yourself enjoy the completion of even the smallest of tasks. Don't minimise your accomplishments. Remember you are already that much closer to finishing things that need to be done. Go ahead, get started. Now!