

Procrastination

Dimensions, Motives, and Impact

Fathi El-Nadi, Ph.D



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Procrastination: Dimensions, Motives, and Impact

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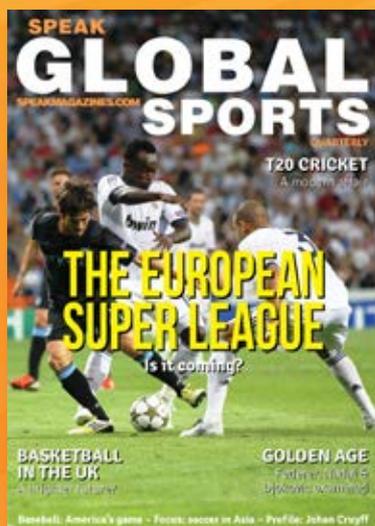
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Introduction

Reminiscing some events of my early childhood, I now believe that I was a shrewd procrastinator with a creative brain, inventing odd reasons to avoid two things: taking medicine, and going to school on cold winter days – without doing my homework. Later, as I finished my formal education and consequently took my first step on my career path, I realized that procrastination does not always have to be negative. It can also be used as a negotiating tool, a relaxing technique, or a problem solver. I was lucky that my life went in two parallel lines: Academic, teaching post graduate students management and human resources, and working for a number of leading multinational and international organizations in the US, SA, The Gulf States, and Egypt such as SOM, GM, Bristol-Myers, Squibb, Johnson Wax, which gave me a very unique opportunity to integrate theory with practice.

When I decided to quit my last job and start my own consulting business, I was further rewarded with a broader perspective of procrastination observing and analyzing my clients' leadership styles as well as their managers' and employees' on-the-job behavior. That's when I realized that there is a new dimension of procrastination that is closely tied up to how people manage their time while working under pressure to meet time schedules. It also had to do with setting priorities where personal preferences interfere – even unconsciously – to push up tasks that we love to do, and push down tough or complicated ones on our “To Do” lists.

This book is meant to take the reader on a journey to explore this aspect of management to understand the nature of procrastination, its motives and causes, its impact, and how to avoid the trap of being addicted to procrastination. The book approach will be an applicable, practical, hands-on throughout, mixing the theory with reality and providing both personal and business examples to illustrate the messages I am trying to relay. Each chapter will also have a conclusion at the end of the chapter to highlight the discussed issues and main points.

About the Author

Fathi A. El-Nadi is currently a Management and OD consultant and professor of management and human resources at The Arab Academy for Science & Technology in Egypt. In addition to his being a public speaker and coach on strategic management and human resource development, he is a visiting professor to a number of Western and European universities, worked for prominent MNCs in the US, The Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. He is the Managing Consultant of Vision Consulting, a consulting firm that he founded in 1990 in Egypt. He believes that investing in people yields the highest ROI, and that no organizational change can happen without the stakeholders buying-in, supporting and adopting it.

1 The What, How, and Why?

1.1 Defining Procrastination

Most dictionaries define procrastination as “the act of putting off or delaying or deferring an action to a later time”. This suggests needless postponement or delaying something that needs to be done. In that sense we are all guilty of committing procrastination. In other words, it is a universal human behavior. In fact, everyone procrastinates on occasions. Whether procrastination becomes a problem or not depends on how much negative impact procrastination has on each person’s life. Some people put off doing tasks, but finally complete them; yet others cannot ever seem to get assignments finished.

1.1.1 What does it look like?

We all put off working on unpleasant or tedious tasks from time to time. Washing the car, taking out garbage, cleaning windows, or making stressful phone calls are no one’s idea of a fun way to spend time. But where most of us do this only occasionally, procrastinators do it most of the time, and that’s where the problems start.

1.1.2 Procrastination is a stress factor

Procrastination is a behavior that leads to stress, because it makes plans and wishes fail at what should be the point of fulfillment: theater tickets and vacation packages sell out before procrastinators get around to calling. Planes take off, deadlines pass; jobs go to other applicants, the ones who got their resumes in on time.

1.1.3 Procrastination has negative effects

The Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Canada did an online survey. They received 2,700 responses to the question, “To what extent is procrastination having a negative impact on your happiness?” Almost one person in two (46%) said “quite a bit” or “very much,” and around one person in five (18%) reported an “extreme negative effect.”

1.1.4 Procrastination threatens happiness

Though procrastination is often trivialized, procrastinators suffer when their careers crash or when they otherwise fail to reach their potential. Long term and wide scale, “the big P” can become more than just a threat to personal health, happiness, and productivity of individuals: it can carry that threat into our companies and communities.

1.1.5 Traits of the procrastinators

How can you spot a chronic procrastinator? Procrastinators avoid revealing information about their abilities, they make poor time estimates, they tend to focus on the past and do not act on their intentions, and they may also prefer service jobs. These characteristics are linked to low self-esteem, perfectionism, non-competitiveness, self-deception, self-control, self-confidence, depression and anxiety.

1.3 The Many Forms of Procrastination

Once you have surmounted the emotional block by acknowledging your procrastination (guilt, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy), and after you have analyzed the underlying causes, you need to clearly specify how you procrastinate. Consider the following examples.

1. Do you act as though if you ignore a task, it will go away? The mid-term exam in your chemistry class is not likely to vaporize, no matter how much you ignore it.
2. Do you underestimate the work involved in the task, or overestimate your abilities and resources in relationship to the task? Do you tell yourself that you grasp concepts so easily that you need only spend one hour on the physics problems which would normally take you six?
3. Do you deceive yourself into believing that a mediocre performance or lesser standards are acceptable? For example, if you deceive yourself that a 2.3 GPA will still get you into the medical school of your choice, you may be avoiding the decision to work harder to improve your grade point average and thus may have to alter your career plans. This form of avoidance can prevent you from consciously making choices about important goals in your life.
4. Do you deceive yourself by substituting one worthy activity for another? Suppose you clean the apartment instead of writing your term paper. Valuing a clean apartment is fine but if that value only becomes important when there is a paper due, you are procrastinating.
5. Do you believe that repeated & quotminor delays are harmless? An example is putting off writing your paper so you can watch five minutes of your favorite television program. If you don't return to writing the paper after five minutes have elapsed, you may stay tuned to the television for the entire evening, with no work being done on the paper.
6. Do you dramatize a commitment to a task rather than actually doing it? An example is taking your books on vacation but never opening them, or perhaps even declining invitations for pleasurable events, but still not pursuing the work at hand nor getting needed relaxation. This way you stay in a constant state of unproductive readiness to work – without ever working.
7. Do you persevere on only one portion of the task? An example is writing and rewriting the introductory paragraph of the paper but not dealing with the body and the conclusion. The introductory paragraph is important, but not at the expense of the entire project.

8. Do you become paralyzed in deciding between alternative choices? An example involves spending so much time deciding between two term paper topics that you don't have sufficient time to write the paper.

1.4 No Easy Answers

There are no easy “buck up” answers, though. As Joseph Ferrari, professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago says: “It's not about time management. To tell a chronic procrastinator to 'Just Do It' is like telling a clinically depressed person to cheer up.” We need to look at the kind of procrastination people practice to understand the reason they do it and find the appropriate cure.

1.4.1 Why do people procrastinate?

Take your pick! Ferrari found that some procrastinators had particularly authoritarian fathers. He sees the p-habit as a continuing rebellion against those demands. Others lay the blame on strong parents who don't leave their children room to develop initiative. Clary Lay of York University, Toronto, creator of the General Procrastination Scale, takes a different tack and believes that procrastinators think and act in terms of “wishes and dreams” while people who do not procrastinate get on with “oughts and obligations.” He says, “Procrastinators are also neurotically disorganized in their thinking, making them forgetful and less likely to plan well.”

1.5 How do people procrastinate?

Procrastination research is a new field, but researchers are starting to describe different types of procrastination. Two types that are particularly common are behavioral- and decisional procrastination.

1.5.1 Behavioral procrastination

Behavioral procrastination is a self-sabotage strategy that allows people to shift blame and avoid action, for example: a student may do poorly in an exam and use procrastination as an excuse. “They'd rather create the impression that they lacked effort than ability,” says Ferrari. “They can blame their failure on the lack of time.”

Ferrari also thinks that procrastinators suffer from low esteem and self-doubt and worry about how other people judge their abilities. “Procrastinators view their self-worth as based on ability,” he says. So according to their logic, “If I never finish the task, you can never judge my ability.”

Prolonged procrastination and failure to perform adequately creates a cycle of self-defeating behavior, which results in a downward spiral of self-esteem. Self-inflicted degradation and shame of this kind often translates into stress and (mental) health problems at some point.

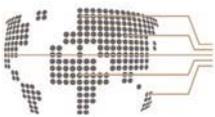
1.5.2 Decisional procrastination

The decisional procrastination strategy is to put off making a decision when dealing with conflicts or choices. People who practice high level decisional procrastination tend to be afraid of errors and are likely to be perfectionists. These procrastinators seek out more and more information about alternatives before attempting to make a decision, if they make one at all.

Over-informed decisional procrastinators run the danger of falling prey to a further self-sabotage strategy, called optional paralysis: they create so many choices for themselves that they feel unable to choose, for fear of choosing an option that is less than perfect.

The most impressive people I know are all terrible procrastinators. So could it be that procrastination isn't always bad?

Most people who write about procrastination write about how to cure it. But this is, strictly speaking, impossible. There are an infinite number of things you could be doing. No matter what you work on, you're not working on everything else. So the question is not how to avoid procrastination, but how to procrastinate well.



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There are three variants of procrastination, depending on what you do instead of working on something: you could work on (a) nothing, (b) something less important, or (c) something more important. That last type, I'd argue, is good procrastination.

That's the "absent-minded professor," who forgets to shave, or eat, or even perhaps look where he's going while he's thinking about some interesting question. His mind is absent from the everyday world because it's hard at work in another.

That's the sense in which the most impressive people I know are all procrastinators. They're type-C procrastinators: they put off working on small stuff to work on big stuff.

What's "small stuff?" Roughly, work that has zero chance of being mentioned in your obituary. It's hard to say at the time what will turn out to be your best work (will it be your magnum opus on Sumerian temple architecture, or the detective thriller you wrote under a pseudonym?), but there's a whole class of tasks you can safely rule out: shaving, doing your laundry, cleaning the house, writing thank-you notes – anything that might be called an errand.

Good procrastination is avoiding errands to do real work.

Good in a sense, at least. The people who want you to do the errands won't think it's good. But you probably have to annoy them if you want to get anything done. The mildest seeming people, if they want to do real work, all have a certain degree of ruthlessness when it comes to avoiding errands.

Some errands, like replying to letters, go away if you ignore them (perhaps taking friends with them). Others, like mowing the lawn, or filing tax returns, only get worse if you put them off. In principle it shouldn't work to put off the second kind of errand. You're going to have to do whatever it is eventually. Why not (as past-due notices are always saying) do it now?

The reason it pays to put off even those errands is that real work needs two things errands don't: big chunks of time, and the right mood. If you get inspired by some project, it can be a net win to blow off everything you were supposed to do for the next few days to work on it. Yes, those errands may cost you more time when you finally get around to them. But if you get a lot done during those few days, you will be net more productive.

In fact, it may not be a difference in degree, but a difference in kind. There may be types of work that can only be done in long, uninterrupted stretches, when inspiration hits, rather than dutifully in scheduled little slices. Empirically it seems to be so. When I think of the people I know who've done great things, I don't imagine them dutifully crossing items off to-do lists. I imagine them sneaking off to work on some new idea.

Conversely, forcing someone to perform errands synchronously is bound to limit their productivity. The cost of an interruption is not just the time it takes, but that it breaks the time on either side in half. You probably only have to interrupt someone a couple times a day before they're unable to work on hard problems at all.

Errands are so effective at killing great projects that a lot of people use them for that purpose. Someone who has decided to write a novel, for example, will suddenly find that the house needs cleaning. People who fail to write novels don't do it by sitting in front of a blank page for days without writing anything. They do it by feeding the cat, going out to buy something they need for their apartment, meeting a friend for coffee, checking email. "I don't have time to work," they say. And they don't; they've made sure of that.

(There's also a variant where one has no place to work. The cure is to visit the places where famous people worked, and see how unsuitable they were.)

I've used both these excuses at one time and another. I've learned a lot of tricks for making myself work over the last 20 years, but even now I don't win consistently. Some days I get real work done. Other days are eaten up by errands. And I know it's usually my fault: I *let* errands eat up the day, to avoid facing some hard problem.

The most dangerous form of procrastination is unacknowledged type-B procrastination, because it doesn't feel like procrastination. You're "getting things done." Just the wrong things.

Any advice about procrastination that concentrates on crossing things off your to-do list is not only incomplete, but positively misleading, if it doesn't consider the possibility that the to-do list is itself a form of type-B procrastination. In fact, possibility is too weak a word. Nearly everyone's is. Unless you're working on the biggest things you could be working on, you're type-B procrastinating, no matter how much you're getting done.

Richard Hamming suggests that we ask ourselves three questions:

1. What are the most important problems in your field?
2. Are you working on one of them?
3. Why not?

The trouble is, you may end up hooking a very big fish with this bait. To do good work, you need to do more than find good projects. Once you've found them, you have to get yourself to work on them, and that can be hard. The bigger the problem, the harder it is to get yourself to work on it.

Of course, the main reason people find it difficult to work on a particular problem is that they do not enjoy it. When you're young, especially, you often find yourself working on stuff you don't really like – because it seems impressive, for example, or because you've been assigned to work on it. Most grad students are stuck working on big problems they don't really like, and grad school is thus synonymous with procrastination.

But even when you like what you're working on, it's easier to get yourself to work on small problems than big ones. Why? Why is it so hard to work on big problems? One reason is that you may not get any reward in the foreseeable future. If you work on something you can finish in a day or two, you can expect to have a nice feeling of accomplishment fairly soon. If the reward is indefinitely far in the future, it seems less real.

Another reason people don't work on big projects is, ironically, fear of wasting time. What if they fail? Then all the time they spent on it will be wasted. (In fact it probably won't be, because work on hard projects almost always leads somewhere.)

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But the trouble with big problems can't be just that they promise no immediate reward and might cause you to waste a lot of time. If that were all, they'd be no worse than going to visit your in-laws. There's more to it than that. Big problems are *terrifying*. There's an almost physical pain in facing them. It's like having a vacuum cleaner hooked up to your imagination. All your initial ideas get sucked out immediately, and you don't have any more, and yet the vacuum cleaner is still sucking.

You can't look a big problem too directly in the eye. You have to approach it somewhat obliquely. But you have to adjust the angle just right: you have to be facing the big problem directly enough that you catch some of the excitement radiating from it, but not so much that it paralyzes you. You can tighten the angle once you get going, just as a sailboat can sail closer to the wind once it gets underway.

If you want to work on big things, you seem to have to trick yourself into doing it. You have to work on small things that could grow into big things, or work on successively larger things, or split the moral load with collaborators. It's not a sign of weakness to depend on such tricks. The very best work has been done this way.

I think the way to "solve" the problem of procrastination is to let delight pull you instead of making a to-do list push you. Work on an ambitious project you really enjoy, and sail as close to the wind as you can, and you'll leave the right things undone.

1.5.3 Is it a common disease?

Some of the common statements that may "pop-up" in a procrastinator's mind and provide attractive excuses shaping her/his style of doing things are:

I am simply lazy.

I don't like my supervisor, so why should I do it.

It is exciting to 'pull off' the task at the last minute.

I want my work to be perfect.

Many people believe these statements and tend to live their lives accordingly. Often the result of this thinking is procrastination, a universal human behavior. In fact, everyone procrastinates on occasion. Whether procrastination becomes a problem or not depends on how much negative impact procrastination has on each person's life. Some people put off doing tasks, but finally complete them; yet others cannot ever seem to get assignments finished.

2 Root Causes of Procrastination

In order to understand and solve your procrastination problems, you must carefully analyze those situations where your work is not being completed. First, determine whether the cause is poor time management; if so, you will need to learn and develop time management skills. If, however, you know how to manage your time but don't make use of those skills, you may have a more serious problem. Many individuals cite the following reasons for avoiding work:

- **Lack of Relevance** – If something is neither relevant nor meaningful to you personally, it may be difficult to get motivated even to begin.
- **Acceptance of Another's Goals** – If a project has been imposed or assigned to you and it is not consistent with your own interests, you may be reluctant to spend the necessary time to see it to conclusion.
- **Perfectionism** – Having unreachable standards will discourage you from pursuing a task. Remember, perfection is unattainable.
- **Evaluation Anxiety** – Since others' responses to your work are not under your direct control, overvaluing these responses can create the kind of anxiety that will interfere with work getting accomplished.
- **Ambiguity** – If you are uncertain of what is expected of you, it may be difficult to get started.
- **Fear of the Unknown** – If you are venturing into a new realm or field, you don't have any way of knowing how well you'll do. Such an uncertain outcome may inhibit your desire to begin.
- **Inability to Handle the Task** – If through lack of training, skill, or ability you feel that you lack the personal resources to do the job, you may avoid it completely.

2.1 Personal Motives of Procrastination

Now let's look at some reasons why you may be procrastinating. All people procrastinate at some time or another, and most are aware of how procrastination works against them. Yet, for most people, procrastination can also work for them. For instance, you can delay making decisions or doing work in order to give yourself time to get your thoughts in order. You can also choose to put off a task because it has a low priority. But procrastination can also serve as a way to avoid something. That something may seem to you to be even worse than the consequences of the procrastinating behavior.

The following are six basic reasons why you may procrastinate. As you read this section, check those reasons that seem to apply most to you. These categories are not mutually exclusive. You may see some of yourself in more than one section.

2.1.1 But, I Don't Know How

A skill deficit is one of the most basic reasons for procrastination. If you lack the skills to complete certain tasks, it is only natural to avoid doing them. For example, you may be a slow reader. If you have several lengthy articles to read before you can write a paper, you may postpone the reading because it is difficult. You may even have trouble admitting to your poor reading skills because you do not want to seem dumb. Procrastinating may seem better than facing your need to improve your reading skills.

The key to solving skill problems is to identify what the problems are. Often a counselor, an instructor, or another professional can help you to make this determination. When you know the problem, then you can take action to correct it. There are many resources at Kansas State University that can help you solve skill problems (see the resource section of this brochure).

2.1.2 This Stuff Is Just Plain Boring

Lack of interest seems to play a role in procrastination. All students from time to time lack interest in a course. However, not all of these students delay in studying or completing assignments.

If your natural interests are not stimulated by the course content, one solution to procrastinating may be to just do it (i.e., simply continue to attend class and do the assigned work on time). This will give you more guilt-free time to do those things that are more interesting to you. Of course, it won't necessarily make the class or assignment interesting, but at least you will not cloud the good times with worry. Consider that the problem is actually the unrealistic standards that have been set, not your failure to meet them. The problem, and thus the failure, may be that you begin to believe that you are not a worthy human being. You may procrastinate to such an extent from fear of failure that you are actually paralyzed. Thus, you do not complete the task and achieve a more realistic level of success.

2.1.3 I Don't Feel Like Doing It

Lack of motivation for a task is a commonly given reason for not attending to an unpleasant task. Most procrastinators believe that something is wrong with them if they do not feel motivated to begin a task. This simply is not true. How many folks do you imagine feel motivated and energized by the prospect of raking leaves, or changing the oil in the car, or doing taxes? These tasks are often seen as unpleasant and less than exciting.

To believe that you must feel motivated in order to begin has the order of events in reverse. In *The Feeling Good Handbook*, Burns (1989) writes that the doing comes first, and the motivation comes after. Starting a task is the real motivator, rather than motivation needing to be present prior to beginning. Often just taking the first step, regardless of how small, can serve as an inducement for further action.

Another strategy involves taking an attitude check. Ask yourself: Does my attitude prevent me from being motivated? If your answer is yes, then it is time to figure a way to make an attitude adjustment. This may mean giving up on the idea that everything in life must be interesting or that I have to like all my classes for them to be worthwhile. It may also mean re-evaluating your goals and determining the steps that do or do not fit into the larger picture. If succeeding in the boring class seems to be a necessary step to achieving your larger goals, that fact alone may motivate you.

2.1.4 But What If I Can't Cut It?

Fear of failure is another reason people procrastinate. It goes something like this: If I really try hard and fail, that is worse than if I don't try and end up failing. In the former case, I gave it my best and failed. In the latter, because I really did not try, I truly did not fail.

For example, you may postpone studying for a major test and then pull an all-nighter. The resulting grade may be poor or mediocre, but you can say, "I could have done better if I had had more time to study". Similarly, you may delay researching and writing papers until the last minute, turning papers in late or incomplete. You then can also say, I know I could have gotten a better grade on that paper if I had had more time.

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The payoff for procrastinating is protecting yourself from the possibility of perceived “real” failure. As long as you do not put 100 percent effort into your work, you will not find out what your true capabilities are. Another variation on this theme is that you may often fill your schedule with busy-work so that you have a legitimate reason for not getting around to more important tasks.

Perfectionism often underlies the fear of failure. Family expectations and standards set by parents may be so high that no one could actually live up to them. Procrastination steps in to derail parental expectations and standards and prevent you from really failing.

2.1.5 How Can I Top This?

Fear of success seems to be another side of fear of failure. Here you procrastinate because you are fearful of the consequences of your achievements. Perhaps you fear that if you do well, then next time even more will be expected. Or succeeding may place you in the spotlight when you prefer the background.

Procrastination of this kind may indicate an internal identity conflict. If your self-worth is tied to your level of achievement, then you may constantly question yourself about how much you must do to be good enough. Each success only sets you up for the next bigger challenge. If your self-worth is tied to family acceptance, then what more does it take for them to be satisfied? Each success only opens the door to greater and greater expectations.

Often this leads to a feeling of losing your identity and perhaps no longer being able to claim your successes as your own. Inaction or procrastination may be the outward expression of this feeling of being lost. In other words, procrastination may be how you cope with the pressures you feel to constantly try to be good enough.

2.1.6 You Can't Make Me

Rebellion and resistance constitute the final set of issues that can underlie procrastinating behavior. Delaying tactics can be a form of rebellion against imposed schedules, standards, and expectations. The expectations are often those of parents, teachers, and friends. Procrastination in this instance is the acting out of a power struggle, usually not on a conscious level.

For example, your father has an accounting business and has always planned on having you become his partner after college. You are enrolled in the College of Business Administration and like accounting, but since you started college you have been wanting to explore some other careers unrelated to business. Your father says, No, you'll stick to accounting and like it. As a result, you turn in work late, forget to do assignments, and earn low grades, sometimes flunking a course.

Rebellion against external evaluation is another facet of this sort of procrastination. For example, if a teacher has offended or angered you in some way, you may retaliate by turning something in late or procrastinating indefinitely. You can also use these same tactics on classmates in a cooperative venture or with parents. The thing to remember is that you ultimately lose (i.e., getting the bad grade, loss of self-respect, etc.).

Rebellion and resistance are reactions not actions, thus the control of your behavior rests with whatever or whomever you are rebelling or resisting. If you are rebelling against your parents, then they have a great deal of power in your life probably more than you really want. Decide what you want for your life don't just react to someone else.

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3 Theories and Practices

3.1 Procrastination Theories

Sometimes there seems to be as many theories on a topic as there are people researching it. Fortunately, over the last 30 years, we have been testing these theories, trying to determine which one works best. Here I review four of the most popular theories of procrastination and consider the evidence for and against them. Much of the empirical evidence comes from my recent meta-analysis, *The Nature of Procrastination*, which is a systematic review of all the literature written on the topic. The theory with the most support is *Temporal Motivation Theory*, which is presented last.

1. Anxiety: Fear of Failure, Perfectionism, etc.

There is a host of anxiety-related reasons that have been thought to cause procrastination. Essentially, people are believed to procrastinate on tasks because the task itself is aversive or stressful. Consequently, those who are more susceptible to experiencing stress should procrastinate more. There are a variety of conditions that make people anxious, especially irrational beliefs. Irrational beliefs, cognition, or thought is a broad term that includes several dysfunctional or anxiety-provoking worldviews. Ellis (1973) characterizes them as: (1) almost certainly hindering the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment of desires, and (2) almost completely arbitrary and un-provable. Some examples of irrational beliefs are fear of failure and perfectionism.

Evaluation

This theory is not supported.

- First, it explains why we might avoid tasks entirely, but not why we delay them. In fact, more anxiety is typically experienced closer to the deadline, so procrastination appears to be a way of increasing anxiety, not reducing it.
- Second, empirical evidence indicates a weak or even no relationship between anxiety or irrational beliefs and procrastination. For example, on average, perfectionists actually report slightly less procrastination than other people.

2. Self-Handicapping

There is dispute over whether self-handicapping should be considered a form of procrastination. Self-handicapping is when people place obstacles that hinder their own good performance. The motivation for self-handicapping is often to protect self-esteem by giving people an external reason, an “out,” if they fail to do well. However, self-handicapping isn’t necessarily a form of procrastination, which is: “*To voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay.*”

Self-handicappers appear to be acting in their own self-interest, thinking they are protecting themselves from shame and humiliation. Consequently, Dr. Clarry Lay, one of the first researchers into procrastination and developer of the General Procrastination Scale, concludes “to intend to put off some activity to protect one’s self-esteem in not procrastinatory behavior.”

Evaluation

This theory is not supported.

- Self-handicapping is still an important issue and can share some commonalities with procrastination (i.e., delaying a task can be a way to self-handicap). However, because the motivations for delaying are not the same, the two will differ regarding causes and treatments and so it is best to study them separately.

3. Rebelliousness

According to the clinical literature, rebelliousness, hostility, and disagreeableness are thought to be major motivations for procrastination. For those with these personality traits, externally imposed schedules are more likely to be experienced as aversive, and thus avoided. Also, by delaying work and starting it on one’s own schedule, autonomy is reasserted.

Evaluation

This theory is not supported.

- First, like anxiety, it explains why we might avoid tasks entirely, but not why we delay them. In fact, more autonomy might be expressed by not doing a task at all instead of just delaying it. By doing it at the last minute, procrastination may appear to express capitulation, “caving in,” rather than autonomy.
- Second, empirical evidence indicates an extremely weak relationship, virtually nil, between rebelliousness and procrastination.

4. Temporal Motivation Theory: Core theory of The Procrastination Equation

Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT) represents the most recent developments in motivational research; it is an integrative theory from which most other motivational theories can be derived. It suggests that the reasons why people make any decision can be largely represented by the following equation:

$$\text{Motivation} = \frac{\text{Expectancy} \times \text{Value}}{\text{Impulsiveness} \times \text{Delay}}$$

Motivation indicates the drive or preference for a course of action, what economists call *utility*. Naturally, the higher the utility, the greater the preference. On the top of the equation, the numerator, we have two variables: Expectancy and Value. Expectancy refers to the odds or chance of an outcome occurring while Value refers to how rewarding that outcome is. Naturally, we would like to choose pursuits that give us a good chance of having a pleasing outcome. On the bottom of the equation, the denominator, we also have two variables. Impulsiveness refers to your sensitivity to delay. The more impulsive you are, the less you like to delay gratification. Finally, Delay indicates how long, on average, you must wait to receive the payout, that is the expected reward. Since delay is in the bottom of the equation, the longer the delay, the less motivated we feel about taking action.

How does this theory relate to procrastination? Essentially, we are constantly beset with making decisions among various courses of action. Should we go to the gym or watch TV? Should I make dinner or order-in? TMT suggests, unsurprisingly, that we are more likely to pursue goals or tasks that are pleasurable and that we are likely to attain. Consequently, we are more likely to put off, to procrastinate, difficult tasks with unenjoyable qualities.

Even more important regarding procrastination is the effects of delay. We like our rewards not only to be large but also to be immediate. Consequently, we will most likely procrastinate any tasks that are unpleasant in the present and offer rewards only in the distant future. In other words, we would be more likely to put off higher priority tasks if there are options available that are immediately pleasurable (even if they have sizeable but delayed costs). We tend to call such options temptations.

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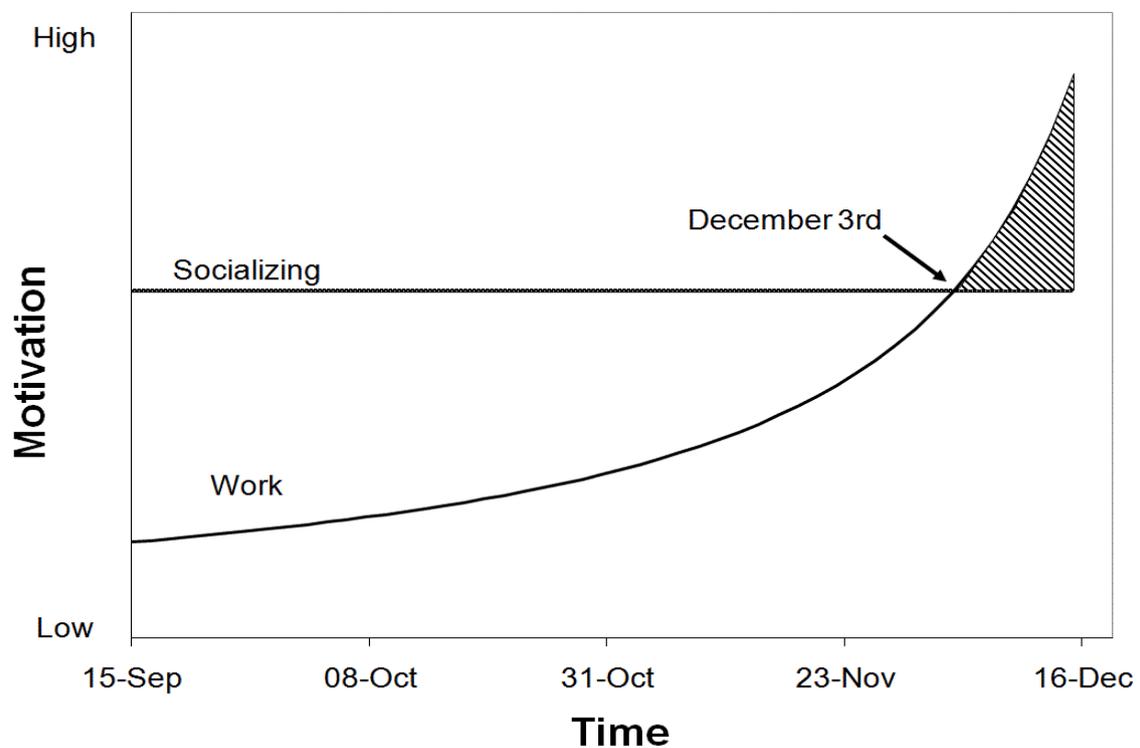
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An Example

To help illustrate these elements of TMT, the following example is put forth: the college student's essay paper. A college student who has been assigned an essay on September 15th, the start of a semester and it is due on December 15th, the course end. This student likes to socialize but he also likes to get good grades. The figure below maps the changes in expected utility for him over the course of the semester regarding his two choices, studying vs. socializing. Since the reward for socializing is always in the present, it maintains a uniformly high utility. For writing, its reward is distant initially, diminishing its utility. Only towards the deadline do the discounting effects of time decrease and writing becomes increasingly likely. In this example, the switch in motivation occurs on December 3rd, leaving just 12 days for concentrated effort. During this final stretch, it is quite likely that earnest but empty promises (i.e., intentions) are made to start working earlier next time.



Evaluation

There is strong evidence that TMT provides a good summary of why we procrastinate.

- First, procrastination is strongly associated with expectancy. Specifically, those people with low self-efficacy, that is feelings of incompetence, are more likely to procrastinate.

- Second, procrastination is strongly associated with the value of the tasks. The more unpleasant people find a task, the more likely they are to put it off. Also, those low in need for achievement, that is how much pleasure they get from achieving, are more likely to procrastinate.
- Third, procrastination is strongly associated with sensitivity to delay. Specifically, people who are more distractible, impulsive, and have less self-control tend to procrastinate more.
- Fourth, procrastination is strongly associated with time delay. The closer we are to realizing a goal, the harder we work at it.
- Fifth, TMT predicts an intention-action gap, where we intend to work but fail to act on these intentions. As expected, procrastinators tend not to act on their intentions.
- Sixth, observed work behavior matches what is predicted by TMT.

See “Integrating Theories of Motivation” published in the *Academy of Management Review*, as it shows that most motivational theories are converging on an integrated model of motivation. TMT concludes that many of the previous theories were right, but only in part. They typically touch on only one piece of the puzzle, such as task evasiveness, and then only certain forms of it. For example, consider rebelliousness. If you are a rebellious individual and feel some work is foisted upon you, then you will likely also find it more aversive. Since anything that makes work more unpleasant increases the likelihood of procrastination, rebelliousness would indeed be one contributor to procrastination, though in general its contribution is extremely small.

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4 Self Inflicted Procrastination

Could procrastination be a self inflicted pain? There are many ways to avoid success in life, but the most sure-fire just might be procrastination. Procrastinators sabotage themselves. They put obstacles in their own path. They actually choose paths that hurt their performance.

Why would people do that? Joseph Ferrari, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at De Paul University in Chicago, and Timothy Pychyl, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. Neither one is a procrastinator, say:

1. Twenty percent of people identify themselves as chronic procrastinators. For them procrastination is a lifestyle, albeit a maladaptive one. And it cuts across all domains of their life. They don't pay bills on time. They miss opportunities for buying tickets to concerts. They don't cash gift certificates or checks. They file income tax returns late. They leave their Christmas shopping until Christmas eve.
2. It's not trivial, although as a culture we don't take it seriously as a problem. It represents a profound problem of **self-regulation**. And there may be more of it in the U.S. than in other countries because we are so nice; we don't call people on their excuses ("my grandmother died last week") even when we don't believe them.
3. Procrastination is not a problem of **time management** or of planning. Procrastinators are not different in their ability to estimate time, although they are more optimistic than others. "Telling someone who procrastinates to buy a weekly planner is like telling someone with chronic depression to just cheer up," insists Dr. Ferrari.
4. Procrastinators are made not born. Procrastination is learned in the family milieu, but not directly. It is one response to an authoritarian parenting style. Having a harsh, controlling father keeps children from developing the ability to regulate themselves, from internalizing their own intentions and then learning to act on them. Procrastination can even be a form of rebellion, one of the few forms available under such circumstances. What's more, under those household conditions, procrastinators turn more to friends than to parents for support, and their friends may reinforce procrastination because they tend to be tolerant of their excuses.
5. Procrastination predicts higher levels of consumption of **alcohol** among those people who drink. Procrastinators drink more than they intend to – a manifestation of generalized problems in self-regulation. That is over and above the effect of avoidant coping styles that underlie procrastination and lead to disengagement via substance abuse.

6. Procrastinators tell lies to themselves. Such as, “I’ll feel more like doing this tomorrow.” Or “I work best under pressure.” But in fact they do not get the urge the next day or work best under pressure. In addition, they protect their sense of self by saying “this isn’t important.” Another big lie procrastinators indulge is that time pressure makes them more creative. Unfortunately they do not turn out to be more creative; they only feel that way. They squander their resources.
7. Procrastinators actively look for distractions, particularly ones that don’t take a lot of commitment on their part. Checking e-mail is almost perfect for this purpose. They distract themselves as a way of regulating their emotions such as fear of failure.
8. There’s more than one flavor of procrastination. People procrastinate for different reasons. Dr. Ferrari identifies three basic types of procrastinators:
 - arousal types, or thrill-seekers, who wait to the last minute for the euphoric rush.
 - avoiders, who may be avoiding fear of failure or even fear of success, but in either case are very concerned with what others think of them; they would rather have others think they lack effort than ability.
 - decisional procrastinators, who cannot make a decision. Not making a decision absolves procrastinators of responsibility for the outcome of events.
9. There are big costs to procrastination. Health is one. Just over the course of a single academic term, procrastinating college students had such evidence of compromised immune systems as more colds and flu, more gastrointestinal problems. And they had **insomnia**. In addition, procrastination has a high cost to others as well as oneself; it shifts the burden of responsibilities onto others, who become resentful. Procrastination destroys **teamwork** in the **workplace** and private relationships.
10. Procrastinators can change their behavior – but doing so consumes a lot of psychic energy. And it doesn’t necessarily mean one feels transformed internally. It can be done with highly structured cognitive behavioral therapy.

The most impressive people I know are all terrible procrastinators. So could it be that procrastination isn’t always bad?

Most people who write about procrastination write about how to cure it. But this is, strictly speaking, impossible. There are an infinite number of things you could be doing. No matter what you work on, you’re not working on everything else. So the question is not how to avoid procrastination, but how to procrastinate well.

There are three variants of procrastination, depending on what you do instead of working on something: you could work on (a) nothing, (b) something less important, or (c) something more important. That last type, I’d argue, is good procrastination.

That's the "absent-minded professor," who forgets to shave, or eat, or even perhaps look where he's going while he's thinking about some interesting question. His mind is absent from the everyday world because it's hard at work in another.

That's the sense in which the most impressive people I know are all procrastinators. They're type-C procrastinators: they put off working on small stuff to work on big stuff.

What's "small stuff?" Roughly, work that has zero chance of being mentioned in your obituary. It's hard to say at the time what will turn out to be your best work (will it be your magnum opus on Sumerian temple architecture, or the detective thriller you wrote under a pseudonym?), but there's a whole class of tasks you can safely rule out: shaving, doing your laundry, cleaning the house, writing thank-you notes – anything that might be called an errand.

Good procrastination is avoiding errands to do real work.

Good in a sense, at least. The people who want you to do the errands won't think it's good. But you probably have to annoy them if you want to get anything done. The mildest seeming people, if they want to do real work, all have a certain degree of ruthlessness when it comes to avoiding errands.

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Some errands, like replying to letters, go away if you ignore them (perhaps taking friends with them). Others, like mowing the lawn, or filing tax returns, only get worse if you put them off. In principle it shouldn't work to put off the second kind of errand. You're going to have to do whatever it is eventually. Why not (as past-due notices are always saying) do it now?

The reason it pays to put off even those errands is that real work needs two things errands don't: big chunks of time, and the right mood. If you get inspired by some project, it can be a net win to blow off everything you were supposed to do for the next few days to work on it. Yes, those errands may cost you more time when you finally get around to them. But if you get a lot done during those few days, you will be net more productive.

In fact, it may not be a difference in degree, but a difference in kind. There may be types of work that can only be done in long, uninterrupted stretches, when inspiration hits, rather than dutifully in scheduled little slices. Empirically it seems to be so. When I think of the people I know who've done great things, I don't imagine them dutifully crossing items off to-do lists. I imagine them sneaking off to work on some new idea.

Conversely, forcing someone to perform errands synchronously is bound to limit their productivity. The cost of an interruption is not just the time it takes, but that it breaks the time on either side in half. You probably only have to interrupt someone a couple times a day before they're unable to work on hard problems at all.

I've wondered a lot about why startups are most productive at the very beginning, when they're just a couple guys in an apartment. The main reason may be that there's no one to interrupt them yet. In theory it's good when the founders finally get enough money to hire people to do some of the work for them. But it may be better to be overworked than interrupted. Once you dilute a startup with ordinary office workers – with type-B procrastinators – the whole company starts to resonate at their frequency. They're interrupt-driven, and soon you are too.

Errands are so effective at killing great projects that a lot of people use them for that purpose. Someone who has decided to write a novel, for example, will suddenly find that the house needs cleaning. People who fail to write novels don't do it by sitting in front of a blank page for days without writing anything. They do it by feeding the cat, going out to buy something they need for their apartment, meeting a friend for coffee, checking email. "I don't have time to work," they say. And they don't; they've made sure of that.

(There's also a variant where one has no place to work. The cure is to visit the places where famous people worked, and see how unsuitable they were.)

I've used both these excuses at one time or another. I've learned a lot of tricks for making myself work over the last 20 years, but even now I don't win consistently. Some days I get real work done. Other days are eaten up by errands. And I know it's usually my fault: I let errands eat up the day, to avoid facing some hard problem.

The most dangerous form of procrastination is unacknowledged type-B procrastination, because it doesn't feel like procrastination. You're "getting things done." Just the wrong things.

Any advice about procrastination that concentrates on crossing things off your to-do list is not only incomplete, but positively misleading, if it doesn't consider the possibility that the to-do list is itself a form of type-B procrastination. In fact, possibility is too weak a word. Nearly everyone's is. Unless you're working on the biggest things you could be working on, you're type-B procrastinating, no matter how much you're getting done.

In his famous essay *You and Your Research* (which I recommend to anyone ambitious, no matter what they're working on) Richard Hamming suggests that you ask yourself three questions:

1. What are the most important problems in your field?
2. Are you working on one of them?
3. Why not?

Hamming was at Bell Labs when he started asking such questions. In principle anyone there ought to have been able to work on the most important problems in their field. Perhaps not everyone can make an equally dramatic mark on the world; I don't know; but whatever your capacities, there are projects that stretch them. So Hamming's exercise can be generalized to:

What's the best thing you could be working on, and why aren't you?

Most people will shy away from this question. I shy away from it myself; I see it there on the page and quickly move on to the next sentence. Hamming used to go around actually asking people this, and it didn't make him popular. But it's a question anyone ambitious should face.

The trouble is, you may end up hooking a very big fish with this bait. To do good work, you need to do more than find good projects. Once you've found them, you have to get yourself to work on them, and that can be hard. The bigger the problem, the harder it is to get yourself to work on it.

Of course, the main reason people find it difficult to work on a particular problem is that they don't enjoy it. When you're young, especially, you often find yourself working on stuff you don't really like – because it seems impressive, for example, or because you've been assigned to work on it. Most grad students are stuck working on big problems they don't really like, and grad school is thus synonymous with procrastination.

But even when you like what you're working on, it's easier to get yourself to work on small problems than big ones. Why? Why is it so hard to work on big problems? One reason is that you may not get any reward in the foreseeable future. If you work on something you can finish in a day or two, you can expect to have a nice feeling of accomplishment fairly soon. If the reward is indefinitely far in the future, it seems less real.

Another reason people don't work on big projects is, ironically, fear of wasting time. What if they fail? Then all the time they spent on it will be wasted. (In fact it probably won't be, because work on hard projects almost always leads somewhere.)

But the trouble with big problems can't be just that they promise no immediate reward and might cause you to waste a lot of time. If that were all, they'd be no worse than going to visit your in-laws. There's more to it than that. Big problems are *terrifying*. There's an almost physical pain in facing them. It's like having a vacuum cleaner hooked up to your imagination. All your initial ideas get sucked out immediately, and you don't have any more, and yet the vacuum cleaner is still sucking.

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You can't look a big problem too directly in the eye. You have to approach it somewhat obliquely. But you have to adjust the angle just right: you have to be facing the big problem directly enough that you catch some of the excitement radiating from it, but not so much that it paralyzes you. You can tighten the angle once you get going, just as a sailboat can sail closer to the wind once it gets underway.

If you want to work on big things, you seem to have to trick yourself into doing it. You have to work on small things that could grow into big things, or work on successively larger things, or split the moral load with collaborators. It's not a sign of weakness to depend on such tricks. The very best work has been done this way.

When I talk to people who've managed to make themselves work on big things, I find that all blow off errands, and all feel guilty about it. I don't think they should feel guilty. There's more to do than anyone could. So someone doing the best work they can is inevitably going to leave a lot of errands undone. It seems a mistake to feel bad about that.

I think the way to "solve" the problem of procrastination is to let delight pull you instead of making a to-do list push you. Work on an ambitious project you really enjoy, and sail as close to the wind as you can, and you'll leave the right things undone.

Some years ago, the economist George Akerlof found himself faced with a simple task: mailing a box of clothes from India, where he was living, to the United States. The clothes belonged to his friend and colleague Joseph Stiglitz, who had left them behind when visiting, so Akerlof was eager to send the box off. But there was a problem. The combination of Indian bureaucracy and what Akerlof called "my own ineptitude in such matters" meant that doing so was going to be a hassle – indeed, he estimated that it would take an entire workday. So he put off dealing with it, week after week. This went on for more than eight months, and it was only shortly before Akerlof himself returned home that he managed to solve his problem: another friend happened to be sending some things back to the U.S., and Akerlof was able to add Stiglitz's clothes to the shipment. Given the vagaries of intercontinental mail, it's possible that Akerlof made it back to the States before Stiglitz's shirts did.

There's something comforting about this story: even Nobel-winning economists procrastinate! Many of us go through life with an array of undone tasks, large and small, nibbling at our conscience. But Akerlof saw the experience, for all its familiarity, as mysterious. He genuinely intended to send the box to his friend, yet, as he wrote, in a paper called "Procrastination and Obedience" (1991), "each morning for over eight months I woke up and decided that the *next* morning would be the day to send the Stiglitz box." He was always *about* to send the box, but the moment to act never arrived. Akerlof, who became one of the central figures in behavioral economics, came to the realization that procrastination might be more than just a bad habit. He argued that it revealed something important about the limits of rational thinking and that it could teach useful lessons about phenomena as diverse as substance abuse and savings habits. Since his essay was published, the study of procrastination has become a significant field in academia, with philosophers, psychologists, and economists all weighing in.

Academics, who work for long periods in a self-directed fashion, may be especially prone to putting things off: surveys suggest that the vast majority of college students procrastinate, and articles in the literature of procrastination often allude to the author's own problems with finishing the piece. (This article will be no exception.) But the academic buzz around the subject isn't just a case of eggheads rationalizing their slothfulness. As various scholars argue in "The Thief of Time," edited by Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D. White (Oxford; \$65) – a collection of essays on procrastination, ranging from the resolutely theoretical to the surprisingly practical – the tendency raises fundamental philosophical and psychological issues. You may have thought, the last time you blew off work on a presentation to watch "How I Met Your Mother," that you were just slacking. But from another angle you were actually engaging in a practice that illuminates the fluidity of human identity and the complicated relationship human beings have to time. Indeed, one essay, by the economist George Ainslie, a central figure in the study of procrastination, argues that dragging our heels is "as fundamental as the shape of time and could well be called the basic impulse."

Ainslie is probably right that procrastination is a basic human impulse, but anxiety about it as a serious problem seems to have emerged in the early modern era. The term itself (derived from a Latin word meaning "to put off for tomorrow") entered the English language in the sixteenth century, and, by the eighteenth, Samuel Johnson was describing it as "one of the general weaknesses" that "prevail to a greater or less degree in every mind," and lamenting the tendency in himself: "I could not forbear to reproach myself for having so long neglected what was unavoidably to be done, and of which every moment's idleness increased the difficulty." And the problem seems to be getting worse all the time. According to Piers Steel, a business professor at the University of Calgary, the percentage of people who admitted to difficulties with procrastination quadrupled between 1978 and 2002. In that light, it's possible to see procrastination as the quintessential modern problem.

It's also a surprisingly costly one. Each year, Americans waste hundreds of millions of dollars because they don't file their taxes on time. The Harvard economist David Laibson has shown that American workers have forgone huge amounts of money in matching 401(k) contributions because they never got around to signing up for a retirement plan. Seventy per cent of patients suffering from glaucoma risk blindness because they don't use their eyedrops regularly. Procrastination also inflicts major costs on businesses and governments. The recent crisis of the euro was exacerbated by the German government's dithering, and the decline of the American auto industry, exemplified by the bankruptcy of G.M., was due in part to executives' penchant for delaying tough decisions. (In Alex Taylor's recent history of G.M., "Sixty to Zero," one of the key conclusions is "Procrastination doesn't pay.")

Philosophers are interested in procrastination for another reason. It's a powerful example of what the Greeks called *akrasia* – doing something against one's own better judgment. Piers Steel defines procrastination as willingly deferring something even though you expect the delay to make you worse off. In other words, if you're simply saying "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," you're not really procrastinating. Knowingly delaying because you think that's the most efficient use of your time doesn't count, either. The essence of procrastination lies in not doing what you think you should be doing, a mental contortion that surely accounts for the great psychic toll the habit takes on people. This is the perplexing thing about procrastination: although it seems to involve avoiding unpleasant tasks, indulging in it generally doesn't make people happy. In one study, sixty-five per cent of students surveyed before they started working on a term paper said they would like to avoid procrastinating: they knew both that they wouldn't do the work on time and that the delay would make them unhappy.

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5 Self Assessment

5.1 How bad it is?

Typically, procrastination is seen as a problem when it disrupts some area of a person's life. Judith Provost (1988) has proposed seven conditions that reflect a level of disruption due to procrastination. The following check list has been adapted from Provost's conditions. Check this list to determine whether or not procrastination is a problem for you.

1. I sometimes feel sick from the physical and psychological stress of putting off work that I know needs to be done.
2. I sometimes feel depressed and not in control, having lost self-confidence and self-esteem because of my procrastinating behavior.
3. Sometimes I feel paralyzed and unable to act and to make decisions.
4. I feel that I have lost the respect of others because of my procrastinating behavior.
5. The quality of my academic work is less than what I know I can do.
6. I have had serious conflicts in my relationships because of my procrastination.
7. My procrastination has created an obstacle to the achievement of my significant personal goals.

If you checked two or more of these items, procrastination seems to be affecting your life in a negative manner. Yet, because all people procrastinate at some time or another, it is important to determine which parts of your life are most prone to procrastinating behavior.

5.2 Acid Test

It is extremely rare for any one person to procrastinate in all areas of life. Most people are selective in their procrastination. The following check list has been adapted from Burka and Yuen (1983). Mark those areas where procrastination seems to affect you most.

Personal

- Eating properly
- Getting enough sleep
- Exercising
- Getting a haircut
- Health care (doctor, dentist)
- Bathing
- Balancing your checkbook
- Recreation/hobbies
- Other: _____

School

- Going to class
- Doing homework
- Studying for tests
- Writing papers
- Doing projects
- Reading
- Paying bills
- Getting financial aid forms
- Finding a place to live
- Going to the library
- Talking to an instructor
- Taking care of parking tickets
- Pre-enrolling for class
- Joining a club
- Other: _____

Work

- Going to work
- Getting to work on time
- Completing tasks
- Looking for a job
- Preparing a resume
- Calling a perspective employer
- Other: _____

Home

- Calling a repair person
- Cleaning
- Doing laundry
- Grocery shopping
- Paying bills
- Doing dishes
- Other: _____

Relationships

- Talking with friends
- Writing letters

- Calling friends
- Going out
- Asking someone for a date
- Giving a party
- Ending a bad relationship
- Visiting relatives
- Calling relatives
- Clearing the air with a friend
- Other: _____

Now, what area in your life tends to be most affected by procrastination? By answering this question you would be able to assess the negative impact of procrastination on your life, and would try accordingly to plan how to overcome it.

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6 Negative Impact and Causes

Procrastination technically refers to the avoidance of a specific task or work which needs to be accomplished. But this technical explanation doesn't begin to capture the emotions triggered by the word. For most of us, the word "procrastination" reminds us of past experiences where we have felt guilty, lazy, inadequate, anxious, or stupid – or some combination of these. It also implies a value judgment; if you procrastinate, you are bad, and as such, you lack worth as a person.

Procrastination, the habit of putting tasks off to the last possible minute, can be a major problem in both your career and your personal life. Side effects include missed opportunities, frenzied work hours, stress, overwhelm, resentment, and guilt. This article will explore the root causes of procrastination and give you several practical tools to overcome it.

The behavior pattern of procrastination can be triggered in many different ways, so you won't always procrastinate for the same reason. Sometimes you'll procrastinate because you're overwhelmed with too much on your plate, and procrastination gives you an escape. Other times you'll feel tired and lazy, and you just can't get going.

Let's now address these various causes of procrastination and consider intelligent ways to respond.

1. Stress

When you feel stressed, worried, or anxious, it's hard to work productively. In certain situations procrastination works as a coping mechanism to keep your stress levels under control. A wise solution is to reduce the amount of stress in your life when possible, such that you can spend more time working because you want to, not because you have to. One of the simplest ways to reduce stress is to take more time for play.

In his book *The Now Habit*, Dr. Neil Fiore suggests that making time for guaranteed fun can be an effective way to overcome procrastination. Decide in advance what blocks of time you'll allocate each week to family time, entertainment, exercise, social activities, and personal hobbies. Then schedule your work hours using whatever time is left. This can reduce the urge to procrastinate because your work will not encroach on your leisure time, so you don't have to procrastinate on work in order to relax and enjoy life. I caution against overusing this strategy, however, as your work should normally be enjoyable enough that you're motivated to do it. If you aren't inspired by your daily work, admit that you made a mistake in choosing the wrong career path; then seek out a new direction that does inspire you.

Benjamin Franklin advised that the optimal strategy for high productivity is to split your days into one third work, one third play, and one third rest. Once again the suggestion is to guarantee your leisure time. Hold your work time and your play time as equally important, so one doesn't encroach upon the other.

I'm most productive when I take abundant time for play. This helps me burn off excess stress and enjoy life more, and my work life is better when I'm happier. I also create a relaxed office environment that reduces stress levels. My office includes healthy plants, a fountain, and several scented candles. I often listen to relaxing music while I work. Despite all the tech equipment, my office has a very relaxed feel to it. Because I enjoy being there, I can work a full day without feeling overly stressed or anxious, even when I have a lot to do. For additional tips to make your work environment more peaceful and relaxing, read the article *10 Ways to Relaxify Your Workspace*.

2. Overwhelm

Sometimes you may have more items on your to-do list than you can reasonably complete. This can quickly lead to overwhelm, and ironically you may be more likely to procrastinate when you can least afford it. Think of it as your brain refusing to cooperate with a schedule that you know is unreasonable. In this case the message is that you need to stop, reassess your true priorities, and simplify.

Options for reducing schedule overwhelm include elimination, delegation, and negotiation. First, review your to-dos and cut as much as you can. Cut everything that isn't truly important. This should be a no-brainer, but it's amazing how poorly people actually implement it. People cut things like exercise while leaving plenty of time for TV, even though exercise invigorates them and TV drains them. When you cut items, be honest about removing the most worthless ones first, and retain those that provide real value. Secondly, delegate tasks to others as much as possible. Ask for extra help if necessary. And thirdly, negotiate with others to free up more time for what's really important. If you happen to have a job that overloads you with more work than you feel is reasonable, it's up to you to decide if it's worthwhile to continue in that situation. Personally I wouldn't tolerate a job that pushed me to overwork myself to the point of feeling overwhelmed; that's counterproductive for both the employer and the employee.

Be aware that the peak performers in any field tend to take more vacation time and work shorter hours than the workaholics. Peak performers get more done in less time by keeping themselves fresh, relaxed, and creative. By treating your working time as a scarce resource rather than an uncontrollable monster that can gobble up every other area of your life, you'll be more balanced, focused, and effective.

It's been shown that the optimal work week for most people is 40–45 hours. Working longer hours than this actually has such an adverse effect on productivity and motivation that less real work gets done. This is especially true for creative, information age work.

Don't just take my word for it though; test this concept for yourself. Many years ago I ran a simple experiment to determine how efficiently I was working. I measured my *efficiency ratio* as the number of hours I spent doing important work divided by the number of hours I spent in my office each week. The first time I did this I was shocked to find that I only got 15 hours of real work done while spending 60 hours in my office, an efficiency ratio of 25%. Can you believe that? Over the following weeks, I increased my productivity dramatically while spending far fewer hours in my office. By limiting my work hours, I actually got more done. You can read the details in the article *Triple Your Personal Productivity*. I now know that working long hours is huge mistake, and I challenge you to discover this truth for yourself.

3. Laziness

Often we procrastinate because we feel too physically and/or emotionally drained to work. Once we fall into this pattern, it's easy to get stuck due to inertia because an object at rest tends to remain at rest. When you feel lazy, even simple tasks seem like too much work because your energy is too low compared to the energy required by the task. If you blame the task for being too difficult or tedious, you'll procrastinate to conserve energy. But the longer you do this, the more your resolve will weaken, and your procrastination habit may begin spiraling toward depression. Feeling weak and unmotivated shouldn't be your norm, so it's important to disrupt this pattern as soon as you become aware of it.

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The solution is straightforward: get off your butt and physically move your body. Exercise helps to raise your energy levels. When your energy is high, tasks will seem to get easier, and you'll be less resistant to taking action. A fit person can handle more activity than an unfit person, even though the difficulty of the tasks remains the same.

Through trial and error, I discovered that diet and exercise are critical in keeping my energy consistently high. I went vegetarian in 1993 and vegan in 1997, and these dietary improvements gave me a significant ongoing energy boost. When I exercise regularly, my metabolism stays high throughout the day. I rarely procrastinate due to laziness because I have the energy and mental clarity to tackle whatever comes my way. Tasks seem easier to complete than they did when my diet and exercise habits were poor. The tasks are the same, but I've grown stronger. A wonderful side benefit of the diet/exercise habit is that I was able to get by with less sleep. I used to need at least 8–9 hours of sleep per night to feel rested, but now I function well on about 6.5 hours.

The most energizing foods are raw fruits and vegetables. Make your diet abundant in these foods, and you'll likely see a marked improvement in your energy levels. The first week or two, however, you may temporarily feel worse as your body takes the opportunity to detox. Erin and I each lost seven pounds the first week we went vegan. Once the dairy clog finally got cleaned out, our intestines were better able to metabolize everything we ate from then on. We later learned that this is actually quite common. There's a good reason baby cows need four stomachs to digest their mother's milk. Human beings can't metabolize dairy products properly, so the partially digested cow proteins float through the bloodstream and must be eliminated as toxins (i.e. poisons). This requires even more energy, which can leave you feeling more tired than you otherwise would.

You'll have to decide for yourself how far you want to take this. I suggest you try different dietary changes for only 30 days at first to see how it affects you. That's how I went vegetarian and later vegan. In each case I went into the challenge fully expecting to revert back at the end of the 30 days, but I liked the results so much that I couldn't fathom going back. Don't take my word for this. Experiment for yourself, and discover what health habits work best for you. For more tips see the article [How to Find the Best Diet for You](#).

4. Lack of Motivation

We all experience temporary laziness at times, but if you suffer from chronically low motivation and just can't seem to get anything going, then it's time for you to let go of immature thought patterns, to embrace life as a mature adult, and to discover your true purpose in life. Until you identify an inspiring purpose, you'll never come close to achieving your potential, and your motivation will always remain weak.

For more than a decade I ran a computer game publishing company. That was a dream of mine in my early 20s, and it was wonderful to be able to fulfill that dream. However, as I entered my 30s, I began feeling much less passionate about it. I was competent at what I did, the business was doing well financially, and I enjoyed plenty of free time. But I just didn't care that much about entertainment software anymore. As my passion faded, I started asking, "What's the point of continuing with this line of work?" Consequently, I procrastinated on some projects that could have moved the business forward. I tried to boost my motivation using a variety of techniques but to no avail. Finally I recognized what I really needed was a total career change. I needed to find a more inspiring career path.

After much soul searching, I retired from the gaming industry and launched StevePavlina.com. What an amazing change that was! I found renewed passion in helping people grow, so I didn't have to use motivation-boosting techniques to get going. I was naturally inspired to work. I still feel totally inspired. Best of all I procrastinated less on non-work tasks too – my passion spread across all areas of my life.

Center your work around an inspiring purpose, and you'll greatly reduce your tendency to procrastinate. Finding your purpose is a powerful way to defeat procrastination problems because you won't procrastinate on what you love to do. Chronic procrastination is actually a big warning sign that tells us, "You're going the wrong way. Take a different path!"

Once you've centered your life around an inspiring purpose, then you can take advantage of certain motivational techniques to boost your motivation even higher.

5. Lack of Discipline

Even when motivation is high, you may still encounter tasks you don't want to do. In these situations self-discipline works like a motivational backup system. When you feel motivated, you don't need much discipline, but it sure comes in handy when you need to get something done but really don't want to do the work. If your self-discipline is weak, however, procrastinating will be too tempting to resist.

6. Poor Time Management Habits

Do you ever find yourself falling behind because you overslept, because you were too disorganized, or because certain tasks just fell through the cracks? Bad habits like these often lead to procrastination, often unintentionally. The solution in this case is to diagnose the bad habit that's hurting you and devise a new habit to replace it. For example, if you have a problem oversleeping, take up the challenge of becoming an early riser.

For tasks you've been putting off for a while, I recommend using the timeboxing method to get started. Here's how it works: First, select a small piece of the task you can work on for just 30 minutes. Then choose a reward you will give yourself immediately afterwards. The reward is guaranteed if you simply put in the time; it doesn't depend on any meaningful accomplishment. Examples include watching your favorite TV show, seeing a movie, enjoying a meal or snack, going out with friends, going for a walk, or doing anything you find pleasurable. Because the amount of time you'll be working on the task is so short, your focus will shift to the impending pleasure of the reward instead of the difficulty of the task. No matter how unpleasant the task, there's virtually nothing you can't endure for just 30 minutes if you have a big enough reward waiting for you.

When you time-box your tasks, you may discover that something very interesting happens. You will probably find that you continue working much longer than 30 minutes. You will often get so involved in a task, even a difficult one, that you actually want to keep working on it. Before you know it, you've put in an hour or even several hours. The certainty of your reward is still there, so you know you can enjoy it whenever you're ready to stop. Once you begin taking action, your focus shifts away from worrying about the difficulty of the task and toward finishing the current piece of the task which now has your full attention.

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When you do decide to stop working, claim and enjoy your reward. Then schedule another 30-minute period to work on the task with another reward. This will help you associate more and more pleasure to the task, knowing that you will always be immediately rewarded for your efforts. Working toward distant and uncertain long-term rewards is not nearly as motivating as immediate short-term rewards. By rewarding yourself for simply putting in the time, instead of for any specific achievements, you'll be eager to return to work on your task again and again, and you'll ultimately finish it.

7. Lack of Skill

If you lack sufficient skill to complete a task at a reasonable level of quality, you may procrastinate to avoid a failure experience. You then have three viable options to overcome this type of pattern: educate, delegate, or eliminate.

First, you can acquire the skill level you need by training up. Just because you can't do something today doesn't mean you'll never be able to do it. Someday you may even master that skill. For example, when I wanted to create my first website in 1995, I didn't know how to do it because I'd never done it before. But I knew I could learn to do it. I took the time to learn HTML, and I experimented. It didn't take long before I launched a functional web site. In the years since then, I continued to apply and upgrade that skill. If you can't do something, don't whine about it. Educate yourself to gain skill until you become proficient.

A second option is to delegate tasks you lack the skill to do. There are far too many interesting skills for you to master, so you must rely on others for help. You may not realize it, but you're already a master at delegation. Do you grow all your own food? Did you sew your own clothes? Did you build your own house? Chances are that you depend on others for your very survival. If you want a certain result but don't want to acquire the skills to get that result, you can recruit others to help you. For example, I don't want to spend my days trying to understand the details of the U.S. tax code, so I delegate that task to my accountant. This frees me to spend more time working from my strengths.

Thirdly, you may conclude that a result isn't needed badly enough to justify the effort of either education or delegation. In that case the smart choice is to eliminate the task. Sometimes procrastination is a sign that a task needn't be done at all.

When I was in college, I felt that certain assignments were pointless busywork, and I couldn't justify the effort required to do them. If the impact on my grade wasn't too great, I'd decline to do those assignments. Nobody cares that I received an A- instead of an A in a class because I declined to write an essay on gestural languages. If an employer or graduate school screener ever did care, I'd have turned the experience to my advantage by using it to demonstrate that I could set priorities.

8. Perfectionism

A common form of erroneous thinking that leads to procrastination is perfectionism. Believing that you must do something perfectly is a recipe for stress, and you'll associate that stress with the task and thus condition yourself to avoid it. So you put the task off to the last possible minute until you finally have a way out of this trap. Now there isn't enough time to do the job perfectly, so you're off the hook because you can tell yourself that you could have been perfect if you only had more time. But if you have no specific deadline for a task, perfectionism can cause you to delay indefinitely.

The solution to perfectionism is to give yourself permission to be human. Have you ever used a piece of software that you consider to be perfect in every way? I doubt it. Realize that an imperfect job completed today is always superior to the perfect job delayed indefinitely.

Perfectionism also arises when you think of a project as one gigantic whole. Replace that one big "must be perfect" project in your mind with one small imperfect first step. Your first draft can be very, very rough. You're always free to revise it later. For example, if you want to write a 5000-word article, allow your first draft be only 100 words if it helps you get started.

Some of these cures are challenging to implement, but they're effective. If you really want to tame the procrastination beast, you'll need something stronger than quick-fix motivational rah-rah. This problem isn't going away on its own. You must take the initiative. The upside is that tackling this problem yields tremendous personal growth. You'll become stronger, braver, more disciplined, more driven, and more focused. These benefits will become hugely significant over your lifetime, so recognize that the challenge of overcoming procrastination is truly a blessing in disguise. The whole point is to grow stronger.

7 Strengthening Your Will

Here are some practical tips that can help you explore your strengths and develop a habit structure to overcome procrastination:

Tip #1 – Use “to do” management programs effectively

If you find yourself procrastinating because you feel overwhelmed, implementing a good “to do” system could be the solution that allows you to get down to business. Keep in mind that a good “to do” program is one that allows you to update tasks quickly and capture thoughts as they occur. While a pen and paper might work for some people, most will be better served by a mobile device running programs like Evernote, Remember the Milk or Things.

Tip #2 – Establish appropriate organization systems

It's no wonder you procrastinate when you know it's going to take at least 20 minutes to find all the documents needed to get started on a project! Instead, develop strong filing systems for your email and digital documents, as well as organizational plans for everyday items around your home. Doing so will prevent the delays that often cost you big in terms of productivity.

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Tip #3 – Try the Pomodoro Technique

The Pomodoro Technique involves working in 25 minute chunks, punctuated by long and short breaks. Use an app like Focusbooster to monitor your progress, and you'll likely find that working in small windows is less overwhelming (and less likely to cause productivity) than tackling a large project all at once.

Tip #4 – Don't "break the chain"

Set daily goals that will help you complete major projects (for example, exercising for 20 minutes each day or writing for one hour) and then mark off the days you meet your goals on a printed calendar. Watching the long line of "X"s grow across your calendar will help you avoid procrastination in order to not "break the chain".

Tip #5 – Identify your most productive times

If you're more focused in the morning, set aside this time for your biggest, most complicated projects. Putting off important work until the times when you're less productive is likely to lead to procrastination.

Tip #6 – Start small, finish big

When your "to do" list seems overwhelming, try to find a few small items that you can knock out quickly. Your feelings of accomplishment will grow and help give you the momentum you need to tackle whatever's on your project list.

Tip #7 – Create a focused environment

Understand what type of environment you work best in and recreate these conditions as much as possible in your workspace. Taking steps to minimize distractions and make your work station as welcoming as possible will make it easier for you to get down to business faster.

Tip #8 – Identify your Top 3 "must do" items

Every night, before you go to bed, write a list of the top three items you most need to finish the next day. When you have a focused plan of attack ready and waiting for you in the morning, you'll be less likely to procrastinate.

Tip #9 – Bet on yourself

If you're afraid your procrastination will prevent you from meeting an important deadline, place a bet on the StickK.com website for a certain amount of money that will be donated to an organization you don't like if you fail to complete your tasks on time.

Tip #10 – Batch process similar tasks

The amount of prep work needed for each different project on your “to do” list can make projects seem larger than they really are. Instead, batch process your tasks to complete similar projects at the same time – eliminating the time needed to switch between tasks and reducing your chances of procrastinating.

Tip #11 – Reward yourself at project milestones

When facing a large task, break the overall project down into several smaller milestones and set up rewards for achieving each new deadline. Make sure the rewards are things you’ll be excited to receive (for example, a new book or a nice dinner out) in order to truly give procrastination the boot.

Tip #12 – Eating the elephant

As the saying goes, the only way to eat an elephant is one mouthful at a time! If you can’t face tackling a large project in its entirety, find one small “mouthful” you can work on in order to prevent procrastination from sneaking in.

Tip #13 – Monitor your internet usage

If you find yourself falling into the vicious trap of funny Youtube videos and cute kitten pictures online, eliminate procrastination by policing your internet activities with free app like RescueTime and LeechBlock.

Tip #14 – Partner up to prevent procrastination

Having an accountability partner can make all the difference in the world when it comes to ending procrastination. If you’ve got a major goal on the horizon, enlist the support of friends and family members to check in with you periodically and help keep you accountable to the goals you set for yourself.

Tip #15 – Take a visualization break

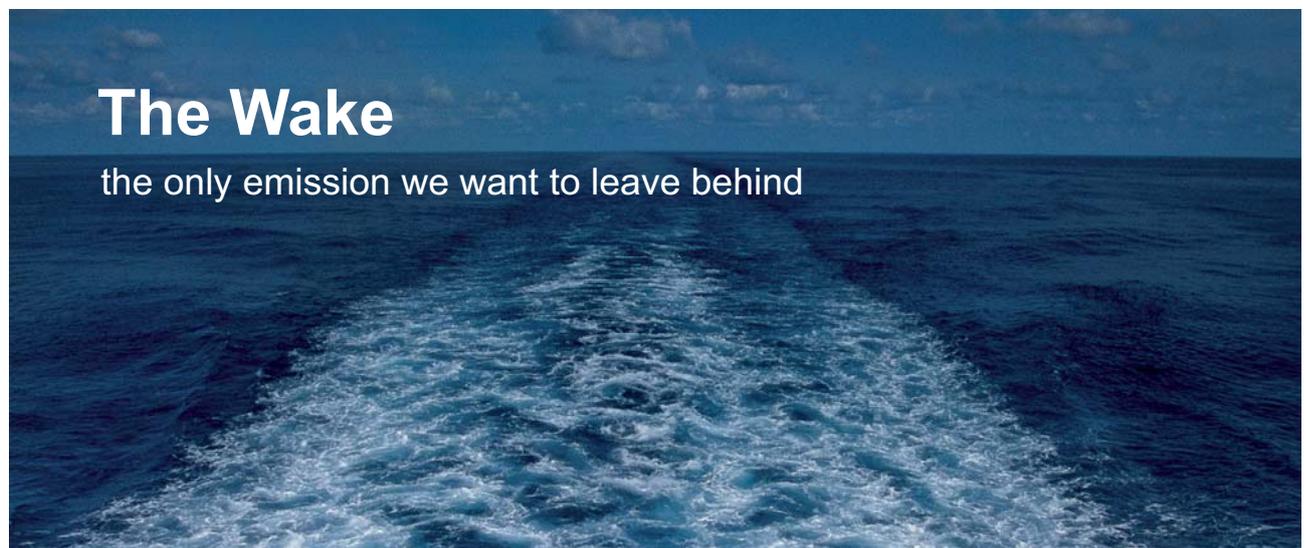
If you find yourself struggling to take action in the face of overwhelming procrastination, take a few minutes to visualize the end result you’re trying to achieve. If you’re trying to lose weight, picture your newly-fit self skipping down the beach in a bikini. If it’s a business project you’re struggling with, visualize the extra money being deposited into your bank account or your boss congratulating you on a job well done. Make your visualizations as realistic as possible and you’ll soon want to experience this same success in real life!

Tip #16 – Work on a different project

One sneaky way to get around your procrastination is to start work on another, more appealing project. Then, while you're hard at work, switch gears and get back to the task you're procrastinating on. You'll find it's a lot easier to make the transition when you're already working than when you're slumping around on the couch.

Tip #17 – Take a Single Half Step

If you're truly stuck, follow the advice of productivity expert Leo Babauta and take a single half step towards your goal. You'll likely find that even the smallest of actions is enough to get you in the right mindset to eliminate procrastination once and for all!



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8 A Self Discipline Approach

8.1 Never too late

If you have long been overwhelmed by an unwieldy list of goals that would sit, unaccomplished, in a long-term to-do list year after year, you still can overcome this chronic problem. It has all to do with self discipline, and being conscious to gradually build and develop a positive habit. Exercise every day and make sure not to “Break the Chain”. The concept is simple: spend some amount of time doing a desired activity every day and, when you do, cross off that day on a calendar. This creates a chain of Xs showing your progress. If you don’t do your specified task on one day, you don’t get an X and that chain is broken. It seems almost too simple to work, but it’s allowed me to accomplish so much more than I ever thought possible.

That said, the concept wasn’t perfect for me and it didn’t account for things like sick days and vacations. The trick assumes you have one goal and never take a break. I wanted to exercise, keep my apartment clean, handle chores more responsibly, work on various development projects, and write screenplays, but not every single day for the rest of my life. Originally, I looked at my schedule and realized there was only about an hour per day I could devote to any of these tasks while still enjoying a social life and maintaining my sanity. That did not seem like enough time to do anything, so I gave up. But then, for some reason, “Don’t Break the Chain” started inadvertently appearing in web searches and email messages. I’d heard about it but never really bothered to find out what it was or how it worked. When I finally looked, I realized that if I devoted 15 minutes per day to each one of my desired tasks I’d make some progress and that would be better than no progress at all.

8.2 How It Works?

The entire process is remarkably easy and you can get everything ready in about 15 to 30 minutes. We’ll go over each step in detail, but here’s the general outline:

1. **Figure out your goals.** Start with no more than three, and add a fourth goal after three weeks if you can handle it.
2. **Set daily minimums for each goal.** Things like “I will run one mile” or “I will put away 10 stray items” work better than setting a time limit.
3. **Set your boundaries and rules.** Because this process expects you to work *every single day*, you have to figure out what you’re going to do when you’re sick, on vacation, or just find yourself in a situation where you won’t be accomplishing your goal that day but don’t deserve the punishment of a broken chain.

4. **Print out a calendar for each goal and label it with that goal.** I prefer a series of monthly calendars because there's more room to make a big X, but traditionally "Don't Break the Chain" uses one year-long calendar. Either way, put these calendars up on your wall where you'll see them regularly.
5. **Buy a fat red marker,** or any marker – the fat ones just make bigger and more rewarding Xs.

Step One: Choose Your Goals

When you're selecting your goals, I've found it helps to start broadly. When I first began I wanted to write a very specific screenplay, but I knew I'd finish it and move on to something else. As a result, I simply made writing a goal. Additionally, your exercise routine shouldn't be the same every day or you won't get enough variation, so I made exercise another broad goal. Basically, don't be too specific when you're deciding what you want to do. You can define your projects as you go. The important thing is that you pick categories that includes many projects so you always have something to do. I found that I ran out of cleaning tasks very quickly, so I needed to expand my cleaning goal to chores in general. Everything is up to you, so you can adjust your process as needed.

Step Two: Set Your Minimums

Now that you have goals, you need to figure out the minimum amount of work you're required to accomplish each day in order to earn your X on the calendar. Because I only had an hour to spare, I had to keep my tasks to 15 minutes each. Telling yourself you have 15 minutes to work on something doesn't provide you with tangible accomplishments, however, so I recommend setting very simple goals that seem like a little but add up to a lot very quickly. Here's what I came up with:

The idea is to essentially capture a task that you can easily accomplish within a given time frame. With things like exercise, you'll probably always use up the total allotted time because as you get stronger and faster you'll need to work harder to continue to get better. With things like cleaning, however, taking out the trash only takes a few minutes and scrubbing the toilet can take a bit longer. Some days may be a little longer and some a little shorter, but it all evens out in the end.

Step Three: Set Your Boundaries

It's unrealistic to expect yourself to work on all your goals every day for the rest of your life. Sometimes you get sick and sometimes you need a break. That said, it just feels wrong to put an X on a day where you did nothing. It also feels wrong to break the chain for a reason beyond your control or for a hard-earned vacation. If you think of this process like a mini-job, however, the solution is simple: time off benefits.

When you're sick and can't perform your duties, put an S instead of an X on that day. If you're on vacation and cannot or do not want to perform your duties, put a V on that day. How many days do you get off? I just use the same rules as my job: three weeks per year including sick days. You can follow the same benefits you get at work or just use the standard allotment: 15 vacation days and six sick days. Your days off get reset at the end of every year, and if you start after the first of the year you should prorate the number. As for weekends, you can decide if you want to take those off or not. Personally, I find the weekends to be the best days to work because I have so much time. I prefer to work every day because the commitment is so small and it helps build better habits, but you should set rules for yourself that work best for your life.

Since starting this process, I've taken one trip, gotten something like the flu, and hurt my arm. None of these problems prevented me from working on my goals every single day. When I was on the trip I couldn't clean my house so instead I cleaned where I was staying to help out. I also spent one day sorting the mail and another day getting my car washed. When I hurt my arm, I simply did other exercises until it felt better. When I was under the weather, I just sucked it up and worked anyway. I don't necessarily recommend this, but I've come to love this process so much that I wasn't going to let fatigue and difficulty breathing stop me from getting things done. (I wish I was kidding.)

Step Four: Print Your Calendars

Once you've got a plan together, you're going to need calendars to keep track of your progress. You can buy one, or you can just print them for free. I used iCal to print mine because I like the way they look, but you can easily grab free, printable calendars from Print Free. Monthly calendars take up a lot of room on the wall, so you may prefer to print out a year instead. "Don't Break the Chain" traditionally uses a single page year-long calendar, but I like seeing my progress in large form. Choose the type that works best for you.

Step Five: Get a Big, Fat Marker

Silly, yes, but this is also the fun part. Getting a big, fat marker doesn't require much additional explanation, but there are a couple of things to add. First, you want to avoid anything that's going to run through paper so permanent markers are not a good choice. (That is, unless you print your calendars on very thick paper.) You get eight for less than the cost of a permanent marker. Also, you may want to pick up some Industrial Strength Adhesive Velcro. Velcro comes in handy in life (especially for tablet owners) but it's also a simple way to stick your marker on the wall besides your calendars so it's always available to cross off a day.

8.3 The Time Management Perspective

How well do you manage your time? If you're like many people, your answer may not be completely positive!

Perhaps you feel overloaded, and you often have to work late to hit your deadlines. Or maybe your days seem to go from one crisis to another, and this is stressful and demoralizing.

Many of us know that we could be managing our time more effectively; but it can be difficult to identify the mistakes that we're making, and to know how we could improve.

When we do manage our time well, however, we're exceptionally productive at work, and our stress levels drop. We can devote time to the interesting, high-reward projects that can make a real difference to a career. In short, we're happier!

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9 Traps To Avoid

Let us have a look at ten of the most common time management mistakes, as well as identifying strategies and tips that you can use to overcome them. These ten mistakes are:

Mistake #1. Failing to Keep a To-Do List

Do you ever have that nagging feeling that you've forgotten to do an important piece of work? If so, you probably don't use a To-Do List to keep on top of things. (Or, if you do, you might not be using it effectively!)

The trick with using To-Do Lists effectively lies in prioritizing the tasks on your list. Many people use an A-F coding system (A for high priority items, F for very low priorities). Alternatively, you can simplify this by using A through D, or by using numbers.

If you have large projects on your list, then, unless you're careful, the entries for these can be vague and ineffective. For instance, you may have written down "Start on budget proposal." But what does this entail? The lack of specifics here might cause you to procrastinate, or miss key steps. So make sure that you break large tasks or projects down into specific, actionable steps – then you won't overlook something important.

You can also use Action Programs to manage your work when you have many large projects happening at once. (Action Programs are "industrial strength" versions of To-Do Lists.)

Mistake #2. Not Setting Personal Goals

Do you know where you'd like to be in six months? What about this time next year, or even 10 years from now? If not, it's time to set some personal goals!

Personal goal setting is essential to managing your time well, because goals give you a destination and vision to work toward. When you know where you want to go, you can manage your priorities, time, and resources to get there. Goals also help you decide what's worth spending your time on, and what's just a distraction.

To learn how to set SMART, effective goals, read up on Locke's Goal Setting Theory. Here, you'll learn how to set clearly defined goals that will keep you motivated.

Your assistant has just walked in with a crisis that she needs you to deal with right now, but you're in the middle of brainstorming ideas for a new client. You're sure that you've *almost* come up with a brilliant idea for their marketing campaign, but now you risk losing the thread of your thinking because of this "emergency."

Sometimes, it's hard to know how to prioritize, especially when you're facing a flood of seemingly-urgent tasks. However, it's essential to learn how to prioritize tasks effectively if you want to manage your time better.

One tool that will help you prioritize effectively is the Urgent/Important Matrix. This helps you understand the difference between urgent activities, and important activities. You'll also learn how to overcome the tendency to focus on the urgent.

The Action Priority Matrix is another useful tool, which will help you determine if a task is high-yield and high-priority, or low-value, "fill in" work. You'll manage your time much better during the day if you know the difference.

Mistake #4. Failing to Manage Distractions

Do you know that some of us can lose as much as two hours a day to distractions? Think how much you could get done if you had that time back!

Whether they come from emails, IM chats, colleagues in a crisis, or phone calls from clients, distractions prevent us from achieving flow, which is the satisfying and seemingly effortless work that we do when we're 100 percent engaged in a task.

If you want to gain control of your day and do your best work, it's vital to know how to minimize distractions and manage interruptions effectively. For instance, turn off your IM chat when you need to focus, and let people know if they're distracting you too often. You should also learn how to improve your concentration, even when you're faced with distractions.

Mistake #5. Procrastination

Procrastination occurs when you put off tasks that you should be focusing on right now. When you procrastinate, you feel guilty that you haven't started; you come to dread doing the task; and, eventually, everything catches up with you when you fail to complete the work on time.

For instance, one useful strategy is to tell yourself that you're only going to start on a project for ten minutes. Often, procrastinators feel that they have to complete a task from start to finish, and this high expectation makes them feel overwhelmed and anxious. Instead, focus on devoting a small amount of time to starting. That's all!

You might also find it helpful to use Action Plans. These help you break large projects down into manageable steps, so that it's easy to see everything that you need to get done, and so that you can complete small chunks at a time. Doing this can stop you from feeling overwhelmed at the start of a new project.

Mistake #6. Taking on too Much

Are you a person who has a hard time saying “no” to people? If so, you probably have far too many projects and commitments on your plate. This can lead to poor performance, stress, and low morale.

Or, you might be a micromanager: someone who insists on controlling or doing all of the work themselves, because they can’t trust anyone else to do it correctly. (This can be a problem for everyone – not just managers!)

Either way, taking on too much is a poor use of your time, and it can get you a reputation for producing rushed, sloppy work.

To stop this, learn the subtle art of saying “yes” to the person, but “no” to the task. This skill helps you assert yourself, while still maintaining good feelings within the group. If the other person starts leaning on you to say “yes” to their request, learn how to think on your feet, and stay cool under pressure.

Mistake #7. Thriving on “Busy”

Some people get a rush from being busy. The narrowly-met deadlines, the endless emails, the piles of files needing attention on the desk, the frantic race to the meeting... What an adrenaline buzz!

The problem is that an “addiction to busyness” rarely means that you’re effective, and it can lead to stress.

Instead, try to slow down, and learn to manage your time better.

Mistake #8. Multitasking

To get on top of her workload, Linda regularly writes emails while she chats on the phone to her clients. However, while Linda thinks that this is a good use of her time, the truth is that it can take 20–40 percent more time to finish a list of jobs when you multitask, compared with completing the same list of tasks in sequence. The result is also that she does both tasks poorly – her emails are full of errors, and her clients are frustrated by her lack of concentration.

So, the best thing is to forget about multitasking, and, instead, focus on one task at a time. That way, you’ll produce higher quality work.

Mistake #9. Not Taking Breaks

It’s nice to think that you can work for 8–10 hours straight, especially when you’re working to a deadline. But it’s impossible for anyone to focus and produce really high-quality work without giving their brains some time to rest and recharge.

So, don't dismiss breaks as "wasting time." They provide valuable down-time, which will enable you to think creatively and work effectively.

If it's hard for you to stop working, then schedule breaks for yourself, or set an alarm as a reminder. Go for a quick walk, grab a cup of coffee, or just sit and meditate at your desk. Try to take a five minute break every hour or two. And make sure that you give yourself ample time for lunch – you won't produce top quality work if you're hungry!

Mistake #10. Ineffectively Scheduling Tasks

Are you a morning person? Or do you find your energy picking up once the sun begins to set in the evening? All of us have different rhythms, that is, different times of day when we feel most productive and energetic.

You can make best use of your time by scheduling high-value work during your peak time, and low-energy work (like returning phone calls and checking email), during your "down" time.

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10 A Systematic Approach

If you can visualize yourself in one or more of these vignettes, you may be ready to overcome your problems with avoidance or procrastination. The following is a list of additional steps which may help you to deal with your avoidance problems:

- Extract from the above examples those principles which apply to you. Write them down.
- Make honest decisions about your work. If you wish to spend only a minimal amount of effort or time on a particular task, admit it – do not allow guilt feelings to interfere with your realization of this fact. Weigh the consequences of various amounts of investment in a project and find the optimal return for your investment. This step exposes intentional reasons for avoiding work. If you have been unintentionally avoiding work, admit to yourself that you do want to achieve certain goals and accept the responsibilities involved in meeting those goals.
- Work to acquire an adequate understanding of what is necessary to accomplish a task within a given time frame.
- Distinguish between activities which dramatize your sense of commitment and those which will help you accomplish the task. Devote only that amount of time which is appropriate for each part of a task. Develop an overview of the entire project and visualize the steps that are needed to reach completion.

10.1 Effective Planning

The larger, more involved, the project, the more difficult it is to plan effectively to carry it out. The following steps may be helpful:

- Segment the task. The entire job may seem impossible, but smaller segments may seem more manageable. Divide the task into small steps.
- Distribute the small steps reasonably within the given time frame. “Reasonably” is the key word; you must allot sufficient time for each step. Do not fool yourself by believing you can do more than is humanly possible.
- Realize that humans periodically need variety and relaxation. Intersperse rewards, relaxation, and gratification for work completed. This will help you feel less resentful of the task and the work that still needs to be done.
- Monitor your progress on the small steps. Watch for the pitfalls discussed earlier. Assess problems when they arise and do something about them quickly. Keep track of the segments and how they fit together to form the whole picture. Reassess time commitments as necessary.
- Be reasonable in your expectations of yourself. Perfectionistic or extremely strict expectations may cause you to rebel or may sabotage your progress.

10.2 Think Concrete

New study finds procrastination is warded off by considering tasks in concrete terms. Procrastination is usually thought of as something to be avoided, this hasn't always been the case. Surveying the history of procrastination Dr. Piers Steel finds that before the industrial revolution procrastination might have been seen in neutral terms (Steel, 2007; PDF).

Nowadays, though, for those living in technically advanced societies, procrastination has become a 'modern malady': everything must be done now or, even better, three weeks ago. For good or evil there are now endless to-do lists to work through, appointments that must be kept and commitments that have to be fulfilled. Such is modern life.

Whatever the cause many people certainly view their procrastination as a problem. Psychologists have found that college students consider themselves champion procrastinators with almost half considering it problematic. Adults are not far behind with some 15–20% self-identifying as 'chronic procrastinators'. Meanwhile the rest of us are guaranteed to procrastinate from time to time. So, perhaps psychology can offer some hope in the ongoing fight against procrastination.

It's all in the construal

In a new study published recently in *Psychological Science* McCrea, Liberman, Trope & Sherman (2008) examined one possible technique for decreasing procrastination. From previous work they hypothesized that how much we procrastinate might be affected by the level at which we construe it. Across three studies two levels of construing tasks were examined:

1. Abstract construal. Say you want to cut the grass, an abstract construal would have you imagining those beautiful stripes imparted by your roller-mower and how beautiful your garden will look once it's done. Perhaps you'll be reminded of the grass courts of Wimbledon and then how the smell takes you back to the time when...well, you get the picture!
2. Concrete construal. Now, instead of being carried off by a flight of fancy, concrete-construers would concentrate on whether the grass is wet, what length to cut it and whether there's any petrol left in the mower.

The three studies used different methods to get participants into one of these two modes of thinking but my favorite involves a painting by pointillist Georges-Pierre Seurat. Participants were presented with one of the two pictures below just before they were asked to complete a simple survey.

In the first experimental condition participants looked at the full painting of *La Parade* (1889) (picture 1) and were told it is a good example of neo-impressionism in which the artist was using order and color to invoke emotion and harmony.

In the second condition participants just saw the detail (picture 2) and were told that this demonstrated the pointillist technique of using contrasting points of colour to build up an image.

After this both groups completed the same survey which they were asked to return within three weeks. The survey's question, however, were essentially irrelevant, the only thing experimenters were interested in was how long participants took to complete and return the questionnaire. This was their measure of procrastination.

The results of this apparently simple manipulation were striking. Those who were thinking about the techniques of pointillism (concrete construal) returned their questionnaires in an average of 12.5 days while those thinking about emotion and harmony (abstract construal) took almost twice as long at an average of 20.5 days. This is an impressive result which seems to point to one very straightforward way of avoiding procrastination: to get tasks done, make sure you focus on the details.

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Another reason this research is potentially very useful is its simplicity. Many of the other techniques for avoiding procrastination seem to involve a lot of mental effort – surely not good for procrastinators! Steel (2007) mentions things like increasing the expectation of success, increasing the value of the task and reducing distractions – all good suggestions but largely effortful. For example it's difficult to increase your expectation of success without the evidence of having completed a similar task successfully. In other words you have to do the task to find out you can do it – exactly what procrastinators are avoiding!

There is, however, another simple technique for avoiding procrastination that has been examined experimentally: using deadlines. Ariely and Wertenbroch (2002) found that self-imposed deadlines were effective in improving task performance but, watch out, people aren't as good at setting their own deadlines as they are at conforming to deadlines set externally. Strangely, when left to their own devices, people seem prone to handicapping themselves with irrational deadlines.

10.3 Self-control

Although McCrea and colleagues' new research has a neat conclusion, it's vital to consider it in the context of two other studies recently covered here – these show that concrete, low-level construals aren't always the answer.

In the first on self-control experimenters found that higher level construals increased self-control (Fujita et al., 2006). At first glance this appears to be saying the exact opposite of the present study – that procrastination is decreased by higher-level construals – but they are actually looking at subtly different situations.

Here's why: in the present study participants were being asked to carry out a task which they didn't place much value on and was very easy, it was just something that had to be done at some point, a chore. In other words people weren't debating with themselves whether the task had to be done, just when it had to be done. In Fujita's study, however, looking at self-control, it was a question of whether or not participants would do a task. It's the dimension of time, then, that most distinguishes between procrastination and self-control. Concrete, low-level construals help you start a task sooner but don't help you decide to do it in the first place.

A second study covered here recently looked at how to get big projects done. This added another piece to the picture, suggesting that a low-level, task focus was a great way of coping with demotivating failures on hard tasks. This adds another piece to the jigsaw puzzle of how we can get things done. In fact taken together these studies start to uncover the complexities inherent in procrastination and self-control.

10.4 Summary: how to get things done

Here's a summary of the main conclusions from all the studies discussed:

1. To avoid procrastinating on a task, focus on its details and use self-imposed deadlines.
2. To stick to a task, *while actually carrying it out*, now it is beneficial to keep the ultimate, abstract goal in mind.
3. When evaluating progress on a hard task, when the chance of failure is high, stay focused on the details of the task.
4. Once tasks are easier or the end is in sight, a more abstract, goal focus is once again the psychological approach to choose.

So, whether or not you feel procrastination is something in need of a 'cure', McCrea and colleagues' study does show that a very simple manipulation of our thought processes can be incredibly powerful. Who would have thought pointillism could save us from procrastination?

11 A Global Cultural Perspective

The cultural side of procrastination does not only involve the time management side, but also the attitude and perception of procrastination. The following quotations are taken from several memoirs and letters written by a number of business travelers to several countries around the world. The good news is positive thinkers and those emotionally matured and socially intelligent travelers sometimes like or at least accept the norms of the other culture or try to find similarities to theirs. However, The quotes illustrate the extent of the cultural shock they suffer when they try to cope with the ways things are done in different cultures:

“I’ve been here a year and if there’s one thing that I’ve learnt about working here... it’s that it’s so damn hard to get anything done here. By western standards, I would have finished the bulk of my work here but in reality I’m only half-way through if even that. It’s funny how quickly I had to scale down my expectations and now what would effectively be 6–12 months of teaching/skills transfer has been planned into a period of 2 years.”

“It’s something that I have yet to get my head around in terms of figuring out how to make any progress on anything I try to do... and I’ve tried to initiate a few things now such as group trainings and workshops for various things technical and non-technical... I keep telling myself that patience is the key but I’m beginning to wonder if I shouldn’t take a more forceful approach. I’ve always been of the opinion that you can’t force people to develop, they have to initiate it themselves so I’ve basically been putting my hand up to do all sorts of trainings and basically putting the ball in their court to decide on a time and place for it. My success rate has been abysmal.”

“I think that it’s a combination of many different factors but the biggest major factor is time. The more I consider it, the more I realize that the excuses I get are related to not having enough time and other things coming up. It’s very common to say, let’s do it next week.. and when next week comes around... postponed or something else comes up. Wait a minute, this is Africa... there’s ALWAYS time... or maybe not. Maybe that’s just the perception... it’s in the culture... the culture of procrastination and comes with believing that you have I of time... there’ll be time later to do it.”

“There’s an interesting lesson here... when you think about it, when you have an excess of anything you no longer think so carefully about how you spend it. I remember coming from being on student allowances to getting a good salary when working. Suddenly my whole paradigm of money changed... What’s a few dollars more here or there now. Imagine if you won lotto... would that 5c per litre price hike on petrol matter as much to you?”

“It’s the same with time here... whereas back in developed countries we have so many things to do, we’re always rushing here and there trying to use up our time because we know there’s only 24 hours in the day... here in Africa, their concept of time is very different. It has its good aspects... see one of my earliest posts about time for that... but it also has its bad aspects. The real danger is when you think you have I of something when in reality you actually don’t... and that’s what I see here.”

“When you get into a habit of having an excess of something and your circumstances change, sometimes you don’t realize that you don’t actually have as much as you thought. In a culture where time is not considered a scarce resource, it’s very easy to suddenly find that your day has been filled up without you realizing it. You get into a habit of doing urgent things first and not important things first... because really there will be time to do the other stuff later. This is the kind of mentality that I’ve been getting... “Yes, I really want to learn about all that stuff... but I am so busy... let’s wait until after x” but of course when the time comes, something else urgent has come up. It’s so easy to fall into the trap really.”

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You may be reading this and thinking that it's pretty obvious that time is a scarce resource. Come on, it's common sense right... but that's because of the culture you come from. I think the same principle applies to anything that you think you have plenty of... consider it carefully... a lot of pollution comes from the fact that a lot of people have the mentality that there's plenty of space or places to put your rubbish... Deforestation. There's so many trees around... Not personal enough? Let's go back to money. Isn't this the same principle with the credit card culture? With the easy availability of credit cards, loans, hire purchase etc... so many people tend to live in the red. Why? Isn't it because these things give us the illusion that we actually have more money than we do? That \$7,000 limit on my credit card gives me the feeling that I can buy anything... even if I can't really afford it.

Africans live in poverty, they have a distinct lack of so many things and the circumstances have certainly shaped their culture and their way of seeing the world. Money and resources is the scarcity, not time... the problem is that they are in such a habit of having so much time that they don't realize that with development, comes more activities and things that can be done or things that need to be done that time is no longer plentiful but scarce and limited... I think that this is a big reason why development has been so slow here in Africa compared to other places... They haven't realized the value of time yet... because they still think they have so much of it.

Our cultural preoccupations can sometimes be painfully obvious. We've sent droves of people abroad to study the sexual mores of other cultures, and pretty much no one to ask how long it takes them to get around to repairing a leaky faucet.

Take New Guinea: It's small and far away, but almost a century of anthropological research has yielded many interesting facts about the people who live there. We now know, for example, that they (or at least the ones who felt like talking to the white-man visitors) aren't huge fans of the missionary position.

Did perhaps just one anthropologist ever think to ask a penis-gourd-wearer if he wakes up some days and thinks he's going to make a new penis gourd, but instead this happens and that happens, and making the new gourd just gets put off, along with everything else that he's supposed to be doing, until he feels terrible and the only option seems to be to move to a place where no one notices that his gourd is outmoded?

Doubtful. For you plucky grad students in search of un-trampled academic terrain, I present the field of cross-cultural procrastination. Slacking off may not be as sexy as, well, sex, but (like sex) everyone seems to do it. The handful of cross-cultural studies that have been done suggest that procrastination is one of those concepts, like color or time, that occurs in other cultures, even if those other cultures have their own ways of seeing it and dealing with it.

There are two dominant modes when it comes to the study of cross-cultural procrastination. The first takes the form of the international managerial missive – an ancient narrative template that delineates the work and business practices of people from one culture, so that a person from another culture can do business with them. These are chatty, opinionated, and prone to generalizations. “Punctuality is the responsibility of the subordinate,” writes corporate cultural training adviser George B. Whitfield III about Jakarta, Indonesia. “The higher the status of a person, the more he or she moves through life causing subordinates to adjust to and swirl around the superior’s schedule.”

The second mode seeks to quantify, in scholarly terms (i.e., with percentages), just who in the world procrastinates and for how long. The most wide-ranging of these efforts was published in the *International Journal of Psychology* in 1998. Leon Mann, a business-oriented behavioral scientist at the University of Melbourne, organized a project to discover “cross-cultural differences in self-reported decision-making style” among test subjects in six locations – three “individualistic English-speaking cultures” (the United States, Australia, and New Zealand) and three “collectivistic East Asian cultures” (Japan, Hong Kong, and Thailand). In other words, Mann and his team would hand out questionnaires to undergrads around the world and ask them how much they agreed (on a scale of one through five) with statements like, “I delay in making decisions until it is too late.”

The researchers theorized that college students from the “collectivistic” cultures would put off making decisions for longer than those from “individualistic” ones. It turned out that the Japanese students had the highest (which is to say, the most procrastination-inclined) scores, followed by the Taiwanese, the students from Hong Kong, the Americans, the Australians, and the New Zealanders. The differences between the groups weren’t quite as dramatic as Mann had hoped, but they were statistically significant.

Of course, how a student chooses to fill out a questionnaire may not reflect his or her true procrastination behavior. It’s possible that the American students outdid the Australians and Kiwis simply by virtue of our drive toward compulsive self-disclosure. The world-class procrastinators of Japan might have inflated their scores out of a tendency to see self-criticism as a virtue.

Further research hasn’t exactly resolved the question. American procrastination expert Joseph Ferrari did his own cross-cultural studies, with different results; he’s adamant that there are no differences at all across international borders. So far, he’s given a questionnaire very similar to the one used by Mann to people in America, Australia, Peru, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. And he’s found no significant differences in procrastination scores, either between countries or genders.

Ferrari's findings also contradict a widely publicized meta-analysis by Canadian psychologist Piers Steel. That study looked at several hundred research papers on procrastination and concluded, among other things, that procrastination is on its way up in American culture, spreading its way through the populace like some kind of slacker virus. (In numerous interviews, Steel blamed this epidemic on computers, cell phones, and, most specifically, the game Minesweeper.) But Ferrari has seen no increased scores for procrastination among his U.S. subjects since he began doing research in the early 90s.

Ferrari does have his methodological quirks. He works with middle-aged subjects rather than students – because, in his words, “75 percent of students are chronic procrastinators.” He also recruits many of his research subjects from the audiences of his lectures (on procrastination, no less) or from the firms that hire him as a workplace consultant. Drawing on data from this cohort, Ferrari has found significant cross-cultural differences within American society but not abroad. People in white-collar occupations procrastinate more than people in blue-collar jobs, corporate workers procrastinate more than professionals like doctors and lawyers, salesmen procrastinate more than managers, and salesmen in the Pacific Northwest procrastinate more than salesmen on the East Coast.

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It may be that the greater occupational diversity among Ferrari's subjects is swamping out more subtle differences. The cultural differences between social classes could have a more dramatic effect on procrastination scores than nation of origin. In a 2003 study called "Differential Incidence of Procrastination Between Blue- and White-Collar Workers," Ferrari and his co-author speculate that blue-collar workers might procrastinate as much as white-collar workers if given the chance, but their relative lack of job security and greater supervision were keeping them in a state of enforced timeliness.

We might get better answers from a study that looked at the actual behaviors associated with procrastination, rather than reported self-image. But, despite much effort, I could find only one paper that addressed similar questions without resorting to the questionnaire. Unfortunately, this study wasn't so much cross-cultural as cross-*species*. In 1998, at the same time that Leon Mann was studying collectivistic and individualistic undergraduates, a psychology professor named James E. Mazur was studying the procrastination habits of pigeons.

Mazur's test subjects were trained to peck illuminated keys at regular intervals, in exchange for a tiny wage in bird feed at the end of their workday. The wage was higher for the birds that worked most consistently and didn't take any breaks. In the end, pigeons turned out to be such layabouts that even a four-fold increase in food could not incite them to peck in a timely fashion. Pigeons aren't the only animals to procrastinate, either. Lab monkeys are known to become distracted when the prospect of a reward seems too far off. In 2004, a research team at the National Institute of Mental Health induced better work habits in a group of monkeys by temporarily knocking out a dopamine receptor gene.

Despite this evidence from the animal kingdom, Ferrari insists that procrastination as we know it has no biological basis. Steel disagrees, citing a study of identical twins in his meta-analysis as evidence that there is a gene for putting things off – but the study in question remains unpublished and has never been peer-reviewed.

Even if procrastination turns out to have a genetic component, Ferrari is right to point out that time-wasting in the real world is associated with power, social class, and group values. We don't yet know the details on how these factors interact, but a bit more research might provide a lot of insight. Come on, grad students – get to work!

12 Top 12 Best Procrastination Benefits

You learn new habits by rewarding yourself. Below are 12 procrastination benefits you have used to reward your procrastination. Knowing them will make you more capable of resisting procrastination.

1. You don't have to do the task anymore.

If you delay a task long enough, occasionally, somebody else will do it for you. Therefore you justify your procrastination to yourself.

For example: When I was little, I never took my laundry downstairs into the designated basket. I always left it hanging in my room. Why? Because I knew my mom would come and pick it up when the pile got too big. ('Sorry mom!')

2. While delaying a buying decision, it goes out of style or it will be priced off significantly!

Just wait long enough, you know what will happen. Fashion changes, prices drop. Hardware gets old, prices drop... Few!, lucky you didn't bought it when you first wanted it. But what about the new trend? Should I buy that now? What about the price? it's still high, maybe I should stall my decision.

3. Procrastination often goes unpunished

Not being punished for something you know is 'bad behavior', is like an invitation to do it again. It's part of the thrill. Will I get caught this time, and everytime you escape from punishment, your mind thinks: "Whoohoo! I need to do this more, this is fun!"

4. You avoid serious arguments

By procrastinating a confrontation with someone about an argument or something you didn't agree on. You avoid a fight by not doing anything. The 'procrastination benefits' on this one are huge. Since you avoid so much pain, your brain is tricked into thinking it did the right thing.

5. Opportunities will pass or additional information will come to you

While delaying a difficult decision, you will often be able to solve it by the additional information that comes to you through all sorts of channels, but you'll also run the risk of losing the opportunity if you wait too long. In both cases, your procrastination is rewarded, in the first case, the decision isn't difficult anymore because of the extra information. The second, well, the opportunity has passed, so there is no decision to be made anymore.

6. You provide an excuse for your upcoming failure.

When you procrastinate on a task, and it is a failure. You can say you haven't given it your all. It's a defense mechanism to protect your self-worth. If people ask why you failed, you can give them an excuse. You can say that it wasn't your fault.

7. You resist authorities!

If your boss tells you what to do, you probably do it. But if you don't like him very much, you will probably do it at a much slower pace. This is the rebel inside you that wants to get back at your boss. By stalling work, you are resisting his commands. You can also resist your government by being late on your tax letter or other administration.

8. You defend against the fear of succes. (by not succeeding and keeping things as they are)

Succes means more responsibilities. More responsibilities means more work. More responsibilities also mean that you are expected to deliver a higher quality of work. You will also get more pay for your work, you probably become friends with the bosses, and you are scared because you won't be able to hang out with your current buddies. All in all, you are not afraid of success, but you are afraid of the change that comes with it. And by procrastination, you don't have to change.

9. You get to put off unpleasant tasks in favor of more enjoyable things.

The reward here is clear, you do fun stuff! This is also the most used excuse from all the procrastination benefits if you have to explain yourself.

10. You can relate with your friends (who also procrastinate) and vice versa.

A lot of people procrastinate in one way or another. Sharing similar stories with them tightens your social connections with them. You also avoid there jealousy by being the same like them.

11. You like the adrenaline rush of doing things the last minute.

A favorite of me when I was in college. I delayed my assignments as long as possible only to do them at the last minutue. Because I felt I could concentrate much better. And it was, and still is, true! The reason I was able to concentrate much better, was that 'not-doing' it would mean much more pain, than doing it.

12. You can avoid the anxiety you feel about the task.

A difficult task often brings unpleasant feelings with it. You are unsure of your succes, and you might fail. You don't want to start because you want to avoid the strange and unpleasant feelings.

Whatever your procrastination benefits are, it can help to be aware of them as you work to turn your procrastination.

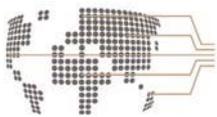
Finally

Let's question the assumption that we need to get rid of all our procrastinating.

Rational procrastination' is good for us. It occurs when there is no time pressure, you are likely to discover more information, the situation itself may improve, or you feel that mulling over a challenge might help you solve it. Calvin Coolidge (a former president of the US) called it 'calculated inactivity'.

We need some level of procrastination to balance the "ready, shoot, aim" mentality that surrounds us. Let's get curious about how procrastination might benefit us.

Incubation: Often, our intuition needs more time to incubate on a certain issue before we act. Many people learn that if they sleep on major decisions or difficult issues, they will typically come out with better. I find that what I used to label procrastination in my own behavior was often the incubation time necessary to allow my creative juices to bubble sufficiently. But how long is long enough? You never know until the idea finds you.



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Waiting for Energy: Sometimes, when you have a big job to do, you may not have the kind of energy you need to tackle it and get it done. I often find that when I put things off until the last minute, the energy surge I get from the charge of adrenaline caused by being up against an almost impossible deadline gives me the boost to not just get the job done, but do it with excellence. Some people find that they can force risk by pushing deadlines and that their best work often occurs under self-imposed pressure.

One word of caution. If you constantly push your deadlines, you can burn out both yourself and others on your team. It's easy to become addicted to your own adrenaline and become unable to work effectively unless you are in the midst of a crisis. This is not a healthy life-style, and it can lead to long-term health problems. So proceed with caution.

Better Brain Waves: A shift in brain waves takes place when you are working in the wee hours of the morning. Have you ever found that the work or writing you do between 2:00 and 5:00 A.M. is much better than you can ever imagine yourself doing during regular working hours? I recall, when I was in school, making some of my best grades on papers that were written at the last moment during all-nighters.

Although it is a no-no to most people, deep fatigue can block the logic of traditional thinking and. Some people find that they are far more likely to generate totally fresh, creative work during their second wind. The author of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll, and other famous authors are known to have worked through many sleepless nights to generate the fantasies and intriguing stories that have lived on as timeless treasures. We must balance the potential benefits of late-night work with the downside-bleary eyes and gallons of caffeine.

Intuition Speaking: Some procrastination is our intuition telling us that this task may not be worth doing. Rather than jumping in and doing it right now, give it a couple of days to see if it is still a top priority. We have noticed that with client information changing so quickly, we actually can save time by holding off on some requests.

Although detours caused by outside forces, such as added clients or unexpected requests for new program designs, are challenging because they are not anticipated, they can also lead to better customer relations, improved services, and innovations. Sharon Melville, vice president of corporate services for Career Development Services, Rochester, New York, tells us:

“On our work plan (which we are rigorous about keeping updated) there is a page called ‘Unexpected Detours’ following each section. In today’s world, one must allow for these. We reward flexibility by documenting what happened and what we did. This also helps us recognize those people who have flexible attitudes and are willing to pitch in to make a project work. We need people who thrive on change, can handle the unexpected, and work well in teams. We place a high value on this in our organization.”

Enlist the help of others: When you are a solo act, you limit what you can do.

But when you make personal shifts so that you can participate in whole-brained planning, you attract the support of other people who are strong where you are not. You can accomplish more because of the synergy of the group and can focus on expanding your gifts instead of staying stuck in your blind spots and weaknesses.

If you find that you typically ignore your plans and frustrate your family and co-workers because you plan with them, only to go in an opposite direction, forgive yourself! You are classically divergent in this trait. Knowing the reasons for your behavior helps. You do not have a fatal flaw in your character. You are not a terrible person because you don't like to follow through on your projects. Instead, you are a source of creativity, fresh ideas, and energy. When you know the causes of your actions, you can see ways to achieve greater satisfaction from the tasks you complete and find ways to work more harmoniously with others.

Invite those around you to remind you gently when you frustrate them by not honoring mutual plans. The "gently" part is critical. If others pound on you for your "failures," it is likely to trigger rebellion and resentment. You might suggest to them that it is easier for you to cooperate and return to a convergent plan if they can encourage and invite, rather than accuse and blame. Ask for what you want in advance and let others know when their positive encouragement helps you.

The advertisement features a laptop on the left displaying a web browser interface with a list of contacts and a text message conversation. A blue double-headed arrow points from the laptop to an HTC smartphone on the right, which also displays the same text message conversation. The laptop screen shows a contact list with names like 'Annamaria Jensen', 'Anders Samuelson', 'Andreas Johnson', 'Andrew McDonald', 'Anja Petersen', 'Anja Oksanen', 'Anna Hide', 'Anna Skovhede', 'Anne Croft', 'Anne Nayr', 'Annette Tyhonen', 'Arne McPherson', 'Aske Pind Uhdensup', and 'Kamphan Mahmood'. The text messages are from 'Elias' and 'Elias Maar'.

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Conclusion: Could it Really Be a Good Thing?

If you're reading this, chances are that procrastination is not your friend. Most of the time, it seems like procrastination leads to nothing but anxiety, disappointment, and shame. So, if that's the case, then why is changing it so hard? One reason may be that, like anything, procrastination has its benefits. Some procrastinators actually delay tasks deliberately because they like to work under pressure or feel challenged by approaching deadlines. These active procrastinators feel in control of their time and use it purposefully. They are less avoidant, have lower stress levels, and higher self-efficacy than passive procrastinators (Chu and Choi 2005). So while they may put things off, unlike passive procrastinators, they are not paralyzed by worry and indecision-and they get things done.

If you're an active procrastinator, you choose to put things off because you like the adrenaline rush that comes with getting things done right at the wire. You enjoy the challenge and you don't really want to change. If you identify more with the passive procrastinator, however, you already know how procrastination interferes with your life-the missed opportunities, the damaged relationships, and the constant stress, anxiety, and guilt.

No doubt, you've tried before but let's face it: changing is hard. One of the main barriers to building the motivation to change your avoidance is that procrastination actually has a number of benefits. Most people don't think of procrastination in these terms, that there are a lot of good things about it. We typically just think of procrastination as a negative thing. But, while the benefits of procrastination are often hidden, they can sap your motivation to change nonetheless. Some examples of the benefits of procrastination include:

- You get to put off unpleasant tasks in favor of more enjoyable things.
- Problems may end up getting solved without any effort from you.
- You can avoid the possibility of failure-or success.
- You get to avoid the discomfort of doing something you dread.
- You can avoid the anxiety you feel about the task.
- Someone may come to your rescue and do it for you.
- The demands placed on you get lifted because you dragged your feet.

Whatever the benefits of procrastination are for you, it can help to be aware of them as you work to turn your procrastination habits around. To build true motivation to change, motivation that will see you through the hard work necessary to achieve your goals, it can be helpful to conduct a cost-benefit analysis and pit the costs and benefits of procrastination against each other to see which side wins out. To do so, simply divide a sheet of paper down the middle. On the left side, under “Costs” you can list all the drawbacks of avoiding unpleasant tasks. On the right side, under “Benefits” list all the benefits of putting things off. When you are done, take a close look at each side. Which wins? Is your procrastination working for you? Or against you?

The answer will be different for each person reading this. But, if you’ve decided that the benefits of procrastination are not worth it compared to the havoc it wreaks on your personal and professional life, now may be the time to make some changes. Look to future posts for tips on how to overcome procrastination, decrease stress and anxiety and improve productivity. You’ll lose the safety net that procrastination can provide, but it will be well worth it.