

# ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTER

## STUDY SKILLS LIBRARY

### *Understanding Procrastination*

#### **Discussion**

Procrastination is a complex psychological behavior that affects everyone to some degree or another. With some it can be a minor problem; with others it is a source of considerable stress and anxiety. Procrastination is only remotely related to time management, (procrastinators often know exactly what they should be doing, even if they cannot do it), which is why very detailed schedules usually are no help.

#### **Characteristics**

The procrastinator is often remarkably optimistic about his ability to complete a task on a tight deadline; this is usually accompanied by expressions of reassurance that everything is under control. *Therefore, there is no need to start.* For example, he may estimate that a paper will take only five days to write; he has fifteen days; there is plenty of time; no need to start now. Lulled by a false sense of security, time passes. At some point, he crosses over an imaginary starting time and suddenly realizes, "Oh no! - I am not in control! There isn't enough time!"

At this point, considerable effort is directed towards completing the task, and work progresses. This sudden spurt of energy is the source of the erroneous feeling that "I only work well under pressure." Actually, at this point you are making progress only because you haven't any choice. Your back is against the wall and there are no alternatives. Progress is being made, but you have lost your freedom.

Barely completed in time, the paper may actually earn a fairly good grade; whereupon the student experiences mixed feelings: pride of accomplishment (sort-of), scorn for the professor who cannot recognize substandard work, and guilt for getting an undeserved grade. But the net result is reinforcement: the procrastinator is rewarded positively for his poor behavior. ("Look at the decent grade I got after all!") As a result, the counterproductive behavior is repeated over and over again.

Positive reinforcement for delay (a good grade) is a principal contributor to continued procrastination.

#### **Other Characteristics**

- Low Self-Confidence: The procrastinator may struggle with feelings of low self-confidence and low self-esteem. He may insist upon a high level of performance even though he may feel inadequate or incapable of actually achieving that level.
- I'm Too Busy: Procrastination may be used to call attention to how busy he is. "Obviously I cannot do such and such because my affairs are so complicated and so demanding. That is why I am late, etc." The procrastinator may even spend considerable time justifying his reasons; time that could be spent doing the work.
- Stubbornness: Procrastination may be used as an expression of stubbornness or pride: "Don't think you can push me around. I will do it when I'm good and ready."

- Manipulation: Procrastination may be used to control or manipulate the behavior of others. "They cannot start if I am not there." Let's face it: deliberate delay drives others crazy.
- Coping with Pressures: Procrastination is often truly difficult to eradicate since the delayed behavior has become a method of coping with day-to-day pressures and experiences. Obviously if one is cured, others will put new demands and expectations upon you. It's easier to have an excuse, to delay, to put off.
- A Frustrated Victim: The procrastinator often feels like a victim: he cannot understand his behavior or why he cannot get work done like others. The whole thing is a frustrating mystery. The reasons for his behavior are hidden from him.

### **Benefits of Overcoming Procrastination**

*What are the benefits of overcoming procrastination?* Peace of mind, a feeling of strength and purpose, and healthy feeling of being in charge of your life. While procrastination makes you feel weak, useless, and helpless, taking charge of your life will make you feel strong, competent, and capable. You will experience increased personal freedom!

### **Four Simple Reasons for Procrastination**

1. *Difficult* - the task seems hard to do; we naturally tend to avoid difficult things in favor of those which seem easy to us.
2. *Time-consuming* - the task will take large blocks of time, and large blocks of time are unavailable until the weekend.
3. *Lack of knowledge or skills* - no one wants to make mistakes, so wait until you learn how before you start.
4. *Fears* - everyone will know how you screwed up.

*The simple cure?* Do everything opposite. Tell yourself: this isn't so hard, it won't take long, and I am sure that I know how to do it, or that I can learn while I'm doing it. And no one else really cares because they are all so busy with their own problems.

### **Four Complex Reasons for Procrastination**

1. Perfectionism: Unrealistically high expectations or standards. Everything must go completely right. It may be either imposed or self-imposed. The perfectionist is long on criticism and short on praise. It creates a high degree of dissatisfaction and frustration because seldom is anything accomplished that is completely acceptable the very first time. The perfectionist nit-picks it to death. A perfectionist may delay in starting a project because he feels overwhelmed by the sheer amount of energy it will take to criticize and nit-pick something, and all the frustration it will generate in the process. The words should, ought, must, have to, occur frequently in the person's conversation. (I should get straight A's; I must do everything right the first time, etc.) "If you can't do it right, don't do it at all." The desire to have everything absolutely perfect may mask problems of self-esteem and self-confidence.

**How to resolve:**

1. Try self-reassurance that this effort or version will be good enough.
2. Make an effort to praise what you have done.
3. It's impossible to eradicate all mistakes.
4. You have undoubtedly found all the fatal errors by now.
5. Finally, remind yourself that great writers, poets, artists at one time or another completed their work; therefore, it will be okay to say that yours is done also.

2. Anger/Hostility: If we are unhappy with someone, we'll often withhold our best efforts. For example, if you are upset with a professor, you are likely to delay in starting a demanding project as a way of "getting even." But you are the one who loses; you are the one with the low grade.

**How to resolve:** Determine that you are the one who is feeling upset and see how your actions will actually harm you in the long run. You are not going to let how you feel about a particular class stand in the way of your personal future, are you?

3. Low Frustration Tolerance: Circumstances overwhelm you easily; you find situations radically intolerable and terribly unfair. Frustration is characterized by whining and complaining, and such phrases as "it isn't fair," "this is too hard," and "no one else has to," etc. Feeling the way you do, it seems reasonable to "put it off" until you feel better about doing the work. The trouble is, you feel just as frustrated the next day.

**How to resolve:** the more you want something and can't have it, the greater your level of frustration.

1. Get help from someone who can show you how to solve the problem
2. Learn how to temporarily postpone your desires. Most of the time, you will eventually get what you want.

4. Self-Downing: This happens when you continually minimize your own skills and abilities and express doubt about your ability to succeed. A person who habitually puts himself down tends to disbelieve himself even when he is successful: it was "just dumb luck." In addition, he may also find it hard to accept praise and compliments for work performed - false modesty. ("Wow, you did so well on the exam!" "Oh, I just lucked out; I really didn't know it all that well.") The trouble with self-downing is that, given a long enough time, the person will actually come to believe that he is incapable of certain levels of achievement. Self-downing results in procrastination because the person who is uncomfortable with success will seek ways to become less successful and less visible. Turn in that important quarterly report late, and soon success will fade. ("Why did they fire you?" "I told them all along I couldn't sustain the pace, and see! I was right. I can't work at that level.")

**How to resolve:**

1. Practice accepting compliments about your work performance by simply saying "Thank you."
2. Figure out why you feel uncomfortable with success. Did significant others in your life often make you feel that way? Were you taught to minimize your success? Why is success so scary? Will it make you stand out in the crowd? Do you feel as though others will not accept you if you are successful?

- Remember to compliment and praise yourself for work accomplished.

### The Inner Workings of Procrastination

**A = Activating Event.** The activating event is whatever you are putting off, such as studying, tests or unpleasant tasks.

**B = Belief System.** These are your “hidden” feelings about the task; your feelings govern your motivation. If you have negative feelings, you will tend to put off or delay. These feelings control your response.

**C = Consequence.** This is what we actually do. There are two approaches: rational and irrational. A rational response is “I don’t like writing papers at all, but I had better get going on it anyway.” An irrational approach is “I hate writing papers, and even though it’s due next week, I’ll start it later.”

The fact is, all tasks are really neutral. Examine your belief system, understand why you dislike the task, and then change your way of thinking.

### Steps to the Cure

- Realize you are delaying something unnecessarily.
- Discover the real reasons for your delay. List them.
- Dispute those real reasons and overcome them. Be vigorous.
- Begin the task.

### Practice What You’ve Learned

- Think of one thing you are currently procrastinating on, and write it on the line below. It might be personal, school or work-related.

\_\_\_\_\_

- Now write all the reasons for your delay. This may take five or ten minutes because some of them are really hidden from you. These reasons are the controlling influences. Write down as many as possible.
- In the “Arguments Against Delay” column, argue against all the reasons for delay in a convincing manner. If you can argue against them successfully, you will be able to start the task.

*I’m delaying on \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_*

Reasons for Delay	Arguments Against Delay
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1. _____	_____
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2. _____	_____
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3. _____	_____
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4. \_\_\_\_\_

### Some Tools That Will Help

- Make the tasks look small and easy in your mind. (“I’ve written lots of excellent papers; this is just one more paper.”)
- Do only a small part of the task each time. (“I’ll just check out the books tonight. Later on, I’ll glance through them.”)
- Five-minute plan: Work on something for just five minutes. At the end of five minutes, switch to something else if you want. Chances are, you’ll be involved enough to keep going.
- Advertise your plans to accomplish something, and let peer pressure push you forward. (“I told everyone that I was going to finish this tonight.”)
- Use a good friend as a positive role model. If you have trouble concentrating, study in the presence of someone who doesn’t.
- Modify your environment – If you can’t study at home, find a place where you can study; or, change your study situation at home.
- Plan tomorrow and establish priorities – some students find that simply writing down reasonable starting and stopping times help them get going.
- Expect some backsliding. Don’t expect to be perfect even when you’re trying to get rid of perfectionism! So occasionally, your plans will not work. Accept setbacks and start again.

### An Insight

Procrastination is reinforcing – Every time you delay, it reinforces your negative attitude toward that task. Every time you put off something you dislike, you:

- Strengthen the habit of not doing.
- Practice avoidance instead of participation.
- Avoid acquiring training and skills.
- Indoctrinate yourself with fears.

Active participation in anything tends to give you a positive attitude toward that activity, while inactivity helps acquire an unfavorable attitude. In other words, the reason you dislike calculus is because it’s hanging over your head, worrying you. Since you haven’t acquired skills in it, you can’t do the assignments, so why try? Also, there’s a test coming up soon, and you MUST do well on it – except you know you can’t. Suddenly everything seems terribly unfair (class is too hard) and you become angry towards the teacher (he goes too fast, and he seems indifferent to my struggles.) The truth is, the sooner you get involved in your studies, the better you will feel.

### Common Impediments to Overcoming Procrastination

Procrastination is relatively hard to overcome since you can delude yourself about it so easily. The following is a list of things we often tell ourselves:

- **Mañana** - “I’ll do it tomorrow.”
- **Contingent mañana** - “I’ll do it tomorrow, if ...”

- **Grasshopperism** - "I need to have some well-earned fun first." (In Aesop's fable, the grasshopper fiddled and played all summer while the ants stored up winter supplies. When winter came, the grasshopper suffered.)
- **Escapism** - "I've got to get out for a while to clear my mind."
- **Impulsiveness** - "My problem will be solved if I change my major, or attend a different college, or ... "
- **Music and reading** - "I'll relax a while and then get started."
- **Cavalry to the Rescue** - "The professor will get sick and cancel finals!"

### Common Rationalizations

Each of these rationalizations needs to be argued against and defeated so that you can experience success. Write a rebuttal for each one.

- "I'm more productive when I work under pressure, so I'm postponing all my work until the pressure builds up and then I'll get it done easily."
- "I don't know how to do this problem, so I'm waiting until I know how before I do it."
- "This task isn't getting done because I really don't want to do it. And that's the honest truth"
- "Relax. The world isn't going to come to an end if this doesn't get done."
- "This job is easier to do when I'm in the mood, and I'm simply not in the mood right now."
- "I waited until the last moment before and it worked out okay, so why not this time?"
- "If I wait until the last minute, I won't spend so much time on it."
- "If I do this work right now, I'll miss out on a once-in-a-lifetime social event."
- "Circumstances beyond my control prevented me from doing so."
- "I've worked on this for so long that I have no interest or energy for it."

### Finally:

Now that you understand how procrastination works, and how you can greatly reduce its influence in your life, you'll experience more freedom and greater personal self-satisfaction.

Keep working on it. You may still procrastinate, but now you'll be able to resolve the situation much more quickly, which in turn will enhance your feelings of self-confidence. When you do succeed, take time to savor the moment so you will remember how good it feels. This will help the next time you need encouragement.

Treat the discovery process like a game, and have some fun with yourself.

### Bibliography

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