

Emotional Wellness

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Why Do We Procrastinate?

**“Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.”
The Earl of Chesterfield - December 26, 1749**

Almost everyone has been afflicted by procrastination at one time or another – that nagging menace that compels us to put things off for another day, another time. For some people this is a persistent problem, and for others it appears in only some areas of their lives. The result, though, is the same for everyone – increased anxiety, wasted time, poor performance, missed opportunities, guilt, excusing ourselves, and avoiding people who depend on us. There are better ways of dealing with the demands of our everyday lives. Procrastination is not a trivial problem – it causes suffering for many people.

Who is likely to procrastinate? There is no research evidence that gender and intelligence have anything to do with a tendency to procrastinate. Age may have something to do with it. One research study finds that procrastination peaks in the middle to late twenties, decreases for the next forty years, and then increases again in the sixties. Other research finds that people who feel overwhelmed and cannot readily calm down tend to put things off. There is a relationship between anxiety and procrastination. It is no surprise that people who fear failure have the problem, as well as people with low self-esteem. People with poor tolerance for frustration, difficulty in delaying gratification, or people who cannot concentrate all find it difficult to stick with a task until it is completed. Research also shows that those who have conflicts with authority figures and are rebellious have a proclivity for pro-



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Patricia uses her excellent client rapport and clinical expertise to help clients overcome their struggles. Her professional counseling experience includes work with children, adolescents, couples, individuals and families with a wide range of clinical issues. She utilizes a variety of approaches including: psychodynamic, family systems, cognitive behavioral and solution-focused theoretical frameworks to match her client needs.

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crastination. People with depression, who may have low energy and hold negative thoughts about their ability to get things done, frequently have problems with procrastination. And then there is the perfectionist. Those perfectionists who set their own standards seem to have no problem with “sloth,” but those who have adopted the standards set by others do have trouble completing their work. This is because they are sensitive to the evaluations they might receive from others – they want

“Procrastination is the thief of time.”
– Edward Young, 1742

to avoid social disapproval.

Making Up Excuses

We procrastinate:

- when the dishes don’t get done and the bed doesn’t get made;
- when that term paper is due tomorrow morning and we’re sitting in front of the TV;
- when we talk about superficial things with our partner rather than confronting some pressing issues that really need to be addressed; or
- when we play solitaire on the computer rather than getting the report done that has to be in at 5:00.

Clearly, we are neither accomplishing those things that need to be done nor confronting the underlying reasons for our procrastination. So what do we tell ourselves to justify our behavior? We may use any of a number of excuses – and here are some common ones:

Getting Bogged Down in Trivia

We spend our time on easy tasks and say that we are so busy that we cannot get to the major project. We might answer phone calls, read e-mails, clean the living room, have lunch – anything that we find simple and are emotionally prepared to do – rather than facing the task that we really have to do. We tell ourselves that we simply had to clear up these trivial tasks before tackling our project and there was no time left. Thus we gain some satisfaction from busying ourselves and alleviating our guilt, but the major task is never finished.

Putting the Blame Elsewhere

It is easy to externalize blame. “If only I had gotten that

promotion, then I would be more involved in my job.” “If only my partner would take out the garbage, I would have time to do the things I need to do.” “If I had a faster computer, I would find more enjoyment in sitting down to write the report.” The problem here is that we selectively focus on one excuse and ignore the reality of the total situation. The simple truth is that we have a project to do and we have to take into account everything that helps or impedes us, and then move on from there. Things are seldom perfect in anything we do.

Letting Emotions Interfere With Productivity

Writing a report might bring up feelings of anxiety – after all, we have to think of the right words, organize it logically, look up relevant information. We might feel overwhelmed because of our past experiences with writing reports. Or we might feel angry that the lawn has to be mowed, especially when our partner keeps harping on us to get it done (in which case the anger is based in being told what to do, not the grass!). We need to separate our emotions from the task itself. In fact, working at the task gives us a good opportunity to see what our emotions are and to confront them honestly. This then allows us see where the feelings came from so that we can achieve more understanding of them. Avoiding painful feelings lets them linger on into the future, but acknowledging them can lead to resolution of our emotional issues.

Setting Up Roadblocks

“I’ll diet after the holidays.” “I’ll wait until I’m in the mood to call my old friend.” “I’ll buy new clothes when I lose twenty pounds.” Although there may be some logic to all of these strategies, they exemplify a major cause of procrastination. We set up artificial barriers which may have little do with actually completing the task at hand. When we place limitations on our ability to work, it makes the completion of the task all the more difficult.

Being Perfect...or Nothing At All

Our society places great emphasis on doing the best job every time. When we try to please other people, rather than ourselves, we run the risk of rejection and failure. Perfectionism has its place. After all, it can help motivate us to get started and to do the best job we can. But taken to the extreme, perfectionism can also inhibit our efforts completely. “If I can’t do the best job possible, I’ll do nothing at all – or at least not until I absolutely have to.” Coming to terms with perfectionistic tendencies can be a challenging but healthy process. We can examine why we need to please others rather than

ourselves, the degree to which this pattern intrudes on various aspects of our lives, and the extent to which it helps – and hinders us.

Procrastination is a serious problem for many people. It can undermine our sense of well being and prevent us from experiencing the full potential of our lives. A portion of our time is spent pleurably and a portion is spent on tasks we may not particularly enjoy. Such is the nature of life. To avoid the disagreeable is, unfortunately, to compromise the pleasurable. The person who is emotionally healthy is one who is familiar with and can tolerate the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the light and the dark. Living completely entails embracing our responsibilities, relishing our pleasures, and appreciating our time.

Fourteen Tips for Overcoming Procrastination

1. **Examine your “shoulds.”** And this applies to “oughts,” “musts,” and “have-tos.” When we feel obligated to someone else, we may feel inhibited. Change these statements to “wants,” and then you assume responsibility yourself for doing a task. Rather than saying, “I should call my son’s teacher,” change it to “I want to call my son’s teacher.”

2. **Look at your excuses rationally.** In fact, make up a list of the excuses you use which prevent you from getting a job done. Then examine each excuse and beside it write out a more realistic thought. For example, “I’m not in the mood” can be reinterpreted as “Mood doesn’t get the job done.”

3. **Use self-motivating statements.** How we define a task can alter our motivation for completing it. Many people repeat phrases to themselves, or even post notes in visible places, which serve to spur them on. Try out phrases like, “The sooner I’m done, the sooner I’m free,” or “There’s no time like the present.”

4. **Make up a To Do List.** Write out a list of things you need to do this week (or day – or month) and then cross them off, one by one, when they are done. With this list you can see exactly what needs to be accomplished, and you can get a feeling of fulfillment as the list gets whittled down.

5. **Set priorities.** On your To Do list, rank the jobs that need to be done in order of their importance. Then focus on only one job at a time.

6. **Break the task down into smaller pieces.** This is one of the most important ways to combat procrastination. Write down all the steps involved in your project and see each step as a manageable job that can get done with little effort. Even if we dislike some duties, we can handle them if they last only for a short time.

7. **Look at time.** We sometimes have a poor conception of how much time it takes to complete a task. Rather than panicking at the thought that you only have a week to get that profit and loss statement together, break the parts of the task down into real time. You may find that this is only a two-hour job.

8. **Take a stand.** Write yourself a contract to complete a job and sign it. Or tell a supportive friend that you plan to finish a job by a certain date. Make your project a public endeavor rather than keeping it to yourself. Gaining the support of others helps when you feel stymied.

9. **Organize.** Make sure you have a clean work area and all of your materials in front of you. Eliminate distractions like the TV blaring in the background if you need to concentrate. Warn others that you will be unavailable (or unbearable) during a certain time.

10. **Manage your stress.** There are a number of techniques one can use to deal with anxiety – mindfulness meditation, deep breathing, progressive relaxation, visualization, physical exercise, relaxation tapes, humor, and music. These techniques can be learned in therapy.

11. **Just get started.** You don’t have to wait until you feel inspired to write that speech. Just write whatever comes to mind, and you can revise it later. Even the longest journey begins with one small step.

12. **Reward yourself when you accomplish a small goal.** Rather than procrastinating a whole afternoon by calling friends, call a friend only when you have written a page of the report as a way of rewarding yourself.

13. **Look at all you have accomplished.** Rather than punishing yourself for not having done enough, take the more positive approach of examining all that you *have* done. Is the glass half empty or half full?

14. **Celebrate the completion of your task.** Have a specific reward in mind for when your project is finished. Go out for dinner. Go to a movie. Take a weekend trip. Have a party. The celebration should be equal to your task.

The Back Page

Can I Really Change An Old Habit Like Procrastination?

Procrastination may be such an ingrained pattern that it seems impossible to change it. While the tips presented on the previous page are effective for many, it may help to see procrastination as a symptom of some of our underlying personality issues. For example, negative self-image often plays a role in our tendency to put off accomplishing tasks. Sometimes we postpone our duties because we lack self-confidence or feel that we might be rejected or abandoned by others if we don't turn in a perfect job. For some people, procrastination is a symptom of depression. Our reasons for procrastinating are as varied as people are different. Therapy is the best way to explore these deeper issues in a supportive, trustworthy, and professional setting. The goal is to define procrastination as a symptom of a deeper issue and then to explore the nature of this underlying problem and discover how to deal with it more effectively. Your life becomes more satisfying when you can find ways to express the most effective parts of yourself.

Yes, an old habit like procrastination can be changed. You have to use the techniques that work for you and remember that these techniques are not a simple all-or-nothing "cure." Look on behavior change as a process composed of many steps. You may have success in dealing with some components of the problem only to find later that you are resistant to making more changes. Then, in therapy, you look into your resistance to see why moving on is difficult at a particular stage. And don't forget that most people relapse. Research has found that only about 20 percent of all people make complete changes on their first try. Most people have setbacks during the change process. Expect this to happen and look on it as something positive – after all, you can learn from your setbacks. To relapse does not mean that you have to start all over again.

You can change uncomfortable patterns of behavior, and procrastination, fortunately, is one of those habits most amenable to change. But don't put it off – just do it!