

We all do it – you might be doing it right now! Procrastination is the act of putting off tasks or activities that you should be focusing on now, usually in favour of doing something more fun, or more comfortable, than what you're supposed to be doing. It's a clinically observed behaviour in most people – it's the delay between when we intend to do a job, and when we actually do it.

Procrastination takes on many forms – organising stuff, answering emails, making cups of tea, doing the dishes – None of these are bad in themselves, obviously, but when we do them instead of doing something more important then we could be in trouble. Even seemingly important tasks like making a to-do list can slip quickly into procrastination if not monitored!

The strange aspect of procrastination is that it doesn't appear to make us happy, even while we are doing it. Journalist James Surowiecki wrote "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." In one study, 65% of students surveyed before they started working on an essay 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.

### **So, how to avoid it and what to do?**

#### **Tip 1: See Yourself Procrastinating**

If you're honest with yourself, you probably know when you're procrastinating. If you're not sure, MindTools has the [Are You a Procrastinator?](#) self test that you can do. Which could be procrastinating in itself!

Here are some other indicators that you're procrastinating:

- Spending all day on your To-Do List, then only undertaking low priority tasks from that list. Ignoring the important things on your list is another one!
- Reading e-mails several times without starting work on them or deciding what you're going to do with them.
- Sitting down to start a high-priority job, and then immediately making a cup of tea.
- Regularly saying "Yes" to unimportant tasks for other people, instead of getting on with the thing you've identified as important from your own list.
- Waiting for the "right mood" or the "right time" to tackle the important task at hand.

#### **Tip 2: Procrastination is not always a bad thing**

We tend to avoid asks that are boring, frustrating or difficult. We also avoid tasks that are unstructured or ambiguous, which is why we sometimes need a warm-up. You wouldn't run a marathon without stretching first, and if you're about to embark on a large creative or

business project, you might also need to stretch yourself. Answering a few emails or doing the dishes allows you to undertake smaller tasks that are specific and finite, and that then allows you to build up the confidence you need to attend to the larger responsibilities.

Just don't let things get out of hand! James Clear suggests only doing 'warm-up' activities that take 2 minutes – I prefer to allow a block of 30 minutes to attend to all the various small things, and then I settle in to work on the larger tasks.

### **Tip 3: Work Out WHY You're Procrastinating**

Working out your lack of motivation would help you correct the issue. It will differ from task to task, and person to person, but below are some of the main reasons:

- The task is boring and/or unpleasant – you need a reward or some other motivation, or develop a “just do it” mentality;
- You are disorganised – you need some structure and perhaps a prioritised list;
- You feel overwhelmed – you need to break the task down in to smaller bite-sized chunks to make it easier for yourself;
- The task is too hard/you lack the skills – you need to get extra training, or outsource some of the task to someone else;
- You just “don't wanna” –In *The Feeling Good Handbook* (1989), Dr David Burns writes that the “doing” comes first, and then the motivation. In other words, starting a task is the real motivator. Take the first step, regardless of how small, and see if that gets the motivation flowing;
- You're worried you're not good enough – check yourself for Imposter Syndrome, and at last give it a go. It's a form of self-sabotage to deny yourself enough time to complete a task, and it's a very bad habit that needs correcting to stay in the game;
- It won't be perfect – Perfectionism often underlies the fear of failure. Consider that the problem is actually the unrealistic standards that have been set, not your failure to meet them.
- “You Can't Make Me” – Rebellion and resistance can underlie procrastinating behaviour. Are you rebelling against schedules, standards, and expectations? If you are, then maybe you need to decide what you want for your life. Don't just react to someone else's decisions – what exactly do you want to achieve?

### **Tip 4: Institute Consequences**

We usually end up meeting the deadlines that other people set for us because there is a balance between reward and punishment. For example, even if working for a client is not motivating, the reward will be payment and the punishment will be a lost client and a bad reputation. Find ways to reward getting things done, such as opening a bottle of wine or indulging in some internet shopping. Similarly, punishment could be denying yourself those things. Also remember to notice how good it feels to finish things!

### **Tip 5: Get a Buddy**

Ask someone else to check up on you, some to be accountable to. Peer pressure works! This principle works for weight loss and seeing a personal trainer, and it's widely recognised as a highly effective approach.

## Tip 6: Get into Better Habits

Easier said than done, obviously! Procrastination is a habit, just like any other. You won't be able to improve overnight, but if you persistently stop the worst of your procrastinating you'll develop better habits. Catch yourself in the moment, and force yourself back to work. Use as many approaches as you can to maximise your focus and stay on task. Some methods will work better than for others, and for some tasks than others. Just don't quit!

In his 1986 article "At Last, My Research Article on Procrastination", published in the *Journal of Research on Personality*, Clarry Lay noted that procrastinating behaviour is independent of need for achievement, energy, or self-esteem. In other words, you may be a procrastinator even if you're confident in your own abilities, energetic, and enjoy achieving things. Work on making better work habits, and perhaps the worst of your procrastination will be a thing of the past.

### More resources on making better work habits:

- James Clear – <http://jamesclear.com/how-to-stop-procrastinating>
- The One Thing: <http://www.the1thing.com/resources>
- Jeff Goins – <http://goinswriter.com/writing-daily/>
- *A Brief Guide to World Domination*, by Chris Guillebeau - <http://chrisguillebeau.com/files/2008/06/worlddomination.pdf>
- *Time Management for Creative People*, by Mark McGuinness - <http://www.creativeplusbusiness.com/freestuff/#TimeManagement>
- One Goal Worksheet: <http://jessicaabel.com/>
- <http://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/health/article/2016/02/03/habits-highly-creative>
- <http://alifeofproductivity.com/why-you-procrastinate-10-tactics-to-help-you-stop/>
- *At Last, My Research Article on Procrastination*, by Clarry Lay. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0092656686901273>

And for some evidence that procrastination is actually GOOD for you, read <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/procrastination-makes-you-more-creative-research-says-a6923626.html>

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