

Overcoming Procrastination

What is procrastination?

Procrastination is the delay or avoidance of a task or decision against our own intentions, and which typically makes things more difficult later on. We may “put things off” in many areas of our life, such as in our work, in our health, or socially.

Why is it a problem?

Many people procrastinate. Some people procrastinate often. It may seem okay to do this because putting things off helps us to avoid unpleasant tasks or decisions in the short-term. It may not even seem like a problem because eventually most things seem to get done. However, chronic procrastination can be very costly.

Research shows that “procrastinators” often perform poorly and do not achieve their desired goals, missing out on many opportunities. They may have strained relationships, experience poor mental and physical health, and unhappiness.

Do you recognise any of the following procrastination tendencies?

- **Feelings:** Do you find it stressful when there are things you “have” to do? Do you find difficult and unpleasant tasks distressing? Do you feel overwhelmed because of the imagined effort to complete a task or make a decision? Are you often stressed, anxious or depressed because you regularly avoid things and put things off?
- **Thoughts:** Do you spend a lot of time worrying about an upcoming task or decision instead of doing something about it? Do you constantly doubt your decisions and actions, fearing that you’ll make mistakes? Do you think in “musts” and “shoulds”?
- **Behaviours:** Do you have a tendency to delay things? Do you waste time even when there’s things that need doing? Do you often postpone and avoid things that are difficult? Are you paralyzed by perfection where you procrastinate or fall behind because of a need to do something “just right”? Are you indecisive, delaying until you have all of the information at your disposal?

Challenging your procrastination

Thought

“I’ll do it later” is my default thinking—I can’t seem to get motivated to do things even though putting it off makes it more difficult in the long run.

Alternative

Sometimes I just need to get things done, and on time. I can try giving it a go—it may actually take less time and energy than I imagined. Besides, I’d probably waste more energy by putting it off and worrying about it.

Feeling

I always wait until I feel “in the mood” to do a task, or feel like I have the energy to tackle it later on, especially if it’s a difficult or unpleasant task.

Alternative

I can still get things done even if I don’t feel “ready”. Even if the task is unpleasant, I can still be effective in it. Belief is half of achievement.

Action

It’s hard for me to make a decision until I have all of the information.

Alternative

I may not be able to get every piece of information to make a “perfect” choice. Sometimes it is better to make a decision now, based on current circumstances. I can adjust later if new information comes to hand.



What can I do differently?

Actions

Being uncomfortable doesn't have to stop me from getting things done

We often shy away from tasks and decisions because they are unpleasant—our instinct is to avoid any discomfort. We may wait until we feel “ready” to face these situations: we postpone until we feel “in the mood” - waiting for our energy levels to be full, our skills capable, and our confidence high. It's as though we believe we can't function properly until we're comfortable. However, avoiding things until we're at ease won't get our tasks completed.

Sometimes you wait for the right time and you run out of time altogether.

Regina Sirois

Instead, we can choose to work within our discomfort, managing our distress whilst getting things done—dealing with our short-term pain for long-term gain. There are many techniques for relaxation and sitting mindfully with discomfort. If feeling overwhelmed, step back to acknowledge your distress, prepare to deal with it, and then step forward to achieve your tasks.

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

Theodore Roosevelt

Explore: *Relaxation techniques; managing worry; discomfort tolerance; mindfulness; Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; approach-avoidance motivation*

Uncertainty and a fear of mistakes won't stop me from starting

We often look for certainty before we make choices or take action. We fear making mistakes or doing the wrong thing, and we feel indecisive and constantly doubt our actions. As such, we do as little as possible so that we can avoid errors—we procrastinate until we're sure we can act “perfectly”.

A person who makes few mistakes makes little progress

Bryant McGill

When we are unsure, it can be hard to move forward, so try creating a bit of certainty: test a decision or action to reduce the ambiguity. Try things out—take small risks and test different options, allowing for mistakes. This will provide feedback about what works and what doesn't, and the small steps allows chances to learn and adjust. These explorations give you practice, helping you to feel more certain, and it's more likely you'll do the tasks well.

As long as you're moving, it's easier to steer.

Anonymous

Explore: *Indecisiveness; decision-making; fear of failure; perfectionism; positive risks*

Giving it a go—moving from “I'll do it later” to “now is the time”

We may not yet have the confidence or know-how to consistently get things done on time. However, with persistence, knowledge, and self-belief, there is much we can achieve. We can choose to be proactive rather than reactive.

The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.

Chinese proverb

Plan to “get things done”: start earlier than you need to, and give yourself time to understand what's involved in the upcoming task or decision—what's the big picture and how can it be broken down into smaller steps? A mountain is not climbed in one leap! Achievement requires action—start small and keep moving, gaining confidence from every step you complete.

To finish, first you must start.

Unknown

Explore: *Goal setting; SMART goals; planning; time management; achievement*

Resources

Resources

For useful resources see www.adavic.org.au/PG-fact-sheets-procrastination.aspx

Talk to others

ADAVIC can refer you to therapists who specialize in working with procrastination. You may also want to share your experiences and seek support from fellow ‘procrastinators’ - we can link you to peer support groups, phone support, and online forums.

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