

PROCRASTINATION

What is Procrastination?

"Procrastination is the grave in which opportunity is buried." ~ Author Unknown

To procrastinate is to put off intentionally the doing of something that should be done.

Most people put tasks off from time to time but if you find you are doing this so much that it seriously affects your academic work or other aspects of your life, then you may have a problem with procrastination. Procrastination is self-defeating behaviour and can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, depression and self-doubt, and generally make you feel BAD.

Why do Students Procrastinate?

It's easy to think (perhaps other people have told you) that you're lazy. However, there may be practical or complicated emotional reasons for procrastination which are worth exploring. Understanding why and how you procrastinate can help you overcome procrastination. Common reasons are:

- Poor time management or not managing time wisely
- An inability to prioritise
- Too many tasks to do at any one time
- Anxiety or fear about the task - time is spent worrying rather than doing
- Difficulty concentrating, perhaps because of other problems
- Not knowing what is required of you in order to do the task
- Feeling overwhelmed by the task
- Concern about failing or not meeting standards set by self or others, of not being good enough
- Perfectionism, believing that anything short of perfect is a complete failure
- Fear of success and its possible consequences
- As an excuse - shortness of time allows the comforting thought "It would have been better if I had had enough time"
- Negative feelings that you're not doing enough. Whatever you are doing you should be doing something else, it's already too late and you have wasted too much time
- All or nothing thinking – where one setback is seen as a total catastrophe
- Being bored by the task
- Never having learned how to sort out problems in the past
- Avoidance of things which are disliked or difficult
- Resentment or anger that you would rather be doing something else more enjoyable or the feeling that someone else is making you do the work

Procrastination has a power of its own. It always involves something other than you being in control of what you're doing. Overcoming procrastination involves resisting this control and taking charge.

How to Overcome Procrastination

Overcoming procrastination usually involves both better organisational and time-management skills as well as a clearer understanding of its personal meaning. There is no one set of instructions for curing yourself of the procrastination habit so try anything and everything. If you experiment you are regaining control.

Try these things to get you started

BE REALISTIC

Focus on what's realistically possible rather than on what you 'should' be doing. Break things down into manageable steps. For example "I'll aim to get to the end of Chapter 3" rather than "I have to read 5 books". What's your goal for today? It may be better expressed as a chunk of time rather than a task:- "I'll work for an hour this morning" regardless of how much work you do in that hour. Stay focussed on the goal you have defined - it's important not to let negative thoughts undermine it: "I've only got to the end of Chapter 3 - there are 7 more chapters to go and then I've got to write 10,000 words.....". That way you can enjoy a sense of achievement and build up confidence for the next step rather than being overwhelmed by thinking about the whole task.

JUST DO IT

"Procrastination is something best put off until tomorrow." ~Gerald Vaughan

Accept there is no magic wand - you need to do the task! You can trick yourself into starting before you've even thought about whether you want to do it or not. Sit down at your workstation with everything to hand, and just start! When you have to stop working, make sure the task is easy to resume so that you can stop (and start again) even mid-sentence.

BREAK THE HABIT

Procrastination works as a set of habits. “I always go on email first, then on Facebook, and then I have a coffee, and then...” Habits get installed just like computer programs – but they can also be uninstalled. Try changing a habit, or more than one. If you tend to procrastinate in your room, work somewhere else. If you’re more likely to procrastinate in the evening, then set the alarm and work in the morning. Set some time aside for preparation but be honest with yourself. Don’t use this as an excuse for more procrastination!

ORGANISATION

"Someday is not a day of the week." ~Author Unknown

Use organisational aids such as diaries, planners, “to do” lists, post-its. This may sound boring but it frees up your head and reduces anxiety about forgetting something important. When you stop a piece of work, leave a reminder about what to do next. Number your list of things to do in order of importance. What is to be done first? People who are organised have more time to be spontaneous!

ASK FOR HELP

If you're putting something off because you feel stuck, ask for help. Speak to someone on the course, or your tutor. Find an ally, someone who can support your decisions, praise you when you keep to them, and remind you when you don't. Find someone you can work with. They can also help you structure your time, if you find that difficult.

GET RID OF GUILT

If you only want to spend a minimal amount of time on a piece of work, that's ok too! Accept that and don't waste time feeling guilty. Devote only that amount of time which is appropriate for each part of the task. It is better, especially in exams, to do all the questions fairly well than one question perfectly and the rest too rushed. As you do the tasks on your to-do list, try to stay aware of the balance between how important the task is and how much time you are spending on it.

REWARDS

Give yourself rewards when you accomplish something. Enjoy it when you tick off a completed task. Plan a treat for when you get to the end of something or the end of a time period. Look after yourself. Eat well, sleep well, relax well and play well. No one can just work all the time. To be effective you need to look after yourself physically and that means scheduling time for food, friends, enjoyable activities and sleep. And you're less likely to let distracting activities take over if you know that you're allowing yourself regular breaks.

SELF TALK

“Self-talk” means the messages we all give ourselves throughout the day. Have you heard what you say to yourself? Are you very harsh: “I’ll never get it right”, “I’m a complete failure”, “I’m so stupid”? Find a phrase that motivates you: “Every journey begins with a small step” or “Most jobs need completion not perfection”. Dwell on your strengths, on tasks you have accomplished and feel good about, in order to remind yourself that you can be successful. Change the words you use from “have to” and “can’t” to “choose to” and “choose not to”. Although this won’t always be true, it will probably be more honest most of the time.

CHALLENGE YOUR SELF SABOTAGE

If you procrastinate you are making the work harder: *"Putting off an easy thing makes it hard. Putting off a hard thing makes it impossible."* ~George Claude Lorimer

Recognise your self-defeating behaviour and its associated thinking. Try to work out why you procrastinate, what do you *gain* from it? Find out how to overcome such behaviour. Consult a self-help book or leaflet, a tutor, supervisor, colleague or counsellor. If you feel resentful about having to work, ask yourself “Who do I resent?” or “Who am I angry with?”. This might help you feel that the task is yours and if you make it yours again, perhaps you will be less likely to procrastinate.

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