

A Cure for Procrastination

Procrastination is “the art of keeping up with yesterday and avoiding today.”

Wayne Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones*

(Handout adapted from Dr. Sandra L. Davis*)

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination is simply postponing action. For some, procrastination is just a once-in-a-while nuisance; for others it is a constant nemesis. If you can honestly say that you put things off by choice, without guilt or anxiety, then you need read no further. If, on the other hand, procrastination prevents you from doing things that you want to do, or results in troublesome consequences, the material below should be helpful.

When do we procrastinate?

Do any of the following situations sound familiar?

- Staying in a job in which you feel stuck and dissatisfied.
- Not tackling bad habits such as smoking, excess drinking, overeating.
- Avoiding a confrontation with a friend, significant other, spouse, or boss.
- Using the “I’d do it if I had the time excuse”, if you are challenged about what is undone.
- Always criticizing how others behave rather than being a “doer” yourself.
- Starting term papers and projects so late that you do not have a chance to do well.
- Putting off menial or unpleasant tasks like cleaning your apartment, doing laundry, or going grocery shopping (provided you place importance on these tasks and do not have domestic help).
- Becoming ill on the day you were to be part of something unpleasant.

If so, you may be suffering from procrastination.

Why do we procrastinate?

How many Sunday nights have you sat down to write your week’s “to do” list with every good intention of completing every task only to find that by Tuesday you have conveniently lost your list and are once again procrastinating? Many people think that if they just set their mind to it, the procrastination will go away. This is called “magical thinking.” Nothing disappears of its own accord. But understanding is the first step to changing your behavior. So, first try to understand what causes procrastination and why it persists despite momentary attempts at change.

Procrastination is a safety blanket.

No behavior is continued unless it has a payoff. While you might like to believe that the misery you feel as a result of procrastinating could not possibly be rewarding, in fact, it is. Somewhere, somehow, it must net you something. Procrastination is another word for

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protectionism. In almost all cases, by procrastinating we protect ourselves from something else that feels far more difficult to face.

- Procrastination often saves us from our fear of failure. If we are worried that we will not do well on a paper or assignment, often we do nothing at all.
- Procrastination maintains perfectionism. Sometimes we feel the need to do everything perfectly. When we get busy we fear that there is no time to do a quality job on everything, and so again, we do nothing at all.
- Procrastination may be caused by a fear of success. If we do very difficult projects exceptionally well, we could draw attention to ourselves. The pressure to always do well would then be overwhelming. Therefore, rather than getting attention for doing something very challenging very well, we wait until the last minute and do a rushed job, or nothing at all.
- Procrastination is a form of rebellion. If you really do not want to do something, telling people that you do not have the time saves you from telling them that you never wanted to do it in the first place.
- Procrastination allows us to live in the world of hopes, wishes, and maybes. If you do not send your resume out to all those firms you wanted maybe the one you did not send it to will call you for an interview. Maybe the professor will cancel the exam so you will not study for it until the last minute. If you ignore the problem with your roommate (or housemate), you hope it will just go away. Fantasies are easier to cope with than taking the risk of change.

How procrastination starts a cycle of stress.

In *Procrastination*, authors Burka and Yuen describe the experience of destructive procrastination as an emotional roller-coaster that follows a cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The cycle begins with a hopeful thought of starting early this time. Emotions change as the time for an early start passes and the procrastinator thinks, “I have got to start soon.” As time goes on the initial optimism fades and is replaced by a sense of foreboding. A number of thoughts and feelings compete for attention. They seem to keep the individual in a state of paralysis. There is guilt with the realization that “I should have started sooner.”

There may be a flurry of activity as the procrastinator searches for a way to feel on top of things, doing everything but the project at hand. He or she may feel ashamed, hoping that no one finds out. Some people go so far as to invent incredible excuses for not working on a project. Sick relatives and family emergencies are common excuses that only make the procrastinator feel fraudulent when concerned colleagues offer condolences.

The cycle continues with a hope that there is still time to do the work. Eventually, the procrastinator worries desperately that he (or she) is missing some fundamental characteristic like ability, courage, or brains. At some point he makes a final choice to do or not to do. He may give up and think “why bother?” He may plunge in and do something, regretting that he had not given himself enough time. Invariably, the cycle ends with a fervid vow never again to procrastinate.

If any of this sounds uncomfortably familiar, then you need to assess which areas of your life are most affected. As a start, write down two or three of the experiences you remember best in which you have procrastinated. What are the common themes? What kind of external consequences occurred? External consequences are the negative things that happened to you because you procrastinated. You may have lost money, had to pay a fine, missed out on a merit increase, lost a relationship, or received a poor grade. Then list the kinds of internal consequences that have occurred. Feelings of inadequacy, guilt, depression, anxiety, or embarrassment are common.

How to Cure Procrastination: Unpleasant Tasks

1. People usually procrastinate selectively. As you think about the following areas, concentrate on whether this is an area in which you do well, or in which you put things off: Work projects and activities, school assignments and attending classes, personal care and exercise, social relationships, housework and errands, and keeping your finances in order.
2. Once you have a picture of the areas in which you procrastinate, ask yourself whether your procrastinating leads to any negative consequences. Some things are such low priority that they will not feel bothersome. Pay most attention to those things that you postpone that are very important.
3. What activity do you tend to substitute for the task you should be doing? Do you go shopping, immerse yourself in a number of unimportant activities, eat, or go see a friend? Becoming aware of your style of procrastinating can help you to be attentive to the cues that tell you that you may be avoiding something that is important.
4. Become aware of the excuses you use internally for not getting started. At the precise moment when you could begin, but do not, what do you say to yourself? Do you try to use the excuse of being too tired or too busy? Do you tell yourself that there isn't enough time right now? Do you find other things to do first?
5. If you postpone unpleasant tasks (as opposes to difficult ones), try doing the most unpleasant task in your day or weekend first. Get it out of the way instead of living with the dread of it hanging over you.
6. If you are the kind of person who works better under the pressure of a deadline, then impose one for your most unpleasant task. Better yet, tell someone else when it will be done. Find a way to divide the task into small pieces.
7. Promise yourself a reward for completing the task. The prize might be calling a friend, going out to a good movie or restaurant, or spending a weekend away.
8. Finally, convince yourself that choosing the easy way out and avoiding unpleasant tasks is detrimental to your ability to achieve the goals you have set for your survival and/ or for your happiness.

How to Cure Procrastination: Difficult Tasks

1. Try to break down the task into small units so that it can be tackled piecemeal.
2. Practice the art of backward planning. Start with your deadline and work back from there. To be done on a certain date, think about where you need to be in the task during the week before, and after that, and so on. Write out all the separate tasks that are a part of the project. Working on the whole project may feel overwhelming, while completing a one-hour task is simple.
3. Once you have divided a big project into small units, you can reserve some time every day to work on one of these. Don't be fooled into thinking that you always need large uninterrupted blocks of time to make progress on an important project.
4. Make a list of everything that needs to be done on a project that can be completed in no more than 10 minutes. Not only will these seem manageable, but mini-jobs can be fit into odd moments throughout the day.
5. Use the "to do" lists and put them in order of priority. Do what you can for the day and do not criticize yourself when the lowest priority items have not been completed. The trick is to complete the highest priorities first. Do not get misled into thinking that you have really had a priority list.
6. Acknowledge your fears and go ahead anyway. Many people find it useful to think about what it is they are afraid of and then imagine the worst things that could happen to them if they acted. Instead of wallowing in self-pity and criticizing the people who assigned the task, take the initiative to talk about your concerns.
7. If the problem is failure to take action, you may need to take a look at what you are telling yourself about the hazards of action. Are you saying that not being able to do well means you are incompetent? If one potential friend turns you down, does that mean that you are not a likeable person? Does one confrontation signal the end of a relationship?
8. Finally, many psychologists believe that a key to behavior changes lie in altering our assumptions about the world from irrational to rational ones. Are the things you are telling yourself about the values of procrastinating rational? If they are not, change them! Don't procrastinate.

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