



Beating Procrastination

If you've found yourself putting off important tasks over and over again, you're not alone. In fact many people procrastinate to some degree - but some are so chronically affected by procrastination that it stops them achieving things they're capable of and disrupts their careers. The key to controlling and ultimately combating this destructive habit is to recognize when you start procrastinating, understand why it happens, and take active steps to better manage your time.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

In a nutshell, you procrastinate when you put off things that you should be focusing on right now, usually in favour of doing something that is more enjoyable or that you're more comfortable doing.

Procrastinators work as many hours in the day as other people (and often work longer hours) but they invest their time in wrong tasks. Sometimes this is simply because they don't understand the difference between urgent tasks and important tasks, and jump straight into getting on with urgent tasks that aren't actually important. They may feel that they're doing the right thing by reacting fast. Or they may not even think about their approach and simply be driven by the person whose demands are loudest. Either way, by doing this, they have little or no time left for the important tasks, despite the unpleasant outcomes this may bring about.

Another common cause of procrastination is feeling overwhelmed by the task. You may not know where to begin, or you may doubt that you have the skills or resources you think you need. So you seek comfort in doing tasks you know you're capable of completing. Unfortunately, the big task isn't going to go away - truly important tasks rarely do. Other causes of procrastination include:

- Waiting for the "right" mood or the "right" time to tackle the important task at hand;
- A fear of failure or success
- Underdeveloped decision-making skills
- Poor organizational skills; and
- Perfectionism ("I don't have the right skills or resources to do this perfectly now, so I won't do it at all.")

How to Overcome Procrastination

Step 1: Recognise that you're procrastinating

If you're honest with yourself, you probably know when you're procrastinating. But to be sure, you first need to make sure you know your priorities. Putting off an unimportant task isn't procrastination; it's probably good prioritization. Identify your priorities, and then work from a *Prioritized To-Do List* on a daily basis.

Some useful indicators showing that you start procrastinating include:

- Filling your day with low priority tasks from your To-Do list
- Reading an e-mail or request you've noted in your notebook or on your TO-Do list more than once, without starting work on it or deciding when you're going to start work on it.
- Sitting down to start a high-priority task, and almost immediately going off to make a cup of coffee or check your e-mails.
- Leaving an item on your To-Do list for a long time, even though you know it's important

- Regularly saying “yes” to unimportant tasks that others ask you to do, and filling your time with these instead of getting on with the important tasks already on your list.

Step 2: Work out WHY you’re procrastinating

Why you procrastinate can depend on both you and the task. But it’s important to understand what the reason for procrastination are for each situation, so that you can select the best approach for overcoming your reluctance to get going.

Common causes of procrastination can often be reduced to two main reasons:

- You find the task unpleasant; or
- You find the task overwhelming

Step 3: get over it!

If you are putting something off because you just don’t want to do it, and you really can’t delegate the work to someone else, you need to find ways of motivating yourself to get moving. The following approaches can be helpful here:

- Make up your own rewards. For example, promise yourself a piece of tasty flapjack at lunchtime if you’ve completed a certain task.
- Ask someone else to check up on you. Peer pressure works! This is the principle behind slimming and other self-help groups, and it is widely recognized as a highly effective approach.
- Identify the unpleasant consequences of NOT doing the task.
- Work out the cost of your time to your employer. As your employers are paying you to do the things that they think are important, you’re not delivering value for money if you’re not doing those things. Shame yourself into getting doing!
- If you’re putting off starting a project because you find it overwhelming, you need to take a different approach, for example: break the project into a set of smaller, more manageable tasks, or create an action plan. You can also start with some quick, small tasks if you can, even if these aren’t the logical first actions. You’ll feel that you’re achieving things, and so perhaps the whole project won’t be so overwhelming after all.

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