

Mental Notes

A Newsletter about Mental Health

Procrastination

By Dr. Sarah Baker and Kelly Swan

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination occurs when we put off working on or completing tasks that must be finished or that have a set deadline. This behaviour frequently becomes repetitive, or even habitual, leading us to have to rush or “cram” to finish things. This frequently comes at the cost of performance, sleep and mental and physical health.

“But Am I Really A Procrastinator?”

If you found that the definition above applied to you and your own work habits, you may be one of the many people who continuously find themselves falling into the pattern of procrastination.

Unfortunately, the idea of procrastination can be misleading. While some proclaim that that procrastinating helps to perform better by forcing us to focus and work harder than we normally would, that is not generally the case. Procrastination presents the illusion that we can only utilize important skills such as focus, determination and a hard work ethic when we are in a time crunch. However, the reality is that we are only forced to

use these skills because we no longer have a choice. What procrastination doesn't teach us, however, is that we can use these same skills earlier and still complete tasks efficiently and well ahead of deadlines, while being spared the last-minute panic.

“What Was I Thinking?”

From a sleepless shift at work to failing a university assignment to losing your job, the consequences of procrastination can be severe. In addition to hurting us professionally and academically, procrastination can stress our immune system, cause insomnia and hurt our interpersonal relationships. So why is procrastination a habit that so many people continuously fall into? Why do we let it continue? What were we thinking?

While some people would believe that procrastination is simply a product of laziness, this is in fact not the case. Here are some of the most common reasons why people procrastinate:

- **“Because I’ll do it tomorrow.”** We feel (falsely) that we will be more motivated to complete the task “tomorrow”.
- **“Because I don’t want to think about it.”** We fear performing poorly or failing on the task, so

avoid worrying about it by putting it off entirely.

- **"Because it's fun."** Those with a thrill-seeking personality may enjoy the "rush" of scrambling to complete a task last-minute.
- **"Because there are too many possibilities."** We have difficulty making decisions pertaining to the project.
- **"Because I'm overwhelmed."** We find the task overwhelming and may be unsure of where or how to begin, so simply put it off instead of seeking help.
- **"Because I haven't had the time yet."** We may be waiting for a large block of free time to open up before starting on the project, rather than working at it in smaller pieces.
- **"Because there's that thing tonight."** We are unable to prioritize our activities properly, and are constantly tempted by the lure of activities that are more fun, such as social engagements with friends.
- **"Because I can."** We may have unrealistic ideas about how long it will take to complete a task.
- **"Because that's just my style."** We believe (again, falsely) that we "work better under pressure" or that working under stress makes us more creative.

"How Do I Change?"

Regardless of what got you stuck in the procrastination trap, there are strategies you can use break free! Here some of the top tips and tricks to help you kick the habit for good:

- **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION.** Move to an environment without any distractions, like a library or coffee shop (and leave the cell phone behind!).
- **DON'T DO ANYTHING.** Refuse to allow yourself to do anything else until your task is done. Allow yourself to take breaks if need be, but under the condition that they consist of doing nothing AT ALL. (NOTE: this works well with finding a work environment that doesn't have distractions readily available)
- **PRACTICE PORTION CONTROL.** Commit yourself to just a small, manageable portion of time to work on your project. For example, set a timer for 10 minutes and commit to working on the task for those 10 straight minutes. That's it. When you're finished you can set another 10 minute block and commit to just 10 minutes more. Keep setting these small, manageable intervals (they can be longer than 10 minutes, as long as they're realistic for you). Eventually, the time will add up.
- **"ON YOUR MARK...GET SET...GO!"** Turn your project into a game by giving yourself a time limit to complete the task. For example, tell yourself that you have 30 minutes to finish editing that

- report and then “race yourself” to finish it.
- **THERE’S NO SHAME IN A LITTLE BRIBERY.** Plan a fun reward for yourself in exchange for meeting your goal.
 - **PLAN AHEAD.** Make a to-do list well ahead of your deadline and give yourself small goals to meet each day (i.e. you’ll spend 15 minutes every night working on the task).
 - **MIX IT UP.** Try combining your unpleasant task with another task that’s more enjoyable. For example, study your flashcards for an upcoming exam while you take a walk outside, or read over your notes for your big presentation while you’re on the treadmill.
 - **TWO WILLPOWERS ARE BETTER THAN ONE.** Find a partner to work with (they don’t necessarily have to be a colleague) and meet with them regularly to do work together (even if your tasks are independent). That way, you can hold each other accountable to the times you set aside to meet up and buckle down.
 - **LEAVE ROOM FOR FUN.** Allow yourself to do something fun, like listen to music, or sip your favourite hot beverage while you work.
 - **YOU BE THE JUDGE.** Prioritize your tasks! Make a list of the things that you aim

to accomplish that day and sort them into what **MUST** be done, what **SHOULD** be done, and what can be **PUT ON HOLD**. That way you won’t find yourself spending too much time on tasks that don’t need to be finished right away and putting off the ones that do.

Expect Some Hurdles. Then Soar Over Them.

While these strategies will help you kick the habit of procrastination, there are some common hang-ups that many people run into.

- **Over-Planning:** some people attempt to overcome their procrastination by over-scheduling their day. Life is full of unexpected surprises, and if you try to plan for every minute of every day, you’re more likely to stray from your plan and become discouraged. **INSTEAD:** try to set aside only a small block of time a day for each goal and leave some flexibility. If you find yourself stressing over a last minute hitch in the plan, try taking the task 10 or 30 minutes at a time rather than giving up on the whole day. Remember, *some* progress is always better than *none*!
- **Perfectionism:** some people find that they can never call a project “finished” because they never feel it is up to their

personal standards. If you struggle with perfectionist-type thinking, make sure to set several small time and progress goals well ahead of your deadline. A little bit of time set aside each day will give you plenty of opportunity to polish your work and also get it in on time. If you still find yourself spending too much time on details, try the “racing yourself” method, and see how much you can finish in a set amount of time. This will switch up your focus and help speed things along!

Remember that overcoming procrastination may not happen right away! Procrastination is a habit, and like any other habit, it takes effort to break. Try different strategies to see which ones work best for you. There is certainly not a “one-size-fits-all” solution. It’s also important to know that missteps are inevitable. Nobody is perfect, and from time to time we ALL put off something we should be doing. The key is to catch yourself performing these behaviours early so they don’t become a pattern! If you do slip up, look at what went wrong, why it went wrong, and make a plan for what to do in the future when you’re faced with the same situation. Remember, overcoming procrastination is POSSIBLE, and while it may take effort now, you’ll reap the rewards mentally, emotionally, physically and professionally in the long run!

Dr. Sarah Baker, Psychologist
www.drsbakerpsychologist.ca
Phone: 905-988-9517
Fax: 905-988-6050
Email: dr.sbakery@yahoo.ca

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