

Avoiding Procrastination for Good

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Procrastination is the #1 killer of productivity! How can you prevent this life-threatening activity from sapping your energy, productivity, and quality of life?

First off, are you admitting you procrastinate? How can that be? You are so very busy. A procrastinator would not be attempting to do as much as you do with a busy job and a full personal life. They avoid their to do lists, don't they? Not necessarily. Some of the busiest people are also procrastinators. Procrastinators are not non-doers; they are often very busy doing things that are not really the most effective use of their time. How do you know if you are procrastinating?

There is a recognizable pattern to procrastination. First a *situation*—you need to return a call to a client who is often argumentative. Then a *reaction* (*cause* for procrastination)—it is unpleasant to do this. Next an *excuse*—"I better call when I'm done seeing my patients. I don't want a conflicting phone call to interfere with my focus on them!" Follow the excuse with an *alternate behavior*—"I'll write that referral letter for Mr. Brown that's due next week." *End result*—temporary relief from the fact that you have once again avoided something unpleasant. However, this is followed quickly by the return of that gnawing feeling that you still have something unpleasant hanging over your head. Unless you resolve even the smallest procrastination habit, you are likely to feel some loss of self-esteem and some increased stress.

Consider these causes and prescriptions for "kicking the habit" of procrastination now in all areas of your life.

1. **Failure to set goals.** Yes, you hear it again—the "g" word. What difference does it make if you procrastinate if you are not going anywhere anyway? Try setting goals that have heart and meaning in their expression. For example, "My goal is to clean out my garage by June." This hardly makes you want to get up in the morning! Perhaps stating the goal as "I want to simplify my life." (cleaning the garage is one project) is a more heart-felt goal and more likely to get done. This is true because it is part of something that has longer-lasting value for you.
2. **Believing in myths.** Are you still waiting for a "block of time" to do something? You're waiting for a bus that isn't coming. Initiate actions that target things on your procrastination list using "snippets of time" – small units of time slots usually 10 or 12 minutes long. Watch your list get shorter sooner.
3. **Getting rough, not tough.** There is also the myth that you can do it all. You can't anymore. Choose what you do in this lifetime carefully. If you are doing what is important, you are not procrastinating. There need be no guilt in admitting you are choosing the most important first, letting other things get done at a later deadline. Get tough on procrastination when it leaves you feeling some sort of real loss—esteem, financial, relational, or professional. Personal relationships are sometimes the best evaluators of whether you invested your time well or procrastinated something really important.

4. **Avoidance of the unpleasant.** This is the most common cause for procrastination. Try these quick fixes:

- Do it. There's an adrenaline rush from knowing the task is done. Doing something we have procrastinated often energizes us for the rest of the day.
- Ditch it. If it has been there that long, maybe you don't need/want to do it.
- Don't do it. Sometimes putting off a decision to do an unpleasant task is wise. It is called "prudent postponement." Perhaps a better action will surface after sleeping on it temporarily.
- Display all your options. When procrastinating a task, decide to do the "worst" first or the "easiest" first. Reward yourself or take a reward away. Focus on the end or concentrate on the first step. Do more than one task or one task at a time. It does not matter what you tell yourself, as long as you stop procrastinating a task.
- Delegate. You probably do this already. Figure out your hourly salary and then decide if paying a personal assistant to get bids from landscapers or office interior decorators isn't a better investment of your time and money.

Be easy on yourself. It is getting harder to detect real procrastination at this time in history. This was not true in the past. Why? We are experiencing the disappearance of something we used to count on to get things accomplished. It was called lag time—a natural occurrence of time between activities. Technology has wiped that out. Your clients and co-workers want you to be an ATM machine. They gave you the information—why so long to get an answer?

What this has to do with procrastination is the unrealistic—self imposed or other-imposed—to be able to do it all. You can't. But, because you may not have made this mental connection, you still think you can and therefore assume you are procrastinating. I don't think you are.

Pareto's rule for 80/20 is more important to us on a personal basis than at any other time. 20% of your activities produce 80% of the results you want. Knowing the 20% is critical—that is where you derive the greatest return on your investment of time, money, physical or mental energy. Focusing on the 20% is a great cure for procrastination. You might not be as in bad shape as you thought.

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