

Overcoming Procrastination

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Procrastination technically refers to the avoidance of a specific task or work which needs to be accomplished. But this technical explanation doesn't begin to capture the emotions triggered by the word. For most of us, the word "procrastination" reminds us of past experiences where we have felt guilty, lazy, inadequate, anxious, or stupid—or some combination of these. It also implies a value judgment; if you procrastinate, you are bad, and as such, you lack worth as a person.

Procrastination and Its Causes

In order to understand and solve your procrastination problems, you must carefully analyze those situations where your work is not being completed. First, determine whether the cause is poor time management; if so, you will need to learn and develop time management skills. If, however, you know how to manage your time but don't make use of those skills, you may have a more serious problem. Many individuals cite the following reasons for avoiding work:

- **Lack of Relevance** – If something is neither relevant nor meaningful to you personally, it may be difficult to get motivated even to begin.
- **Acceptance of Another's Goals** – If a project has been imposed or assigned to you and it is not consistent with your own interests, you may be reluctant to spend the necessary time to see it to conclusion.
- **Perfectionism** - Having unreachable standards will discourage you from pursuing a task. Remember, perfection is unattainable.
- **Evaluation Anxiety** – Since others' responses to your work are not under your direct control, overvaluing these responses can create the kind of anxiety that will interfere with work getting accomplished.
- **Ambiguity** - If you are uncertain of what is expected of you, it may be difficult to get started.
- **Fear of the Unknown** - If you are venturing into a new realm or field, you don't have any way of knowing how well you'll do. Such an uncertain outcome may inhibit your desire to begin.
- **Inability to Handle the Task** – If through lack of training, skill, or ability you feel that you lack the personal resources to do the job, you may avoid it completely.

Procrastination Takes Many Forms

Once you have surmounted the emotional block by acknowledging your procrastination (guilt, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy), and after you have analyzed the underlying causes, you need to clearly specify how you procrastinate. Consider the following examples.

1. Do you act as though if you ignore a task, it will go away? The mid-term exam in your chemistry class is not likely to vaporize, no matter how much you ignore it.
2. Do you underestimate the work involved in the task, or overestimate your abilities and resources in relationship to the task? Do you tell yourself that you grasp concepts so

easily that you need only spend one hour on the physics problems which would normally take you six?

3. Do you deceive yourself into believing that a mediocre performance or lesser standards are acceptable? For example, if you deceive yourself that a 2.3 GPA will still get you into the medical school of your choice, you may be avoiding the decision to work harder to improve your grade point average and thus may have to alter your career plans. This form of avoidance can prevent you from consciously making choices about important goals in your life.
4. Do you deceive yourself by substituting one worthy activity for another? Suppose you clean the apartment instead of writing your term paper. Valuing a clean apartment is fine but if that value only becomes important when there is a paper due, you are procrastinating.
5. Do you believe that delays are harmless? An example is putting off writing your paper so you can watch five minutes of your favorite television program. If you don't return to writing the paper after five minutes have elapsed, you may stay tuned to the television for the entire evening, with no work being done on the paper.
6. Do you dramatize a commitment to a task rather than actually doing it? An example is taking your books on vacation but never opening them, or perhaps even declining invitations for pleasurable events, but still not pursuing the work at hand nor getting needed relaxation. This way you stay in a constant state of unproductive readiness to work—without ever working.
7. Do you persevere on only one portion of the task? An example is writing and rewriting the introductory paragraph of the paper but not dealing with the body and the conclusion. The introductory paragraph is important, but not at the expense of the entire project.
8. Do you become paralyzed in deciding between alternative choices? An example involves spending so much time deciding between two term paper topics that you don't have sufficient time to write the paper.

What to Do about Procrastination

If you can visualize yourself in one or more of these vignettes, you may be ready to overcome your problems with avoidance or procrastination. The following is a list of additional steps which may help you to deal with your avoidance problems:

- Extract from the above examples those principles which apply to you. Write them down.
- Make honest decisions about your work. If you wish to spend only a minimal amount of effort or time on a particular task, admit it—do not allow guilt feelings to interfere with your realization of this fact. Weigh the consequences of various amounts of investment in a project and find the optimal return for your investment. This step exposes intentional reasons for avoiding work. If you have been unintentionally avoiding work, admit to yourself that you do want to achieve certain goals and accept the responsibilities involved in meeting those goals.
- Work to acquire an adequate understanding of what is necessary to accomplish a task within a given time frame.
- Distinguish between activities which dramatize your sense of commitment and those which will help you accomplish the task. Devote only that amount of time which is appropriate for each part of a task. Develop an overview of the entire project and visualize the steps that are needed to reach completion.

Effective Planning

The larger, more involved, the project, the more difficult it is to plan effectively to carry it out. The following steps may be helpful:

- Segment the task. The entire job may seem impossible, but smaller segments may seem more manageable. Divide the task into small steps.
- Distribute the small steps reasonably within the given time frame. “Reasonably” is the key word; you must allot sufficient time for each step. Do not fool yourself by believing you can do more than is humanly possible.
- Realize that humans periodically need variety and relaxation. Intersperse rewards, relaxation, and gratification for work completed. This will help you feel less resentful of the task and the work that still needs to be done.
- Monitor your progress on the small steps. Watch for the pitfalls discussed earlier. Assess problems when they arise and do something about them quickly. Keep track of the segments and how they fit together to form the whole picture. Reassess time commitments as necessary.
- Be reasonable in your expectations of yourself. Perfectionist or extremely strict expectations may cause you to rebel or may sabotage your progress.

Need Additional Help?

Should you feel you would like more suggestions for coping with procrastination, the Counseling Center offers free workshops, discussion groups, and individual counseling. Dates, times, and locations of various sessions you may call the Counseling Center at 301-891-4089 for more information.