

Procrastination

"THE ART OF KEEPING UP WITH YESTERDAY."

Are you a procrastinator? The formula is pretty simple:

A = You postpone things you should be doing

B = You feel guilty about doing it

A + B = procrastinator

If you don't feel guilty, you are likely just being selective about the things you do. For example, you are not procrastinating if you put off calling friends because you think it is more important to finish a class assignment - even if your friends think the calls should come first.



Why do people procrastinate?

Procrastination is a coping strategy that we use to protect ourselves from uncomfortable feelings. These uncomfortable feelings may be related to a variety of reasons, including our fear of failure, fear of success, desire for perfectionism, or need to exert control in our lives.

"Now, wait a minute," you may be saying to yourself. "When I procrastinate, I don't get things done or I don't do a good job. Thus, I've failed. So how does procrastination protect me from a fear of failure?" It does seem a little complicated, but here is how it works.

Many people believe that they are a good person only when they perform well. They may feel that if they don't perform perfectly or better than anyone else, they are inadequate as a person. Their self-worth is based solely on their performance. This can be pretty damaging to their self-esteem because they say to themselves "**I failed as a person**" versus the more realistic appraisal "**I failed on this task.**"

So, procrastination is a behavior you may use to cope with your fears that you just aren't good enough. Procrastinating allows you to tell yourself that your "failures" are due to lack of time versus lack of ability. The scenario might sound something like this:

"I got a "C" on that research project. That's pretty good considering I only spent two days on it. I could have gotten an "A", no problem, if I had more time to do the work."

The good news is...

Procrastination is not an inherited trait nor is it a terminal disease! It is, however, a **learned** behavior. And, just as you learned to use procrastination to help you cope in your life, you can **unlearn** it. You can replace it with healthier coping strategies - ones that help you to perform more effectively and feel better about yourself.

CAN I GET THERE FROM HERE?

1. **Visualize yourself succeeding.**
Imagine yourself taking the first step in achieving your goal, continuing without obstacles until you achieve what you set out to do. Post success reminders in places where you spend most of your time (pictures of a person in a graduation gown on your bathroom mirror; picture on your refrigerator of a runner breaking through the tape on the finish line, etc.).

2. **Increase your chances for success.**
Set up your environment so that it works for you, not against you. Pick supportive people to help you, not people you know will unduly criticize you. Work on your goal during your "prime" energy times, not when you can expect distractions and disruptions.
3. **Do it now.**
There is never going to be the "perfect" time to start. You may not ever "want" to start. There is always some small task you can do to get you going, even if you aren't in the ideal mood or frame of mind to work.
4. **Listen for excuses.**
Excuses are "red flags." When you hear yourself launching into them, you know you are preparing to procrastinate.
5. **Take it one step at a time.**
Don't look at everything that must be done; that's how you lead yourself into feeling overwhelmed. Focus on the here and now; take "baby steps." Tell yourself "I can do it." "It's going to be okay."
6. **Get beyond your first obstacle.**
You will encounter problems, but don't give up. Remember, problems are opportunities in disguise. Determine if you need a new strategy to accomplish your goal. Use this opportunity to assess your situation and determine if a new strategy is needed. Work on other parts of your goal while figuring out how to get past the obstacle.
7. **Reward yourself.**
Every accomplishment, regardless of how "small" you perceive it to be, is worthy of reward. Find rewards that you value and give them to yourself immediately after the desired behavior.
8. **Be flexible about your goal.**
Certain circumstances are beyond your control. When unexpected things happen, readjust your goal. This is a realistic response, not a failure.
9. **It doesn't have to be perfect.**
"It doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to be done!" The more you let go of your perfectionism, the more you can accomplish.

Adapted from Burka, J.B. & Yuen, L.M. Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do About It. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1983.

SETTING GOALS

1. **A goal must be OBSERVABLE.**
Define your goal as an action. Describe what you will be doing as you are accomplishing it; i.e., what it will look like when you have achieved it.
2. **Be specific and concrete.**
Using vague language will not help you determine what you need to do and does not make the goal seem real. Being vague leads to feeling overwhelmed by the seeming "hugeness" of the task. Compare "**I need to start working on my job search,**" with "**I need to meet with Career Services to get ideas for writing my resume.**"
3. **Small steps.**
Break your goal down into small steps, where you can see the progress you have made. "**Life by the yard is very hard. Life by the inch is a cinch.**"

EXAMPLE

I will spend two hours every weekend for the next month gathering information for my resume. That means, in March I will spend eight hours gathering information for my resume. The **first weekend** I will gather all my previous employment information: dates, supervisors, and list my responsibilities. The **second weekend** I will gather information on my classes, GPA, and honors/awards/activities. The **third weekend** I will write out my various accomplishments in my previous jobs during college. The **fourth weekend** I will review all the information and add anything I have left out.

EXAMPLE

I will complete my research paper for Persuasive Writing by March 1st, two weeks before it is due. That gives me eight weeks to complete the paper. By (date), I will have selected my topic. During that week, I will use the online library system for at least one hour to get ideas and I will schedule an appointment with my instructor to get additional ideas, etc., etc..

NOTE: You get the idea. Lay out specific, small, observable goals for the remaining weeks. If you find out you have too much to accomplish using your original action plan, revise. Determine if your topic is too broad. Determine if you are engaging in perfectionist behavior; talk with your instructor to help you determine a realistic, achievable goal in regards to the paper. Determine if adding 30 minutes each week to the time you have planned will allow you to reach your original goal, etc.)

MY ACTION PLAN

GOAL: I will: _____

When I have achieved my goal, I will have accomplished: _____

Steps I will take to achieve my goal:

1. **Action:** _____

Time necessary to complete this step: _____

I will complete this step by (date): _____

2. **Action:** _____

Time necessary to complete this step: _____

I will complete this step by (date): _____

3. **Action:** _____

Time necessary to complete this step: _____

I will complete this step by (date): _____

4. **Action:** _____

Time necessary to complete this step: _____

I will complete this step by (date): _____

5. **Action:** _____

Time necessary to complete this step: _____

I will complete this step by (date): _____