

Insights from Solving the Procrastination Puzzle by Timothy Pynchyl

Procrastination takes a series toll on our mental and physical well-being.

Putting off actions that move us closer to important goals erodes self-esteem and lowers life satisfaction. Wasting valuable work time procrastinating generates intense guilt and stress, which leads to bad eating habits and poor sleep. Studies on procrastination find that frequent procrastinators suffer from stomach aches and headaches. One study found a strong correlation between procrastination and heart disease.

Despite the long-term consequences of procrastinating, we still do it for two reasons:

The future self forecasting fallacy: When we put off a task, we assume our future selves will be in a better mood and have the energy to do it. Essentially, we tell ourselves, "I don't feel like doing this now, but my future self will!" However, we fail to predict the events that will make our future selves just as busy and just as unwilling to do a task as our current selves are.

The mood enhancement effect: If the thought of doing a task makes us feel down, we can put it off until tomorrow and instantly improve our mood. Studies show that people in a bad mood are more likely to procrastinate on difficult tasks and seek immediate pleasure. Combine that with the fact that we value our current emotional state more than a future emotional state – just as we prefer \$100 today to \$100 in one month – and it's easy to see why we have a procrastination bias.

L.E.A.R.N. a new response

The urge to avoid a task starts in an area of the brain called the amygdala. When the amygdala is active, we experience the "fight-or-flight" response. Luckily, we can L.E.A.R.N. to calm down the amygdala when we encounter a task that we don't feel like doing and reduce the urge to run away by labeling, exhaling, accepting, releasing, and noticing.

- **Label** the emotion leading to procrastination. When we feel the urge to procrastinate, we must call it out by thinking, "This is overwhelm," or "This is anxiety." Consciously acknowledging a fear-based emotion is proven to reduce activity in the amygdala.
- **Exhale** slowly. By consciously exhaling longer than we inhale, we activate a parasympathetic response that counteracts the fight-or-flight response.
- **Accept** whatever you're feeling. When we resist an uncomfortable emotion, we prolong its presence. But when we accept a negative emotion, that emotion is no longer perceived as a threat, which further calms the amygdala.
- **Release** muscle tension. Letting go of muscle tension relaxes the body, which relaxes the amygdala.
- **Notice** where the urge to procrastinate is coming from. Searching our bodies for the source of our procrastination urge puts us in a curious state, which we can then use to explore and move toward a task we didn't feel like doing.



Set an anti-procrastination intention

An anti-procrastination intention (also known as an implementation intention) is a specific "when-then" statement directed at a frequently procrastinated task. For example, "**When** I hear my 'book writing' calendar notification at 9 AM, **I will** open a new Word document on my laptop and do stream of conscious typing for 5 minutes to generate ideas for the writing session." Give the brain an explicit cue and a simple action sequence, and it will act without thought or resistance.

But sometimes, we need extra motivation to start a frequently procrastinated task. That's why psychologists have come up with the W.O.O.P. method – Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan. Think of it like implementation intentions on steroids. Complete the following W.O.O.P. statements for a task or project you've been putting off and you'll find that you need very little willpower to move past your procrastination and get your work done:

Wish: "I wish to complete _____."

I fill out this statement by thinking of something I want to finish by the end of the day – it's typically a project or task I've been putting off.

Outcome: "After I complete _____, I will experience _____."

I complete this statement by imagining the emotional high I'll experience when I fulfill my wish in statement one. I typically write "immense pride," "excitement," or "complete satisfaction."

Obstacle: "However, I won't experience _____ if I _____."

I complete this statement by writing the experience I want to have followed by the procrastination tactic that will prevent me from having it. I typically write: Go down a researching rabbit hole or insist "I'm too tired." Paradoxically, imagining an optimistic vision of the future destroyed by procrastination is motivating (not demoralizing) because we hate the feeling of being held back.

Plan: "When I start to _____, I will _____."

This is the anti-procrastination intention (implementation intention). Here I might write, "When I start to think 'I'm too tired to work,' I will get on the floor, do five push-ups, and get to work." OR "When I start to browse YouTube, Reddit, or check my email, I will turn off the phone and stare at the wall until I feel like working again."