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Productivity Tips for Procrastinators

The pandemic and working from home have sapped motivation at work for many. Here are some ways to tackle a growing to-do list.



ILLUSTRATION: DOMINIC BUGATTO



By

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To hear Piers Steel tell it, the whole thing isn't our fault.

He sees you: scrolling instead of working, hiding from your to-do list, cycling through the bevy of thin excuses that justify—supposedly—why you're not doing the thing you ought to be doing. And he feels for you.

"You don't have anything on your side right now," says the University of Calgary business professor and author of "The Procrastination Equation." "You're on the windswept plains with no way of hiding from that cold breeze. You are completely exposed."

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The pandemic has brought us to peak procrastination. Turns out your office—in addition to being in plain sight of your boss—came with environmental cues that reminded you that you had to, you know, work. Without the hum of the industrial printer and the sight of

colleagues marching off to the conference room, we all tend toward aimlessness.

“If you don’t have routine, you’re just making it a question mark again. Will I, won’t I?” Dr. Steel says. “Asking yourself what you want to do—you probably want to actually check what’s on Instagram.”

Of course, some of us have been powering through this stretch, even more efficient than before. But the rest of us are having trouble.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What techniques do you use to stay motivated when you’re working from home? Join the conversation below.

Sarah Feingold, a 40-year-old Brooklyn resident, has been stress-crafting as a way to ease pandemic anxiety and regain her focus. The co-founder of the Fourth Floor, an organization that works to get women on boards of directors, says she has spent hours sewing tiny beads onto a

jean jacket and drawing a slew of circles on a piece of paper. “This is my strange coping mechanism,” she says.

Sometimes the activity calms her brain, makes her feel in control or even sparks a great idea related to her actual responsibilities. Other times? She sighs. “It’s like, why did I just spend this time gluing random things together, making more of a mess, when I could be doing something else?”

Working from home in this moment is certainly part of the problem. Our workspace was thrown together haphazardly in March and never rectified. Kids, pets and neighbors distract us. Our homes are filled with things we like to do. More than a third of telecommuters in a survey of 10,332 adults by Pew Research Center in October said it’s been difficult for them to feel motivated to do their work.

But the collective procrastination we're feeling is bigger than remote work. We're tired and down, worried about our finances and health and the state of the world. We haven't taken a vacation in what feels like forever.

Extreme procrastination might signal a larger issue, like depression. But for those just having a hard time getting going in this moment, small tweaks and tricks might be able to help.

Cliff Weitzman has found that the best way to make himself feel better when procrastination strikes is to make others feel better first. When the 26-year-old founder and CEO of Speechify, a text-to-speech application, starts beating himself up for avoiding wrapping up a contract or otherwise whiling away an hour, he texts a family member or friend to tell them he loves them.

"I feel like a good person," he says. "It's easier to go back to work. It's nicer than eating a bar of chocolate."

He's also obsessed with stripping potential triggers from his environment, using the screen-time feature on his phone to limit access to social media. He programmed a browser extension to remove the main feed from his LinkedIn account and the comments and suggestions bar from his YouTube.

Nikki Kinzer, a Springfield, Ore.-based life coach who works with clients with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, recently began offering a Zoom study hall. For four hours every Thursday afternoon, participants do 25-minute work "sprints," followed by five-minute breaks, a practice known as the Pomodoro Technique. Watching other people heads down—coding, grading papers or even cleaning their bathrooms—is an incredible motivator, she says.

"When you're by yourself, it's really difficult to be accountable," she says.

Alone in his home office, Brett Goldblatt, a 48-year-old attorney in Los Angeles, struggled to find the focus that seemed to come easily at his law firm. There, glass walls had left plenty of room for accountability. At home, when he inadvertently plunged down a Twitter rabbit hole of political news during election season, no one was there to notice. His afternoons, especially, became a blur: Burnt out from nonstop work in the mornings, he'd zone out on social media or gravitate toward easier tasks like email.

He realized he was missing the steady stream of interruptions and rituals—a colleague popping by to say hello, the walk to grab lunch—that had injected necessary pauses into his workday.

“Our brains aren’t meant to be focusing for that long,” Mr. Goldblatt says.

Incorporating more breaks has helped, as has trying to stick to set work hours and printing documents out on paper instead of reading everything on a screen. But he still has his moments.

If you, too, can’t quite kick the procrastination habit, take heart and remember Dr. Steel. “Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with you,” the professor says. “What you’re simply trying to do is diet in that candy store.”

Get Going

Kick the procrastination habit, with tips from ADHD coach Nikki Kinzer and professor Piers Steel

Start small: Force yourself to take a first step, no matter how tiny. Dreading sending an email? Open a new window and put the person’s address in the “to” line. “The significance is that you’re doing something,” Ms. Kinzer says. “You’re pushing it forward.”

Get a partner: Accountability is crucial. One of Ms. Kinzer’s clients meets with a peer every morning. They plan their weeks, talk about priorities and touch base at the end of each day to review how things went.

Add some separation: Don’t peruse social media in the same room where you work. If possible, take breaks in a separate space, and use a different device. Even just placing your phone a 20-second walk away can help.

Establish a routine: Set firm work hours. Start at 9 a.m., even if the boss isn’t watching.

Don’t beat yourself up: It’s a pandemic. You’re a human. Keep trying, but don’t take it as a deep personal failing if you’re struggling to find your focus.

Write to Rachel Feintzeig at rachel.feintzeig@wsj.com

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