

Solved Episode 02

How to Stop Procrastinating



Solved

with Mark Manson

Introduction

I am starting this guide a full 90 minutes after I intended to this morning. This is despite the fact that I have been writing professionally for over 15 years, have been self-employed for nearly 20, and have been struggling with distraction my entire life.

We all remember being in school and putting off doing our homework until late the night before. But procrastination affects every area of our lives:

- We put off going to the gym or starting that new diet.
- We avoid going to the doctor or dentist when we know we're long overdue for a check-up or when we know fully well that we have a health issue.
- We delay important conversations with loved ones.
- We keep "forgetting" to reach out to friends we haven't seen, put off that event we've wanted to host, neglected to reach out to our neighbors and invite them over.
- We keep telling ourselves we're going to read that book on our desk "one day when I have time." Meanwhile, we've read over 5,000 posts on social media since we bought it.
- We needlessly put off applying for that dream job, asking out our crush, or in some cases, even planning the vacation we've always wanted.

But why do we do this? And more importantly, how can we stop?

As we will see, procrastination is a nearly universal human affliction. We all succumb to it at some point and to some degree. The question is therefore not “whether” but rather “how much” procrastination interferes with our lives.

I have procrastinated more times and more things than I can count. Everything from writing a simple business email to proposing to my then-girlfriend, now-wife.

And I’m not the only one. According to surveys, a striking 95% of people report procrastinating at least occasionally.¹ Of those, 42% of adults report procrastinating daily, and 20-25% of people report struggling with near constant and ever-present procrastination, which classifies them as “chronic procrastinators.”²

My team and I spent nearly three months researching everything there is to know about procrastination. We dug into 2,500 years of human thought and over 100 years of psychological research to understand what causes procrastination, why it happens, and what are the best strategies we can use to fix it.

¹ Steel, P. (2007). [The nature of procrastination: A meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 65–94.

² Hen M., & Goroshit M. (2018). [General and Life-Domain Procrastination in Highly Educated Adults in Israel](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 11173.

In the process, we combed through hundreds of studies, read half a dozen books and interviewed three world-class experts on the subject. Over the next few hours, you will know everything you could ever possibly need to know about managing procrastination in your own life, to prevent it from ever being a problem again.

Our goal is to make this the last podcast you ever need to listen to in order to solve this area of your life. But second, this is the last podcast I can ever make on this subject — meaning the information is exhaustive. We have left no stone uncovered. We have followed every rabbit hole and what you are going to get here is everything you could possibly ever need to know and then some.

If this guide or episode ends up helping you, we'd love to hear from you. Tell us your story and email us at mark@solvedpodcast.com. We're always trying to make the show better and can't do it without your help and feedback.

Mark Manson
May 5, 2025

This PDF is meant as a companion to the Solved Podcast episode on Procrastination. For elaboration, discussion, and expert insights on what you read in this guide, listen to the episode in its entirety.

If you'd like exercises and action steps to help you stop procrastinating, along with a supportive community, that's what my **Momentum** membership is for. [You can learn more about it here.](#)

There is a lot to digest here. But if you take the time to work through it and integrate it into your life, it can be utterly transformative.

You can expect some big breakthroughs ahead. We'll uncover what kind of procrastinator you are, what most causes you to procrastinate, and the true roots of this common human affliction. Take it at your own pace, and remember that discomfort is good. It's a sign of growth.

You can do it.

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Definitions

Friend, stop putting off work and allow us to go home in good time
— 1400 BC hieroglyphic³

There have been many definitions of procrastination throughout history and among various cultures. But the standard definition used by psychologists and researchers today is:

Procrastination is the act of unnecessarily delaying something despite knowing that there could be negative consequences for doing so.⁴

There are three elements to consider in this definition:

1. **Unnecessary delay** — We often put off something less important because something more important happens. This is not procrastination but prioritization. Procrastination requires that the delay is *not justified*.
2. **Negative consequences** — For procrastination to occur, there must be likely negative consequences to the decision.
3. **Despite knowing** — And finally, for it to be procrastination, you should be aware that what you are avoiding will have negative

³ Fry, H. (2024). [A brief history of procrastination and how you can overcome it](#). *The Guardian*.

⁴ Steel, P. (2007). [The nature of procrastination: A meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 65–94.

consequences. There is a difference between procrastination and simply being ignorant or naive.

The Cultural Lens of Delay

These three factors matter because ultimately, they are subjective. Whether a delay is necessary or not is going to be a value judgment. Same with whether consequences are negative or not. Same with whether you fully know the repercussions of your actions or not.

And because the definition of procrastination is ultimately subjective, we see it manifested quite differently across cultures.

Some cultures prioritize punctuality and time management less and favor social cohesion and “good vibes” more. Therefore, the same behavior that would be considered procrastination in Germany or Japan would not necessarily be viewed as procrastination in Egypt or Brazil and vice-versa.⁵

But because every culture has some prioritization of what matters and faces some negative repercussions for inaction, every culture therefore has some form of procrastination, even if the expressions differ.

For example, in Brazil, procrastination might look like not sharing your feelings or speaking up at a meeting. Whereas in Germany, the procrastination would be arriving late to the meeting itself.

⁵ Hofstede, G. (2003). [*Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*](#). SAGE Publications.

We won't delve too deeply into cultural definitions throughout this guide, but I think it is important to note since this podcast is listened to in over 150 countries and cultural priorities vary widely. Regardless of your culture and your relationship with time, there are always things in your life that you know you should be doing but aren't, and you face negative consequences due to your delay. Whatever those things are, this guide is for you.

Throughout this episode, we will try to rely on the most common, cross-cultural examples (e.g. health failures and basic productivity) and ignore the more culturally dependent examples (e.g. time management and relationships) simply for the sake of clarity and understanding.

Productive Procrastination

Let's say I procrastinate writing this guide by deciding to clean out my garage — a task I've neglected for months. While I'm still accomplishing something worthwhile, I'm deliberately avoiding my highest priority. Am I really procrastinating if I'm being productive?

Researchers call this active procrastination and believe it or not, it's actually a useful productivity tool.⁶ Call it “productive procrastination.” If you're going to succumb to procrastination, you might as well tackle slightly less intimidating, yet still useful tasks.

⁶ Choi, J. N., & Moran, S. V. (2009). [Why Not Procrastinate? Development and Validation of a New Active Procrastination Scale](#). *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 149(2), 195–212.

That said, productive procrastination remains procrastination at its core. You're still unnecessarily postponing something that demands your attention, knowingly setting yourself back in the process.

Productive procrastination sits as the least damaging option in the procrastination spectrum. It's always better to face urgent or important tasks head-on. But if you absolutely must procrastinate, well, you might as well clean out the garage.

The Ancient World

The earliest treatment of procrastination was written by Plato around 385 BCE. The ancient Greeks referred to the concept of procrastination as *akrasia*,⁷ which loosely translates to “without will” or “without power.” The Greeks (and later Romans) would evolve several different ways to deal with *akrasia* but there would emerge two separate schools of thought, which, in many ways, continue up to today.

Plato’s School of Reason

In his early dialogues, Plato sees *akrasia* as a question not of willpower, but of knowledge.⁸ In many ways, Plato did not believe *akrasia* as being possible, arguing in *Protagoras*⁹ that it’s impossible for someone to act against their own self-interest — the issue is simply people’s misunderstanding of their own self-interest. As such, Plato saw procrastination as a problem of ignorance. If we merely educated people on the consequences of their desires and actions, then they would logically make the right decision.

Plato’s view of *akrasia* will have massive historical implications. He describes the “human soul” as having three parts, loosely what we would translate today to be mind, body and spirit. The mind is in charge

⁷ Steward, H.(1998). [Akrasia](#). In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Taylor and Francis.

⁸ Plato. [Phaedo](#)

⁹ Plato. [Protagoras](#)

of our rational faculties. The body houses our base animalistic impulses. And the spirit is our drive and emotion.¹⁰

Plato believed that *akrasia* resulted from people whose souls were out of harmony with themselves. While he did recognize that our instincts and desires could overpower our reason, he still saw it as a failure of reason. As a result, Plato saw procrastination as fundamentally a problem of education — if people simply understood what was best for themselves, then they would do it.

Plato believed that people only act badly because they don't truly understand what's good for them. In his view, if someone really knew that smoking was harmful, they would never smoke. If they truly understood that procrastination hurt their goals, they would never put things off. Plato thought that bad behavior was simply a lack of knowledge or wisdom - that nobody willingly does wrong when they fully understand the consequences.

And there *is* something to this. It's just not the whole story. When we procrastinate, we often delude ourselves into believing that the consequences of putting something off are not that big of a deal. We also trick ourselves into believing that we often don't actually want what is in our best interest. We will get to this later. But for the moment, it will turn out to be an incomplete understanding of the issue.

¹⁰ Plato. [Republic](#).

Aristotle's School of Habit

Well begun is halfway done.

— Aristotle

Though taught by Plato, Aristotle disagreed entirely with Plato's view of *akrasia*. He believed that not only was knowingly doing what was not in your best interest possible, he thought it happened all the time. Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not believe the problem was ignorance or a lack of understanding of consequences. He saw that you could have all the education and knowledge in the world, yet still succumb to terrible behaviors.

Aristotle understood that humans have conflicting desires and impulses that can overpower our rational knowledge. He believed we could know exactly what we should do and still choose to do the opposite because of emotions, cravings, or weak self-control. For Aristotle, the smoker who continues smoking despite knowing the health risks isn't ignorant — they're experiencing a battle between their rational mind (which knows smoking is bad) and their immediate desires (which want the cigarette). He saw this internal conflict as completely normal and human.

Therefore, Aristotle did not see procrastination as a problem of knowledge but rather a problem of habit and behavior. He believed the solution wasn't more education or thinking but building better habits through repeated practice. Just like learning to play piano requires doing it over and over, not just reading about it, Aristotle thought good

behavior came from repeatedly choosing good actions until they became automatic.

We now know, with modern research, psychology and brain scans, that Aristotle was correct. Yet, he was in the minority, not only to his contemporaries but for most of world history. Instead, Plato's view took hold. His views were largely adopted by the Stoics, who believed that the intellectual knowledge of virtue was all that was required to overcome our emotions and impulses. This meant they thought you could think your way out of bad habits and control your emotions through reason alone. This view then found a home in the early Christian church, where, as we'll see, it wreaked havoc on people's mental health for centuries.

Plato's popularity and influence would send the western world down the wrong path for over a thousand years. A path that, amazingly, we only recently recovered from.

**Ignorance
Model**

**Habits
Model**

Plato



Aristotle

Akrasia

Due to lack of knowledge

As failure of habit formation

Solution

Education and awareness

Habit building through
repetition

Solved

Eastern Philosophy

To see what is right and not do it is the worst cowardice.
— Confucius

It's worth mentioning that there is an analogous schism between Buddhism and Confucianism in eastern philosophy.

Buddhism, like Plato's school of reason, viewed procrastination as stemming from ignorance and advocated developing mindfulness and insight to counteract it. Buddhist teachings define procrastination as a form of laziness, arising from "apathy toward the uncontrollable sufferings of samsara, idleness, or craving sleep as escape."¹¹

Buddhist philosophy highlights the necessity of recognizing the value of time, equating it with life itself¹² and promotes practices such as insight meditation and mindfulness, which shift impulsive decisions into deliberate, thoughtful actions, effectively countering procrastination.

In contrast, Confucianism aligns more closely with Aristotle's habit-based approach, emphasizing discipline, punctuality, dependability, and moral agency. Although classical Confucian texts do not explicitly discuss procrastination, they address related themes such

¹¹ Young, A. (2016, April 9). [Overcoming procrastination](#). Buddhavipassana.

¹² Sister Ocean. (2016). [Procrastination, determination, and compassion](#). Buddhistdoor Global.

as timeliness (shi, 时)¹³, deliberation, and appropriateness (yi, 義),¹⁴ advocating actions aligned with self-cultivation and societal roles.

Confucianism uniquely stresses that self-discipline requires courage and mental fortitude — a necessary component in overcoming inertia. This perspective acknowledges that pushing beyond comfort zones and habitual inertia is fundamentally an act of bravery.

Confucian principles significantly shaped ancient Chinese institutions, embedding discipline and dependable habits deeply into societal norms. Unlike the West, where Plato's perspective dominated, in the East, Confucianism's practical, habit-oriented philosophy prevailed.

Thus, both historical and contemporary insights reveal that overcoming procrastination involves not only education and mindfulness but also habit formation and courage. By integrating these diverse philosophies, we gain a comprehensive understanding of procrastination and effective strategies to combat it.

¹³ Tiwald, J. (2017). [Punishment and autonomous shame in Confucian thought](#). *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 36(1), 45–60.

¹⁴ Zhang, M. (2020) [Respect and the Mengzian Conception of Yi as a Rule-related Virtue](#), *Comparative Philosophy*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Shame and Forgiveness

The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed. The mind commands itself and meets resistance.

— St. Augustine of Hippo

The Ancient Greeks and Romans acknowledged the issue of procrastination but did not see it as immoral or a character flaw. Plato and the Stoics believed that it could be overcome through greater knowledge and awareness of one's decisions. And Aristotle believed that defeating procrastination could be learned through the development of skills and habits.

In the case of both the Stoics and Aristotle, *akrasia* distances you from a virtuous life, but it does not necessarily make you evil. Aristotle explicitly states in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the difference between *akrasia* and vice is that in the case of *akrasia*, you do the wrong thing and know you messed up. Whereas vice is when you do the wrong thing and don't care that it's the wrong thing.

The virtue ethics of the ancient world saw morality as a sliding scale, something you worked towards over time, not some inherent aspect of your character.

But that would change.

The early Christians were zealots and fanatics. They burned libraries, destroyed thousands of philosophical works and outlawed almost all study of philosophy outside of the early Christian texts.¹⁵

As a result, a majority of the philosophical and scientific work of the Greeks and Romans is lost to history.

But, some select thinkers were spared. The most prominent survivor to the wave of Christianity was Plato. Plato's metaphysical views about the universe, the permanence of the soul and the impermanence of the material world, appealed to Christian theology and gave the young religion a philosophical foundation upon which to build its ideas.

Plato's views on procrastination would be adopted by the early Christian church, but with one important twist: *akrasia* was no longer just a simple failure of knowledge or skill — it would now be a mortal sin.

Saint Augustine

St. Augustine is arguably the most important Christian theologian who ever lived that is not featured in the Bible itself. Born in 354 CE, he came of age in a Roman Empire that had just adopted Christianity as the official state religion, thus converting millions of new people to a relatively new religion that still lacked a strong philosophical foundation. St. Augustine would go on to fulfill that role, bringing the best elements of Plato and Stoicism and integrating them with early

¹⁵ Nixey, Catherine. [The darkening age](#). 2017. Macmillan. Pp. 16-28.

Christian theology. But his take on *akrasia* would end up being quite drastic, likely because he himself struggled so much with it.

Augustine had a wayward youth. He grew up in the upper class, went to the finest schools, and spent much of his time drinking, partying and fornicating with women. As young as nine, he would shoplift from the local vendors — a behavior that would later give him deep consternation as an adult.

For many years, Augustine wanted to change his ways but couldn't. He had been exposed to Christianity through his mother but did not fully believe in it. He studied the Greek philosophers and particularly loved the Stoics but none of it seemed to affect his behavior. He dabbled in another religion popular at the time called “Manichaeism.” Sometimes, he would half-heartedly pray to God saying, “Please God, make me pure... but not yet.” It was a spiritual form of *akrasia*.

Then one day, in the year 386, Augustine was relaxing in a local garden when he heard a child singing: “Take it and read it, take it and read it,” over and over again. He looked down and coincidentally saw a parchment paper. He picked it up. It was St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, verse 13:13, which read, “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”

He converted to Christianity on the spot.

Augustine immediately studied to join the clergy. From there, he excelled, becoming one of the most respected and sought after

preachers in his province. He was incredibly prolific, writing over 2000 sermons throughout his life, many of which are still preserved today. Through his work, Augustine grounded Christian theology in the philosophical frameworks of Plato and the Stoics. And part of this grounding was his approach to *akrasia*, which, in his case, was a deeply personal issue loaded with baggage.

Augustine wrote about stealing as a child. He realized that he stole not because he needed to, but because it impressed the other kids. He described it as putting a “lower good” (impressing others) above a “higher good” (honesty). He realized that this selfish impulse, this inability to defer gratification, this form of *akrasia*, of knowing what is right but failing to do it anyway, was the root of sinfulness.¹⁶

Augustine went on to explain that *akrasia* was not simply a lack of knowledge, as Plato argued, or skill, as Aristotle suggested, **but reflected a fundamental lack of character**. The problem was not that you didn’t know what was right or couldn’t do what was right. The problem was *you* were not right. And the only way to get yourself right was through God.

Thus launched over a thousand-year cycle of shame around one’s failure to resist impulse and do the right thing. Augustine’s moral judgments and personal baggage have forever been imbued deeply into Christian theology, resulting in severe punishments for adherents who could not control their “lower” impulses and desires. It would declare sloth/laziness as one of the seven deadly sins. And it would deem the

¹⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, [Confessions](#), Book II.

church the only path to overcoming one's poor judgment. Any failure to act would be met with shame and a demand that one confess, repent and give oneself to God.

This was the doctrine of Original Sin. You are born impulsive and selfish. You are born into *akrasia* and procrastination. Like all humans, you fail to defer your impulses and subdue your selfishness. Therefore, the only path to salvation is through surrendering to God.

Shame

This history matters because it led to procrastination being viewed as a moral failing, and as a result, it integrated the idea that failing to act on your better judgment is a source of shame and a lack of character.

This is important because modern research into procrastination and self-discipline shows that *shaming people and ourselves backfires*. The more you judge a person's character for their failures to act, the less likely they are to act in the future.¹⁷ In studies where researchers tracked workplace environments, they consistently found that workers who were morally judged for their failings were the least motivated to work and got less done.¹⁸

¹⁷ Abdelaliem, S.M.F., Asal, M.G.R., Abou Zeid, M.A.G., Hendy, A. & El-Sayed, A.A.I. (2024). [Humble leadership and nurses' turnover intention: the moderating effect of leader expertise](#). *International Nursing Review*, 1, 13.

¹⁸ He, Q., Wu, M., Wu, W., & Fu, J. (2021). [The effect of abusive supervision on employees' work procrastination behavior](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 596704.

Psychologists have studied people's self-talk regarding their abilities to accomplish goals. They found a pattern: people who shame themselves — judging their procrastination as a character flaw rather than a lack of skill or knowledge — perform worse over time.¹⁹

This brings us to one of the most important takeaways of the episode: *When you struggle with procrastination, the worst thing you can do is shame yourself for it.*

Self-Compassion and Self-Forgiveness

About 15 years ago, psychologists began measuring what they called “self-compassion.” Self-compassion is “being open to and moved by one’s own suffering, experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one’s inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one’s own experience is part of the common human experience”.²⁰

One way to think about it is if your best friend screwed up, how would you talk to them? You would probably be encouraging, tell them to not be so hard on themselves, tell them some nice things about themselves to help them feel better. Now, imagine if you said those things to yourself. *That’s* self-compassion.

¹⁹ Fee, R. L., & Tangney, J. P. (2000). [Procrastination: A means of avoiding shame or guilt?](#) *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 15(5), 167–184.

²⁰ Neff, K. D. (2011). [Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being](#). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(1), 1–12.

Self-forgiveness is similar to self-compassion in that it is the ability to forgive ourselves for our mistakes. It's not seeing our failed actions as reflective of our character but rather, simply a problem of skill or knowledge.²¹

Researchers find that people who have a lot of self-compassion and are able to practice self-forgiveness generally experience less shame and are less likely to procrastinate.²² Again, we will see the exact mechanisms for why this is later in the episode, but for now it's important to know that not being so hard on yourself actually generates better results.

If you have a hard time being compassionate with yourself or forgiving yourself for your failures, one of the best ways to go about it is what researchers call “finding common humanity.”²³ It's basically reminding yourself that your failures are quite common and that there is nothing unique or horrible about them. As mentioned at the top of the show, over 95% of the population struggles with procrastination to some degree and 25% of the population struggles with it chronically. That means hundreds of millions of people, if not billions, struggle with procrastination regularly and severely.

²¹ Wohl, M. J. A., & McLaughlin, K. J. (2014). [Self-forgiveness: the good, the bad, and the ugly](#). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 8(8), 422–435.

²² Martinčková, L., & Enright, R. D. (2018b). [The effects of self-forgiveness and shame-proneness on procrastination: exploring the mediating role of affect](#). *Current Psychology*, 39(2), 428–437.

²³ Neff, K. D. (2003). [The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion](#). *Self and identity*, 2(3), 223–250

Shame and Forgiveness

If you have failed to achieve or even pursue any of your goals, not only are you not weird for failing to do so, but you are actually quite ordinary.

Possibilities for Growth

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

— Aristotle

Saving Aristotle: A Story of Ideas

Most people don't know that Aristotle's work was almost lost to the world forever. As he developed his philosophical system, he established early principles of systematic inquiry and argued that knowledge should be gained through careful observation and reasoning. Therefore, this qualified him as heretical in the early Christian church and all of his work was either lost or destroyed.

Luckily, translations of his work managed to make it to the Middle East, where Muslim scholars had translated him to Arabic and studied him thoroughly. His texts on logic, natural philosophy, and metaphysics were instrumental to the developments in science, astronomy and mathematics in the Islamic world.

In the 12th century, a Muslim scholar living in Spain by the name of Averroes²⁴ wrote a series of commentaries on Aristotle's work, defending it against Islamic criticisms of the time. After he wrote it, he happened to translate these commentaries — and some of Aristotle's

²⁴Ibn Rushd [Averroes]. (2021). [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

original work — into Latin. It was the first time Aristotle’s work was available to Europeans in nearly a thousand years.

To his surprise, Averroes’ commentaries exploded in popularity within European universities and quickly became controversial within the church. So-called “Averroism,” a defense of Aristotelianism, was condemned by the clergy as heretical.

But there was one young student at the University of Paris at the time named Thomas Aquinas who fell in love with Aristotle’s work and believed it could be integrated within Christian theology. He dedicated his career to marrying the two: Aristotle’s rationality and science with Christianity’s dogma and theology.

The result was his masterpiece *Summa Theologica*,²⁵ one of the most important books in western history. Aquinas not only brought Aristotle’s ideas to the European mainstream, but, more importantly, he made those ideas acceptable within the church.

The implications of this were massive. Aristotle’s worldview was progressive, scientific and hopeful. It argued that, with practice and effort, things can improve and get better over time. That humans can learn skills, adopt better habits, become more virtuous, and develop better technologies.

Up until this point, Christianity saw the world as static and unchanging. There was a cosmic struggle between good and evil and each of us were

²⁵ Aquinas, T. [*Summa theologica*](#).

caught in the middle of it, as there was no hope for redemption in this life but only in the next.

Aristotle brought the concept of redemption back to this life. Not only could you ask for forgiveness for your failures, but you could actively improve upon them, by learning more and becoming a better person through practice. Aristotle not only promised this progress but provided the method for attaining it — experimentation, measurement, and critical thinking that would enable humans to become better versions of themselves.

This had ripple effects across the continent in the following centuries. The Scientific Revolution of Galileo and Copernicus would soon emerge, followed by the Renaissance of Erasmus and Petrarch and then finally the Reformation. Each of these movements pushed a message of the possibility of improvement — that success, goals and virtue could be achieved in this life.

Self-Efficacy

Throughout psychology, there is a consistent causal link between a person's belief that they can do something, and their likelihood of doing it.²⁶ And procrastination is no different. The more you believe yourself capable of overcoming your procrastination, the more likely you are to improve at it.

²⁶ Sheeran, P., Maki, A., Montanaro, E., Avishai-Yitshak, A., Bryan, A., Klein, W. M., ... & Rothman, A. J. (2016). [The impact of changing attitudes, norms, and self-efficacy on health-related intentions and behavior: A meta-analysis](#). *Health Psychology*, 35(11), 1178-1188.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks or actions successfully.²⁷ Unlike self-esteem, which is a global evaluation of self-worth, self-efficacy focuses on perceived competence in particular domains or tasks, regardless of how outcomes affect overall self-evaluation.

Aristotle's work is crucial because it introduced the idea of self-efficacy to the masses. It showed people that improvement was possible, and they were capable of it. This was true not only of science and knowledge but of self-discipline and virtue as well. We are not static, permanent creatures. We can always get better.

The “Do Something” Principle

Most people believe that motivation must come first — that you feel inspired, then motivated, and finally act. Yet, this approach can be counterproductive, particularly when negative emotions interfere with taking essential actions. For example, someone aiming to lose weight might feel ashamed of their body, making the thought of visiting a gym intimidating or overwhelming. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which negative feelings prevent action, and the absence of action further deepens these negative emotions.

To break this cycle, I use what I call “The Do Something Principle”: by initiating even the smallest task — or your “minimum viable action” — you

²⁷ Hajloo N. (2014). [Relationships between self-efficacy, self-esteem and procrastination in undergraduate psychology students](#). *Iranian journal of psychiatry and behavioral sciences*, 8(3), 42–49.

can spark inspiration and motivation.²⁸ And that's because action isn't just the effect of motivation but also the cause of it.

A minimum viable action could be as simple as designing a website header when overwhelmed by a complete redesign. Often, starting with a minor task leads to momentum, making larger tasks more manageable.

Incorporating rituals can further enhance this approach. Establishing a consistent routine signals your brain that it's time to engage, reducing resistance. Also, eliminating distractions and confronting underlying fears can help maintain focus and drive.

Remember: action creates motivation, not the other way around. So, when in doubt, do something — anything — to get the ball rolling.

²⁸ Manson, M. (2023). [How to get motivated: the “Do something” principle](#). Mark Manson.

Puritanism & Perfectionism

In the 16th century, the Reformation caused millions across Europe to break away from the Catholic Church and establish their own beliefs. At its heart, this split followed Aristotle's idea: you, as an individual, could shape your own relationship with God. It was something that could be improved and worked on, like anything else, through gaining knowledge and working hard. The Reformation gave responsibility back to the people.

As a result, Protestants developed a strong work ethic.²⁹ If salvation was available on earth, only your own effort could help you achieve it. Protestant leaders like John Calvin and John Winthrop emphasized this by teaching that God favored those who were industrious, diligent and hard-working.

This led to many positive changes — people became more educated, economies grew stronger, and eventually, these attitudes helped create the Industrial Revolution. Yet, the problem of shame persisted.

Ironically, many Protestant groups were just as strict, or even stricter than the Catholic Church when judging moral failures. The difference was that now, people weren't judged for lacking religious devotion, but for being lazy or undisciplined.

The Puritans who settled in North America show this clearly. They held extremely rigid beliefs, judged others harshly, and worked incredibly

²⁹ Weber, M. (2013). [*The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*](#). Routledge.

hard. To them, being idle was both a sin against God and a failure to support their community.

These communities created a culture of perfectionism, where everyone was expected to excel at everything — or face consequences. Not surprisingly, this pressure to be perfect made procrastination problems worse, not better. This Puritan-influenced perfectionism and work ethic remains deeply embedded in many Western societies today, continuing to shape our attitudes toward productivity, success, and self-worth.

Perfectionism

On the surface, striving for excellence sounds admirable. Who doesn't want to do things exactly right? But perfectionism is often a double-edged sword. It's not about caring too much — it's also about caring in the wrong ways.

Procrastination can be the perfectionist's drug of choice. Why start something if you're going to mess it up? Why risk failure when you can delay, distract, and dream about a perfect outcome instead? This coping mechanism feels like temporary relief but leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of avoidance, guilt, and paralyzing anxiety.

Beneath the surface of perfectionism lies a deeper psychological pattern that manifests in our social interactions. Many perfectionists don't just demand excellence from themselves; they develop elaborate strategies to manage how others perceive them.

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation

Perfectionists often engage in what we call perfectionistic self-presentation:³⁰ the desperate need to appear flawless to others.

This includes:

- **The Perfect Persona:** Presenting yourself as perfect to gain validation.
- **Hiding Flaws:** Concealing mistakes and imperfections from others.
- **Never Admitting Weakness:** Avoiding asking for help, lying to cover up shortcomings, and taking on too much to prove competence.

These strategies may temporarily protect the ego, but they often fuel anxiety, social isolation, and burnout. This behavior is relevant in understanding **imposter syndrome**³¹ — where people feel intellectually inferior despite evidence of their competence.

What Drives Perfectionism?

Perfectionism isn't just a personality quirk — it's shaped by both nature and nurture:³²

³⁰Sherry, S. B., Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., Lee-Baggley, D. L., & Hall, P. A. (2006). [Trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation in personality pathology](#). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42(3), 477–490

³¹ Thomas, M., & Bigatti, S. (2020). [Perfectionism, imposter phenomenon, and mental health in medicine: a literature review](#). *International journal of medical education*, 11, 201–213.

³² Maloney, G. K., Egan, S. J., Kane, R. T., & Rees, C. S. (2014). [An etiological model of perfectionism](#). *PloS one*, 9(5), e94757.

- **Parenting Style**

Children raised by overbearing, critical or demanding parents often develop perfectionistic tendencies as they internalize high expectations, associating their worth with achievement.

- **Trauma and Emotional Deprivation**

Childhood experiences of neglect, emotional deprivation, or trauma can lead to schemas of defectiveness and unworthiness, fueling perfectionism as a way to “earn” love and approval.

- **Personality Traits**

High levels of neuroticism (a tendency toward negative emotions) can amplify the harmful aspects of perfectionism, while conscientiousness (thoughtfulness and diligence) contributes to its healthier expressions.

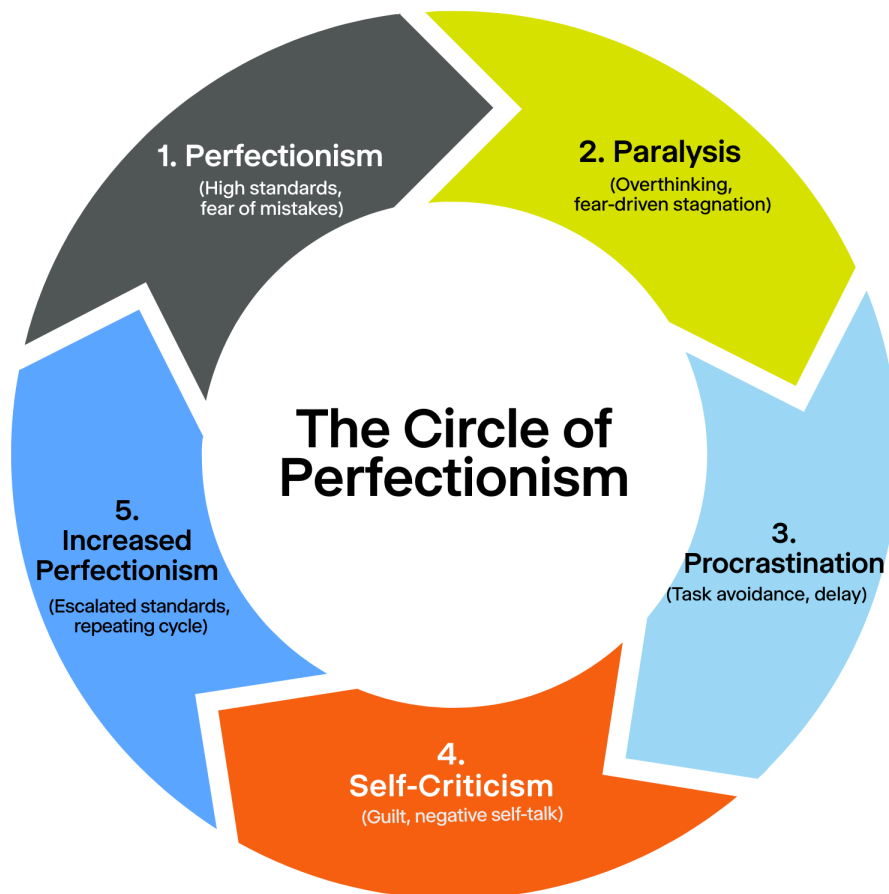
Signs of Perfectionism-Induced Procrastination

If you're a perfectionist, you might notice these behaviors when you procrastinate:³³

- Abandoning tasks that can't be done perfectly.
- Getting stuck in endless revisions.
- Over-planning and obsessing over details.
- Struggling to start tasks, paralyzed by fear of imperfection.

³³ P. Sederlund, A., R. Burns, L., & Rogers, W. (2020). [Multidimensional models of perfectionism and procrastination: Seeking determinants of both](#). *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(14), 5099.

- Experiencing intense guilt and stress from missed deadlines.
- Reacting strongly to criticism or negative feedback.



Do *All* Perfectionists Procrastinate?

Psychological research confirms that perfectionism and procrastination are closely intertwined, though not synonymous.³⁴ Perfectionism, it turns out, isn't just one thing — it comes in many forms, and not all of them lead to procrastination.

However, some are more tightly linked to procrastination than others:

- **Socially Prescribed Perfectionists**

This type comes from external pressures. You believe that others expect perfection from you, and failure feels like public humiliation. The fear of social judgment leads to procrastination as a way to escape the overwhelming anxiety of not meeting expectations. Studies reveal that socially prescribed perfectionists are especially vulnerable to procrastination, often paralyzed by fear of criticism and rejection.

- **Self-Oriented Perfectionists**

This is about setting high standards for yourself. It splits into two categories:

1. Adaptive Self-Oriented Perfectionism: These perfectionists are driven by growth and achievement. They have high standards for themselves but can also tolerate mistakes and setbacks as well as celebrate achievements. This type of perfectionism (also called

³⁴ Sirois F., Pychyl T. (2013). [Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: Consequences for future self](#). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(2), 115–127.

“healthy perfectionism”)³⁵ has been shown to be a protector *against* procrastination!³⁶

2. Maladaptive Self-Oriented Perfectionism: These perfectionists hold equally high standards but crumble under the weight of their own expectations.³⁷ Self-oriented perfectionists with high self-criticism, fear of failure, or overwhelming standards are more prone to procrastination, which can become chronic if these pressures persist over time.

Breaking Free from Perfectionism

The good news is, you can break the perfectionism-procrastination cycle. It's not easy, but it's worth it. Here's how:

- **Reframe Failure:** See mistakes as learning opportunities, not proof of inadequacy.
- **Set Realistic Goals:** Aim high, but make sure your goals are achievable. Break big projects into manageable steps.

³⁵ Shafir, H. (2022, November 9). [Perfectionism: Signs, causes, & ways to overcome](#). *Choosing Therapy*.

³⁶ Flett G. L., Blankstein K. R., Hewitt P. L., Koledin S. (1992). [Components of perfectionism and procrastination in college students](#). *Social Behavior and Personality: International Journal*, 20(2), 85–94.

³⁷ Sederlund, A. P., Burns, L. R., & Rogers, W. (2020). [Multidimensional models of perfectionism and procrastination: seeking determinants of both](#). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(14), 5099.

- **Practice Self-Compassion:** Treat yourself with kindness. Forgive your missteps and move on.
- **Start Before You're Ready:** Action beats perfection every time. Stop waiting for the perfect moment and dive in.
- **Celebrate Progress:** Focus on how far you've come, not how far you have to go.
- **Create Accountability Systems:** Partner with someone or announce your deadlines publicly to increase commitment.
- **Use Time Constraints:** Set strict time limits for tasks to prevent endless refinement and overthinking.
- **Practice "Good Enough":** Deliberately complete some tasks at 80% quality to build tolerance for imperfection.
- **Challenge Negative Thoughts:** Question assumptions about what might happen if something isn't perfect.
- **Separate Identity from Performance:** Remind yourself that outcomes don't define your worth as a person.
- **Focus on Purpose:** Connect with why the task matters rather than how perfectly it's executed.

- **Develop Process Orientation:** Enjoy the act of creating rather than fixating solely on the result.
 - **Schedule Regular Breaks:** Plan rest periods to prevent burnout and maintain sustainable productivity.
-

Sigmund Freud

One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful.

— Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud is simultaneously one of the most influential and controversial figures in psychology. In many ways, he invented the field. But he also got a lot of things wrong, too. Whatever your opinion of him, the impact he had on psychology — and Western thought more generally — is undeniably huge.

Before we dig into what Freud got right and wrong about procrastination, we need to cover a few of the key concepts on which he based his theories.

Freud thought that a fundamental human drive was to seek pleasure and avoid pain. He called this **the pleasure principle**. Shaped by millions of years of evolution, this drive, Freud reasoned, is a fundamental characteristic of all mammals, perhaps even all animals.³⁸

As children, we operate mostly on the pleasure principle. During development, we're constantly learning what feels good and what feels bad. Freud argued we are wired at this stage to prioritize and seek ways to feel good as much as possible, consequences be damned.

³⁸ Sigmund, F., & Anna, F. (1911). [Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning](#). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey, 12, 215-26.

But as we develop and mature, we learn that acting on our impulses isn't always the best strategy, and in fact it often leads to a lot of bad outcomes. Once we come to realize this more fully, Freud argued that we learn to navigate life based on what he called **the reality principle**, which is the mind's way of acting on the conditions and limits of the real world.

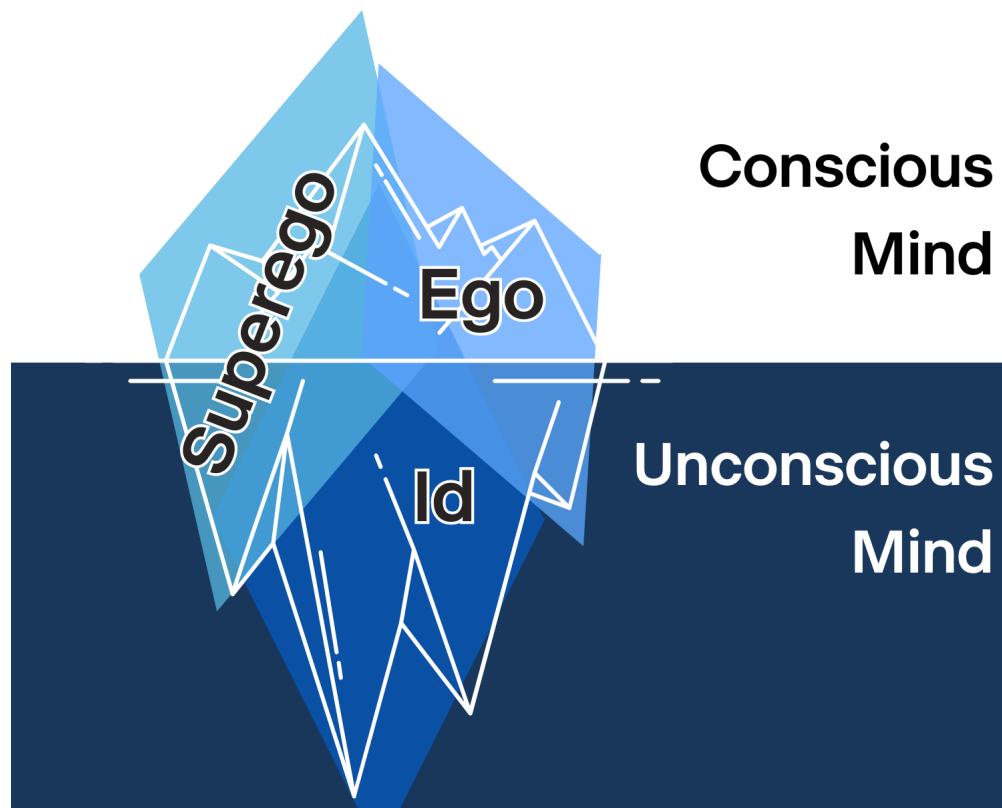
So, to Freud, a healthy, mature adult has learned to manage their impulses and delay gratification when it benefits them in the long run.

Freud also theorized that the human psyche was made up of three main parts: the id, ego, and superego.³⁹

- The **id** is the primitive, instinctual part of the mind. It contains basic drives and impulses, operating purely on the pleasure principle — avoid pain, seek pleasure. We're born with a fully intact id.
- The **superego** is the moral part of the mind. It represents the ideals and standards of the society we grow up in, striving for perfection and moral integrity. The superego develops during childhood through observing our parents and the broader culture around us.
- The **ego** is the mediator between the id and superego. It operates on the reality principle, attempting to balance our desires, morality, and reality. The ego develops from the id and becomes distinct during early childhood.

³⁹ Freud, S. (1923). [The ego and the id](#). *Therapeutic Advances in Chronic Disease Journal*, 17(1), 5-22.

Freud's Iceberg Model



According to Freud's psychodynamic theory, we experience psychological distress and even mental illness when the ego fails to balance the desires of the id with the moral standards of the superego.

Procrastination Through a Freudian Lens

While Freud didn't directly address procrastination, other psychoanalysts (Freudian psychologists) have used his theories to develop a framework for understanding this behavior.

A main tenet of Freud's psychodynamic theory is that we engage in all sorts of mental gymnastics to protect our self-image when it's been threatened and this can be a useful insight to understanding procrastination as well.

Essentially, procrastination occurs in response to ego threats. The tasks we encounter in our lives present the possibility that we might fail, or we might not be the person we imagine ourselves to be, and so we procrastinate in order to avoid the possibility of being wrong about ourselves. Similarly, even actions or behaviors that could improve our lives *also* threaten our ego and identity, so we avoid doing them as well. Ultimately, the ego wants *stasis*. It wants to change as little as possible. And it will psychologically fight to keep things the same.

The primary way we do this is through defense mechanisms.⁴⁰

For example, a very common justification for procrastination I hear is “I work better under pressure”. This is blatant rationalization, a common defense mechanism where we create logical-sounding excuses for our actions or, in this case, lack of action.

⁴⁰ Freud, A. (1936). [*The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*](#).

A common defense mechanism I use to procrastinate is intellectualization. I think I just need to “research” something a little more before I really start working on it. Or I start overplanning the task in my head, thinking I need to set aside some time to think about it first and come up with the best plan of attack. A few hours or days or even a week goes by, and I haven't started yet!

Here's a list of common defense mechanisms we use when procrastinating:⁴¹

- **Denial** — Refusing to acknowledge the urgency or importance of a task. You convince yourself that a deadline isn't real or that the consequences of delay are negligible.
- **Projection** — Attributes their procrastination tendencies to external factors or other people. This externalization relieves personal responsibility.
- **Dissociation** — Detaching from the reality of a situation, leading to a sense of emotional numbness or disconnect from the task at hand.
- **Regression** — When overwhelmed, you might revert to childish behaviors or a less mature state, avoiding responsibilities entirely.

⁴¹ Baumeister, R. F., Dale, K., & Sommer, K. L. (1998). [Freudian defense mechanisms and empirical findings in modern social psychology: Reaction formation, projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation, and denial](#). *Journal of Personality*, 66(6), 1081-1124.

- **Passive-Aggressive Behavior** — Procrastination may act as a passive-aggressive way to resist authority or expectations, especially if you feel imposed upon.
- **Reaction Formation** — Acting in a way that is opposite to your true feelings. A procrastinator might outwardly express confidence and indifference about their tasks, while internally feeling anxious and inadequate.
- **Displacement** — A person redirects their anxiety about the task toward unrelated activities or people, using these distractions to avoid confronting the real issue.
- **Undoing** — Undoing might involve making token efforts or gestures that superficially address procrastination but do not fully solve the problem.
- **Identification with the Aggressor** — Here, the procrastinator internalizes the perceived criticism or expectations of an authority figure, resulting in paralysis due to fear of failure or judgment.
- **Intellectualization** — Overthinking or analyzing the task in abstract terms to avoid emotional engagement with it.

DEFENSE MECHANISMS



Denial

Refusing to acknowledge uncomfortable realities or emotions.



Projection

Attributing your own feelings or flaws onto someone else.



Dissociation

Mentally disconnecting from feelings, memories, or reality to avoid distress.



Regression

Reverting to childlike behaviors when stressed or overwhelmed.



Intellectualization

Using excessive logic or analysis to avoid dealing with emotional distress.



Passive Agressiveness

Expressing hostility indirectly through subtle resistance.



Reaction Formation

Behaving opposite to your true feelings to hide unacceptable emotions.



Displacement

Redirecting strong feelings toward a safer, unrelated target.



Undoing

Attempting to reverse or neutralize past actions by doing the opposite behavior.



Identification with the aggressor

Adopting behaviors or attitudes of someone causing stress or fear to reduce anxiety.

Parenting Styles and Procrastination

Freud also explored how parenting influences child development and concluded that the way children are raised has a deep-seated impact on our psyches that lasts throughout our lifetime.

Psychoanalysts have studied how childhood could affect procrastination and have come up with a few explanations:

When Achievements = Love

One is that procrastination could arise from parents who set unrealistic expectations and tie their love to achievements.⁴²

- **Example:** Imagine a young adult named Sarah who struggles to complete important tasks, such as preparing for a job interview.
- **As a child:** Sarah's parents set extremely high expectations for her academic and extracurricular achievements, often tying their approval and affection to her success. When she failed to meet their standards, they expressed disappointment, leaving her feeling unworthy and anxious about failure.
- **As an adult:** Sarah internalizes these feelings of inadequacy. When faced with the job interview, she begins to procrastinate — spending hours daydreaming or engaging in

⁴² Missildine, W. H. (1963). [*Your Inner Child of the Past*](#). New York: Simon & Schuster.

unrelated activities instead of preparing. This behavior stems from her fear of failing to meet expectations and the emotional paralysis caused by the pressure she feels. Ultimately, Sarah avoids the task altogether, reinforcing her feelings of worthlessness and perpetuating a cycle of procrastination.

Internalizing Parental Anger

Another is that children internalize perceived parental anger when failing to meet expectations. As adults, they tend to procrastinate to unconsciously avoid the pain of disapproval, reinforcing fear of failure and perfectionist tendencies.⁴³

- **Example:** Consider a man named David who consistently procrastinates on important work presentations.
- **As a child:** David's parents had high expectations and would often show visible frustration or disappointment when he failed to meet their standards. Although his parents rarely expressed outright anger, David internalized these reactions as a form of disapproval and came to associate failure with feelings of shame and rejection.
- **As an adult:** Whenever David faces a significant task like preparing for a presentation, he unconsciously recalls the anxiety and perceived anger from his childhood experiences. To avoid the

⁴³Jackson, D. M. H. (2012). [*The role of academic procrastination, academic self-efficacy beliefs, and prior academic skills on course outcomes for college students in developmental education*](#). (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia).

emotional pain tied to these memories, he puts off working on the presentation, even though he knows it will increase his stress later. This procrastination becomes a way of avoiding the discomfort of potential failure and disapproval, perpetuating a cycle of delay and self-doubt.

Permissive and Authoritarian Parenting Styles

Another theory suggests that extreme parenting styles — whether overly permissive or overly authoritarian — can create different but equally problematic patterns of chronic procrastination in adulthood.⁴⁴

Permissive Parenting

When parents provide insufficient structure and boundaries, children may develop into what researchers call "nervous underachievers" — individuals who become paralyzed by freedom and struggle with self-regulation. Without external frameworks to guide decision-making, these children never internalize effective planning and prioritization skills.

The lack of consistent expectations can create what psychologists term "choice overload anxiety." When everything is optional and self-directed, the sheer number of possibilities becomes overwhelming rather than liberating. These individuals often report feeling

⁴⁴ MCIntyre P. M. (1964). [Dynamics and Treatment of the Passive Aggressive Underachiever](#). *American journal of psychotherapy*, 18, 95–108.

simultaneously burdened by responsibility and unprepared to handle it effectively.

- **Example:** Emily consistently struggles with self-imposed deadlines and time management, often describing herself as "swimming in quicksand" when faced with open-ended projects.

As a child: Emily grew up with parents who rarely set rules or expectations for her. They allowed her to make her own decisions without much guidance or structure. As a result, Emily never developed strong time-management or goal-setting skills.

- **As an adult:** Emily excels in highly structured environments but crumbles under self-directed work. When her supervisor assigns a project with only a final deadline, she experiences what she calls "analysis paralysis" — spending days agonizing over how to begin rather than actually working. She tends to create elaborate planning systems that she subsequently abandons, and often works in frantic bursts just before deadlines, despite having weeks or months to complete tasks.

Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parents, on the other hand, are too strict and foster “angry underachievers” who rebel against authority through procrastination.

- **Example:** Jake procrastinates on important tasks at work, especially those with tight deadlines, as a form of rebellion against the authority of time and expectations.
- **As a child:** Jake was raised by authoritarian parents who enforced strict rules and demanded obedience. They imposed rigid expectations and punished him harshly for failing to meet them. He often felt stifled and powerless, leading to resentment toward authority.
- **As an adult:** When his manager assigns him a quarterly report with a strict two-week deadline, Jake waits until the night before it's due to begin working on it. Despite having the skills to complete it easily, he feels a sense of satisfaction in pushing against the imposed timeline, unconsciously recreating the power struggle from his childhood but now with him exerting control through delay. His procrastination reflects MacIntyre's concept of "angry underachievers," where rebellion against control manifests in avoidance behaviors.

Here are three practical steps that can serve as a starting point to help you identify your patterns:

1. Identify Your Parenting-Based Procrastination Pattern

- Reflect on your childhood experiences and how they might connect to your current procrastination habits. Determine whether you align with the patterns seen in David (high expectations/fear of failure),

Emily (permissive/lack of structure), or Jake (authoritarian/rebellion).

2. Create Personalized Structure

- **For those raised with permissive parenting:** Break down large tasks into small, concrete steps for each component. Start with creating structure for just one project to practice these skills without feeling overwhelmed.
- **For those raised with authoritarian parenting:** Reframe tasks as personal choices rather than external demands. Write down how completing the task serves your own values and goals, not just others' expectations.
- **For those raised with high-expectation parenting:** Set "good enough" standards explicitly before beginning tasks, defining what acceptable completion looks like rather than pursuing perfection.

3. Practice Emotional Awareness

- When you notice yourself procrastinating, pause and ask: "What am I feeling right now?" Label the emotion (anxiety, resentment, overwhelm) and connect it to your childhood pattern. Simply recognizing "This is my childhood pattern activating" can create space for new choices.

These strategies for addressing procrastination through childhood patterns reflect decades of psychological research that builds upon — and moves beyond — the foundational work of early theorists.

Freud got a lot right. But he also got a lot wrong. Ultimately, the weakness of his approach was the lack of empirical evidence and scientific data. Everything was a theory based on his observations of thousands of patients. And while many of those observations did spot universal characteristics of humanity, many of them simply reflected Freud's own biases and neuroses.

Despite his (often hilarious) miscalculations, he brought psychology to the mainstream, and opened the door for hundreds of other psychologists and researchers to come after him. Many of whom *did* approach the field with more scientific rigor.

Behaviorism

Behavior is the result of stimulus-response. If you can control the stimulus, you can control the behavior.

— John Watson

In 1913, a psychologist named John B. Watson formally introduced the theory that would become known as **behaviorism**.⁴⁵

Watson and Classical Conditioning

Watson thought that the emphasis psychoanalysts placed on subconscious motives and internal mental processes was far too wishy-washy and unscientific. He saw all the advances in the material sciences (e.g., physics and chemistry) of the early 20th century and reasoned that if he could apply the same rigor and discipline to psychology, similar breakthroughs in understanding human nature would soon follow.

Watson therefore pushed for a stricter adherence to the scientific method in the behavioral sciences, arguing that psychologists should be concerned *only* with what we can directly observe. He thought that behavior in all animals, including humans, could be explained through this reductionist approach if we only took the time to study it as carefully as a physicist studies protons and electrons. There was no

⁴⁵ Watson, J. B. (1913). [Psychology as the behaviorist views it](#). *Psychological review*, 20(2), 158.

need for the armchair theorizing about mental processes or the role of the unconscious.

Essentially, the behaviorists believed that all behavior was shaped through a series of punishments and rewards.

Watson was heavily influenced by the work of Ivan Pavlov, the famous animal behaviorist who discovered what is now known as *classical conditioning* in his experiments on dogs.⁴⁶ Pavlov found that by ringing a bell prior to giving dogs food, he could eventually make them salivate just by ringing the bell, even in the absence of food.

These experiments taught us that you could elicit an innate, reflexive response (e.g., salivating) with a “neutral” stimulus (e.g., a bell) if you repeatedly paired the neutral stimulus with the reward (e.g., food).

Classical conditioning — A learning process through which a neutral stimulus becomes associated with a biologically significant stimulus, leading to a learned response.⁴⁷

The early behaviorists theorized that this kind of classical conditioning could explain not just simple reflexes, but all behavior, including the most complex human actions and mental processes.

They proposed that even our most sophisticated thoughts, emotions, and behaviors were ultimately elaborate chains of conditioned

⁴⁶ Clark, R. E. (2004). [The classical origins of Pavlov's conditioning](#). *Integrative Physiological and Behavioral Science*, 39(4), 279–294.

⁴⁷ Allen, C. T., & Madden, T. J. (1985). [A closer look at classical conditioning](#). *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12(3), 301.

responses built upon simpler associations. This radical view suggested that human experience could be reduced to a series of learned stimulus-response connections, with no need to invoke internal mental states or consciousness to explain behavior.

Skinner and Operant Conditioning

This theory, however, couldn't account for everything. A young psychologist by the name of Burrhus Frederic Skinner — better known as B.F. Skinner — started to notice that animals could be conditioned to produce all kinds of behaviors, not just innate, reflexive ones.⁴⁸

Heavily influenced by Watson and the other behaviorists before him, Skinner took to devising methods of measuring learned behavior as precisely as he could. While doing research at Harvard, he invented a small box designed to hold a rat and equipped with a lever that, when pushed, could deliver a tiny food pellet to the rat. He called this a “conditioning chamber” — but it’s better known now as the “Skinner box”.⁴⁹

Skinner would place a hungry rat in the chamber for the first time. As the rat naturally explored and moved around, it would inevitably bump into the lever and receive a food reward. The rats quickly realized that pressing the lever meant food.

⁴⁸ Skinner, B. F. (1938; reprint 2019). [The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis](#). B.F. Skinner Foundation.

⁴⁹ Du Boulay, B. (2019). [Escape from the Skinner Box: The case for contemporary intelligent learning environments](#). *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50 (6), 2902-2919.

Once the rats understood and *learned* this basic connection, Skinner would then begin to train them to perform more complex behaviors. For example, he would only deliver the food when rats turned around first and then pressed the lever. Or he would teach them to jump through a small hoop before pressing the lever, and so on.

It was a simple idea that would send shockwaves through the behavioral sciences. Skinner could train these rats to perform all sorts of complicated behaviors using just this tiny box and a few pellets of rat chow.

This kind of conditioning, where *learned* behaviors were reinforced through a series of rewards, was called *operant conditioning*.

Operant conditioning — A learning process through which voluntary behaviors are modified based on their consequences.⁵⁰

In addition to rats, Skinner was also fond of training pigeons, a.k.a., sky rats. He trained pigeons to play ping pong with each other⁵¹ and even taught them how to “read” using operant conditioning. In one of the more bizarre stories of his life, Skinner was commissioned by the US government to train pigeons to guide bombs during World War II (he never got it to work).⁵²

⁵⁰ Kirsch, I., Lynn, S. J., Vigorito, M., & Miller, R. R. (2004). [The role of cognition in classical and operant conditioning](#). *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60(4), 369–392.

⁵¹ Skinner, B. F. (1962). [Two “synthetic social relations”](#). *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 5(4), 531.

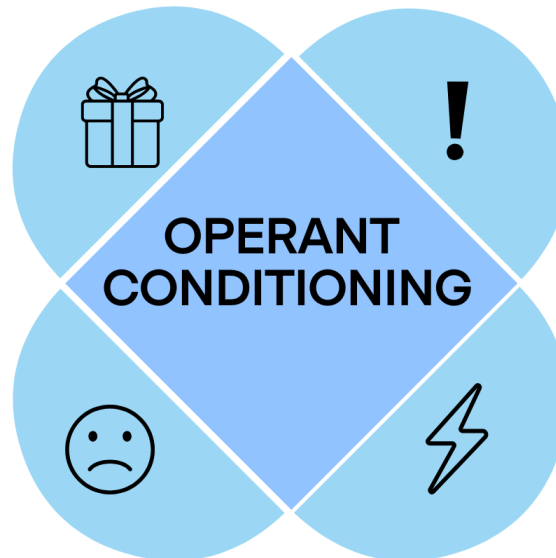
⁵² Skinner, B. F. (1960). [Pigeons in a pelican](#). *American Psychologist*, 15(1), 28.

Positive Reinforcement

Adding a pleasant stimulus increases desired behavior

Negative Reinforcement

Removing an unpleasant stimulus encourages desired behavior



Negative Punishment

Removing a pleasant stimulus discourages undesired behavior

Positive Punishment

Adding an unpleasant stimulus decreases undesired behavior

Adapted from "Operant Conditioning." Early Years TV.

Skinner would go on to discover all sorts of fascinating things about operant conditioning.

In a set of experiments, he varied how frequently a rat or pigeon was rewarded for a given behavior. He found that a more random (or

"variable") reward schedule made the behavior much more persistent and harder to eliminate than if you consistently rewarded them every single time for their behavior. For example, if a rat received food only sometimes when pressing a lever (perhaps every third or fifth press in an unpredictable pattern) it would continue pressing the lever much longer even when rewards stopped completely, compared to rats that had been rewarded every single time. He also found that punishments could be applied in operant conditioning to discourage behaviors⁵³ — such as delivering a mild shock when an animal performed an unwanted action, which would reduce the likelihood of that behavior happening again.

Equipped with all these experiments in classical and operant conditioning, the behaviorists were becoming a force to be reckoned with in the behavioral sciences. Their highly-quantified, highly-controlled experiments using direct observation of behavior stood in stark contrast to the psychoanalysts' endless theorizing about how hidden sexual drives made us all want to screw our parents... or something?

Later in his life, through his notion of **Radical Behaviorism**, Skinner hypothesized that even our thoughts and emotions were types of behaviors that could be explained by reinforcement through rewards and punishments.

So, what do Skinner's rats and pigeons have to do with procrastination?

⁵³ Ferster, C. B., & Skinner, B. F. (1957). [*Schedules of reinforcement*](#). Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Procrastination As a Behaviorist Sees It

To a staunch behaviorist, procrastination can be fully explained in terms of rewards and punishments.

According to this view, someone who procrastinates simply has neither been punished enough for their procrastinating nor rewarded enough for taking timely action.

To the behaviorists, procrastination is a result of punishments and rewards at different stages of procrastination.⁵⁴ For example:

- **Reinforcement of delay:** We indulge in immediate rewards in response to aversive tasks, reinforcing the procrastination. For example, feeling instant relief when you choose scrolling social media instead of sending that uncomfortable email.
- **Ineffective punishments:** Negative consequences of procrastination are often delayed, which reduces their effectiveness. For instance, the gradual weight gain from repeatedly postponing exercise happens too slowly to deter tomorrow's decision to skip the gym.
- **Previous conditioning:** Past experiences where procrastination wasn't punished effectively or it was even rewarded. Such as receiving praise for a “last-minute” presentation that was actually

⁵⁴ Svartdal, F., & Løkke, J. A. (2022). [The ABC of Academic Procrastination: Functional Analysis of a Detrimental Habit](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1019261.

decent, teaching you that procrastination “works.”

- **Negative reinforcement of procrastination itself:** Anxiety increases as the deadline of a task approaches and, therefore, we experience a greater sense of relief the closer to the deadline we finish a task, which could cause a self-reinforcing loop of procrastination. For instance, experiencing an intense rush of satisfaction after submitting an assignment just minutes before the deadline, inadvertently teaching your brain that this stressful pattern is rewarding.

The Behaviorist Remedies for Procrastination

Since behaviorists were laser-focused on rewards and punishments in shaping behavior, they looked for remedies where said rewards and punishments lived: in one’s immediate environment.

They thought that all quirks and failures of human nature could be solved if only we thought carefully enough about our surroundings, which contains all triggers and reinforcements for any given behavior we perform.

The behaviorist school of thought has been highly influential in many of the solutions offered for behavioral change even up to today.

The modern education system is essentially one big reinforcement machine. You’re rewarded with good grades, praise, and more

professional opportunities for doing the assignments, and punished with bad grades and fewer opportunities if you don't.

So it goes with most jobs, too, with rewards in the forms of paychecks in exchange for performing your work, and punishments (e.g., losing your job) for slacking off.

There is also a strong legacy of behaviorist principles in the modern productivity industry that has cropped up over the past several decades.

Common advice derived from the behaviorist school of thought in this space includes things like:

- Creating consequences that motivate action and punish delay (operant conditioning) — such as earning a guilt-free weekend getaway after completing your project, or forfeiting concert tickets if you miss your deadline.
- Intentionally setting up one's environment to reinforce desired actions and discourage delay — like working in a distraction-free library instead of at home.
- Shaping and chaining behaviors, such as breaking down large tasks into smaller ones and rewarding completion along the way, much like Skinner shaping the behavior of his rats and pigeons.
- Stimulus control, such as establishing a dedicated work environment that serves as a discriminative stimulus and signals that working behavior will be rewarded — like having a specific

desk you only use for focused work.

- Some behaviorists schools even promote “Skinner’s Law”, which sums it all up nicely:

1. Make the pain of not doing a task greater than the pain of doing it. For instance, setting public deadlines, penalties for missing goals, or having an accountability partner who checks your progress daily.

2. Amplify the pleasure of doing a task to exceed the pleasure of not doing it. For instance, task chunking, rewarding yourself, creating dedicated work spaces that foster positive reinforcement, etc.

These strategies can certainly be useful to help you procrastinate less. But the behaviorist approach falls short in a few key areas.

The Limitations of the Behaviorist Model

While Watson and Skinner left a lasting impact on the field of psychology, their approach is not without its critics, especially when it comes to procrastination.

Behaviorists often overlook internal processes — thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and motivations. However, procrastination might stem from irrational beliefs about how difficult or tedious the task will be. Or perhaps perfectionism is holding you back, making it hard to start anything that might not be flawless. These internal blockers don't quite fit into the behaviorist framework.

Another issue is the overly simplistic nature of the approach. People procrastinate for all kinds of reasons. We differ in how conscientious or impulsive we are, and how much we care about future rewards. So the kind of punishment or reward that works for one person might completely flop for another.

Sure, rewards and punishments can work, but mostly in the short term. When it comes to chronic procrastination, (which has become automatic and is often emotionally driven) there is a need for a more nuanced approach. Just dangling a carrot or threatening a stick doesn't go deep enough.

While behaviorism has its flaws, many of us do need systems of rewards, punishments, and the right environment to overcome our tendency to delay action.

As the old-school behaviorists taught us, building a new habit of action often comes down to this:

Stimulus → Response.

Reward → Repetition.

Environment → Outcome.

Sadly, none of us magically wake up motivated. Instead, we must create an environment that *rewards our action*, *punishes our delay*, and *trains our brain to get shit done*.

That's what **Momentum** is built for.

Momentum is my private membership community for continuous growth, and it could also be a valuable tool in your behavior-change box.

[Check it out and consider joining us here.](#)

Time Management

By the 1960s and 70s, more people were starting to work in offices as part of the burgeoning knowledge work sector. Think Don Draper of *Mad Men*, all the sales and marketing jobs cropping up as consumer products were proliferating, all the design jobs needed to create and package these products, and so on.

This was a stark change from the farms and factories where most in the middle and working classes had been employed prior to this era.

With this shift, the definition of “productivity” was also fundamentally changing. If you work in a factory, your productivity is easily measured by how many widgets you produce on a given day. What's more, the process by which those widgets are produced is clearly defined for you as a worker. You're given the exact step-by-step process by your boss, and you have to just do it. No need to think much past that.

In contrast, knowledge work is different. It's not always clear what the end product of your work will be. Processes for producing this kind of work are often not clearly defined either. Creativity can't really be achieved by following step-by-step processes.

So in the context of knowledge work, it was no longer feasible for bosses to micromanage what workers did all day. And if someone couldn't tell you what you needed to do at any given time, then it seemed reasonable to think that workers just needed to be taught how to manage their own time better.

According to these time management models, procrastination was a result of simple dysfunction in organization and planning abilities — that is, some people were just bad at structuring and allocating their time well.⁵⁵

Indeed, procrastinators often underestimate the time it will take to complete a task, or they set overly ambitious goals, or they're generally bad at prioritizing.⁵⁶ Time management proponents argued that if you could just teach these people some basic organizational skills, procrastination wouldn't be such a big deal.

This is where we started to get all sorts of organizational and personal productivity frameworks — things like the Eisenhower Matrix (categorizing tasks by urgency and importance), the Pareto Principle (focusing on the vital 20% of tasks that produce 80% of results), time logging and audits (tracking how you actually spend your time), and time blocking (scheduling specific chunks of time for focused work).

⁵⁵ Yan, B., & Zhang, X. (2022). [What research has been conducted on procrastination? Evidence from a systematical bibliometric analysis](#). *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 809044.

⁵⁶ Gustavson, D. E., & Miyake, A. (2017). [Academic Procrastination and Goal Accomplishment: A Combined Experimental and Individual Differences Investigation](#). *Learning and individual differences*, 54, 160–172.

Time Management



Adapted from: Martins, Z. (2025). The Eisenhower matrix: Time and task management made simple. Luxafor.

Many of these are still touted today in some form or another by productivity gurus, and they definitely have their place in our efforts to get things done.

But anyone who's tried to rely solely on these methods knows that they fall short in fixing the problem entirely.

The Problem with the Time Management Approach

While it's clear that having some basic organizational skills is a more effective way to work compared to just winging it, the time management approach fails to explain a lot about procrastination.

First and perhaps foremost, teaching people time management skills doesn't really solve procrastination. Even highly organized, conscientious people still struggle with procrastination at least some of the time. If it were a simple organizational problem, these people would almost never procrastinate.

Moreover, the time management approach completely glosses over the cognitive and emotional processes involved at all the stages of procrastination. It essentially attempts to treat the symptoms without addressing the root causes of the problem.

To be fair, time management methods can obviously help us organize our time more effectively. We should think more carefully about how we prioritize tasks and how we plan our days. And of course, we need to be more realistic about what we can and can't get done in a given time period.

While these kinds of skills are crucial for getting important things done, they ultimately fail to resolve the deep-seated problems that cause us to procrastinate in the first place.

Temporal Motivation Theory

As we've just seen, the behaviorists and time management proponents mostly tried to explain procrastination in terms of its environmental mechanics.

Behaviorists thought we could solve procrastination by manipulating our environment to reward us for getting things done and punish us for procrastinating.

The time management crowd thought we just needed better organizational skills and systems in place to keep us on track.

Both have been criticized for ignoring the complexity of human motivation and behavior — namely, they don't account for the emotional struggles and complex cognitive processes that perpetuate the vicious procrastination cycle.

This started to change in the 1990s and 2000s when a researcher named Piers Steel⁵⁷ set out to formulate a more comprehensive theory of human motivation.

Steel sought to blend some of the principles of behaviorism and time management with cognitive frameworks with the goal of providing a more complete picture of why we procrastinate and what we can do about it.

⁵⁷ Steel, P. (2011). [The procrastination equation](#). Allen & Unwin.

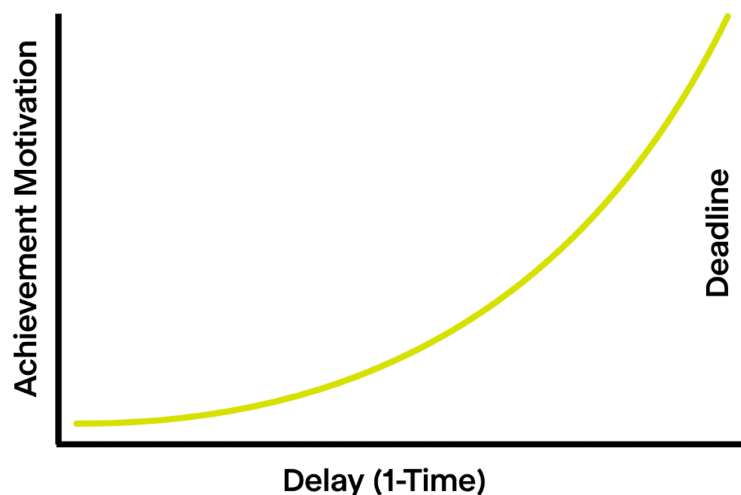
Temporal Motivation Theory

To that end, he and his colleagues came up with **Temporal Motivation Theory** – TMT for short.⁵⁸

TMT is a theory that explains how cognitive processes related to time influence motivation and decision-making.

Steel and his colleagues even developed a fancy mathematical formula to express their ideas in a more precise way (don't worry, there won't be a test on this):

$$\text{Motivation} = \frac{\text{Expectancy} \times \text{Value}}{1 + \text{Impulsiveness} \times \text{Delay}}$$



Adapted from: Janson, M. P., Wenker, T., & Bäumle, L. (2024). Only a matter of time? Using logfile data to evaluate temporal motivation theory in university students' examination preparation. British Journal of Educational Psychology.

⁵⁸ Steel, P., & König, C. J. (2006). [Integrating theories of motivation](#). *Academy of management review*, 31(4), 889-913.

Without completely boring you with the math of it all, TMT boils procrastination down to four different factors:

1. **Expectancy:** Your perceived likelihood of successfully completing a task. This is the “self-efficacy” part we mentioned before.
2. **Value:** Your perceived reward or satisfaction from completing the task.
3. **Impulsiveness:** Your tendency to indulge in short term rewards at the expense of long-term gains.
4. **Delay:** The amount of time before the reward is received or the task is due.

So basically, if you're confident that you can complete the task (expectancy) and you really do want the reward that comes with completing it (value), you'll be motivated to do it. But that's only the case if you can fend off the urge to indulge in short term pleasure (impulsiveness) and so long as the task isn't due too far in advance (delay).

TMT's Innovations

As you can probably already tell, TMT was a major improvement over earlier models. In fact, this fairly simple formula made all kinds of predictions that were later verified in experimental studies.

For example, TMT predicts one aspect of procrastination by showing that as deadlines approach, motivation increases because we can no longer take comfort in thinking “Oh, I have plenty of time, I’ll do it later”. So this explains why motivation ramps up for us and we’re more likely to act on tasks when the deadline is imminent.

Moreover, it takes into account a lot of the individual differences people show with motivation. People vary a lot in how confident we are in completing tasks, how we value different rewards, and how impulsive we are.

Another great leap forward with TMT was that it more accurately described the dynamic nature of procrastination and how it fluctuates over time. For example, the theory incorporated what’s known as “temporal discounting”, which describes our tendency to seek immediate gratification over delayed rewards. Thus, the predictions from this model were more accurate and useful, showing when, how, and why motivation shifts at different stages.

A more accurate and precise model of motivation and procrastination also meant that TMT could be applied across different areas of our lives, such as financial, health, and professional domains.

Overall, TMT was one of the first evidence-based models to give us a more comprehensive view of why we procrastinate. It incorporated the principles of several areas of psychology and finally started to explore the emotional dynamics through a scientific lens.

Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT) explains procrastination by proposing that individuals tend to prioritize tasks based on their perceived immediate utility. As a result, tasks with lower perceived rewards or urgency are more likely to be postponed. Additionally, procrastination can arise when a task lacks clear instructions, tangible incentives, or strict deadlines.

More specifically:

- **Unclear Directions:** Lack of clarity on task goals lowers expectancy, as individuals are unsure of what achieving the task will mean.
- **Lack of Incentives:** If a task offers little perceived reward, its value decreases, leading to delay.
- **Deadlines:** Tight deadlines increase sensitivity to delay, as they act as an external motivator.

TMT Solutions?

TMT offers several strategies for dealing with procrastination, such as:

- Setting shorter deadlines to create a sense of urgency
- Breaking tasks into smaller, more manageable parts to boost expectancy
- Focusing more on the value and rewards of completing tasks
- Implementing time blocking and creating clear deadlines to combat impulsiveness

You might have used some of these strategies in your life. I have, and they work pretty well, at least for some things and at least some of the time.

BUT...

While TMT does give us a more comprehensive view of how procrastination works, it still falls short in a few key areas. Critics of TMT argue that it's overly reliant on people making "rational calculations" for things like expectancy and reward values. While many behavioral economists used to believe that people act more or less rationally over time, we've since learned that this is rarely the case. People do all sorts of irrational things all the time (shocker, I know).

Another criticism of TMT is that it's far too simple to capture all the complex emotional dynamics involved in procrastination, and its components lack direct measurability.⁵⁹ For instance, how do beliefs around perfectionism or self-esteem (which we know influence motivation and procrastination) factor into the way we feel about a given task? TMT doesn't really address this without some real reaching in the dark.

Perhaps one of the biggest shortcomings of TMT is its focus on *motivation* rather than on *taking action*.

⁵⁹ Wessel, J. (2023). [Can procrastination be solved?](#) Unpack Psychology.

You'll notice that the TMT formula calculates motivation. But if you think about it, there are plenty of times we might feel a great surge of motivation and yet... we still procrastinate. Do we just “don’t want it badly enough”?

This is just a more subtle, secular form of the idea that procrastination is a failure of character: if only you had the right priorities, the right values in life, the right amount of confidence in yourself, then you would “just do it.”

Now, motivation obviously plays an important role in whether or not we procrastinate, but we're still not quite to the bottom of *why* we procrastinate. We're getting closer, but we still need to complete the procrastination puzzle.

Purpose and Procrastination

While business consultants were making millions of dollars teaching time management, an entirely different philosophical movement was taking place in Europe.

In the wake of World War II, French philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, argued that life was inherently meaningless and that it is our responsibility as individuals to find or create some sense of purpose for ourselves.

This idea generated a relatively bleak philosophy. But it turns out that it makes for excellent psychology.

Since then, researchers have consistently found that people who feel a strong sense of purpose — that is, that they serve some greater cause or mission than themselves — experience greater life satisfaction, mental and emotional well-being, and yes, they start and stick to their tasks more often.⁶⁰

While highly philosophical, it turns out that purpose is practical. People who feel a sense of “harmony” between their outward pursuits and their

⁶⁰ Schippers, M. C., & Ziegler, N. (2019). [Life Crafting as a way to find purpose and meaning in life](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

inner values, experience less procrastination and are more resilient when they run up against obstacles or setbacks.⁶¹

Ironically, the existentialists, with their fancy coffees and skinny cigarettes and dismal view of the universe, likely invented a more useful concept to fight procrastination than the time management consultants did. Cultivating a deep sense of purpose or meaning in life is associated with lower procrastination, largely by enhancing motivation, focus, and perseverance. People who feel their actions serve a meaningful goal are less inclined to “waste time” and more inclined to pursue those goals proactively.⁶² Psychological theories back this up, explaining that purpose-driven individuals find it easier to self-regulate and to cope with the discomfort that often triggers procrastination.⁶³

So, before you ask yourself *how* you can procrastinate less, it may be more useful to ask *why* you want to accomplish whatever it is you want to accomplish. Generally, if you are motivated by fleeting benefits, your motivation will be fleeting as well. We generally only maintain long-term motivation for tasks and pursuits that reflect our long-term values, and that we care deeply about.

⁶¹ Peixoto EM, Pallini AC, Vallerand RJ, Rahimi S, Silva MV. (2021). [The role of passion for studies on academic procrastination and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *Social Psychology Education*. 24(3):877-893.

⁶² Di Nocera F, De Piano R, Rullo M, Tempestini G. (2023). [A lack of focus, not task avoidance, makes the difference: Work routines in procrastinators and non-procrastinators](#). *Behavioral Science (Basel)*.13(4):333.

⁶³ Sirois, F. M. (2022). [Procrastination: What it is, why it's a problem, and what you can do about it](#). American Psychological Association.

Understanding your values, and your “why” behind doing things, might be the missing prerequisite in overcoming the tendency to put things off. Clarifying what really matters to you also helps you identify any actions or tasks that are drifting down your to-do list because, well, you don’t really give a f*ck about them.

Sometimes the solution to procrastination is eliminating the excess that never mattered much to you in the first place.

That’s why, inside **Momentum**, there’s a whole 24-day process for clarifying your values, identifying what in your life needs to change, and setting a plan of action based on what you actually care about. With just one simple action prompt per day, you’ll build meaningful momentum — one small win at a time.

Whether you want a system for reevaluating your values, or evidence-based tools that will stop procrastination in its tracks, **Momentum** is ready when you are. [Read more about this community and join us here.](#)

The Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination

Hopefully by this point, you can see why viewing procrastination as some kind of insurmountable character flaw that you should feel ashamed of is counterproductive. Punishing yourself with guilt and shame only makes the problem worse!

It's also not simply a time management or motivational problem either. Even highly organized, highly motivated people struggle with procrastination.

So, what is at the crux of the problem of putting off the things we genuinely *want* to accomplish... but somehow just don't?

The Emotional Core of Procrastination

Some of the ideas and theories we've covered so far have hinted at the root cause of the problem.

But in 2013, pioneering procrastination researchers published their groundbreaking study that would finally start to put it all together. In collaboration, they formalized the Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Sirois, F., & Pychyl, T. (2013). [Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: Consequences for future self](#). *Social and personality psychology compass*, 7(2), 115-127.

The Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination

According to this theory, procrastination is not about time management or lack of motivation. Instead, **procrastination is a short-term strategy to escape the negative emotions we feel when faced with tasks we find challenging or unpleasant.**⁶⁵

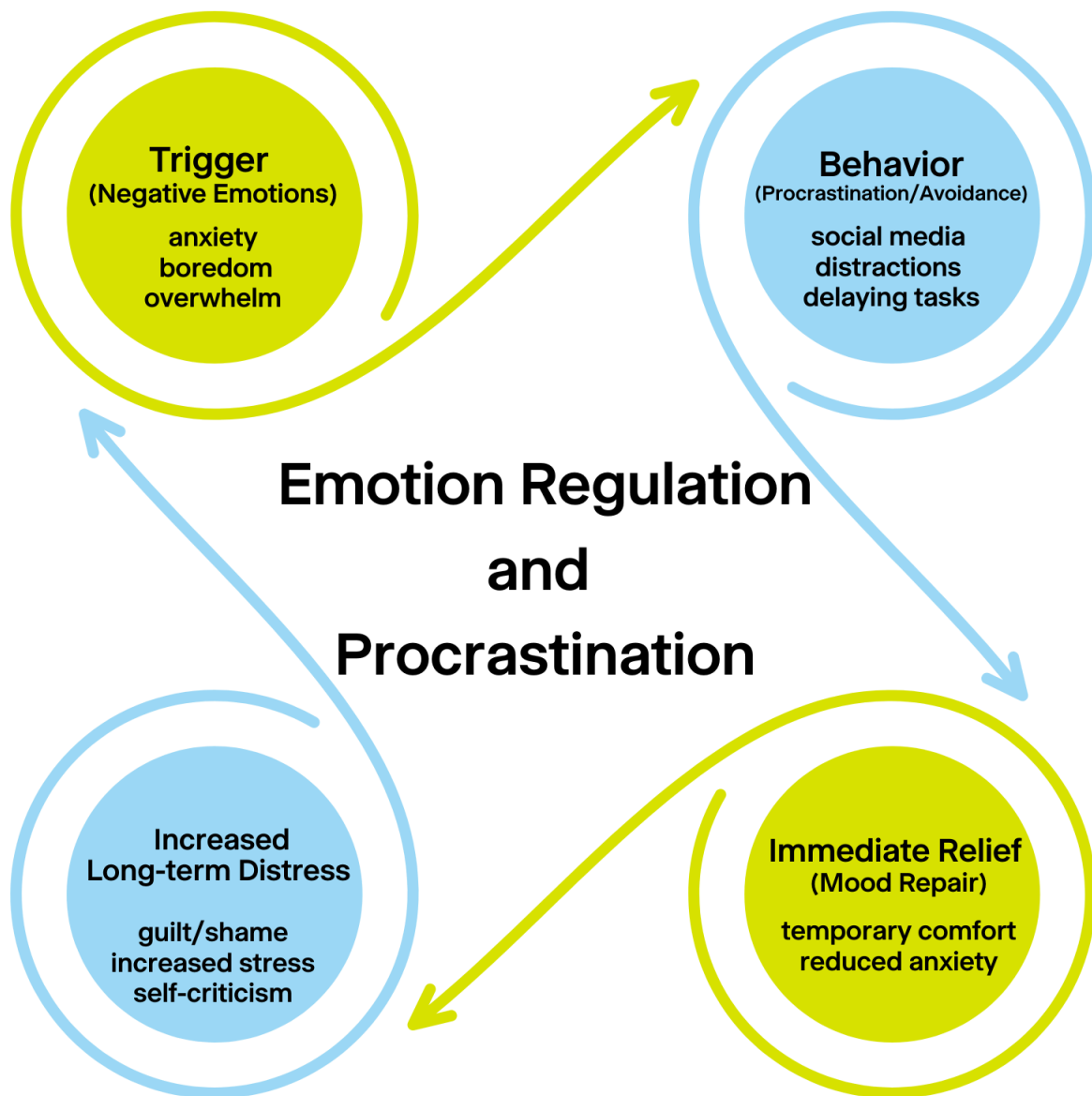
When faced with a daunting assignment or an anxiety-inducing project, our default reaction is often to seek relief from this discomfort. By putting off the task, we temporarily alleviate these uncomfortable emotions, prioritizing short-term comfort over long-term goal achievement. Procrastination researchers call this “giving in to feel good.”

And while this *giving in to feel good* provides immediate mood relief, it creates problems for our future selves who still have to deal with the task, often under increased time pressure and stress.

Ironically, procrastination often leads to more negative emotions in the long run, like guilt, shame, and anxiety. And as we’ve already seen, these kinds of emotions only perpetuate procrastination, creating a cycle of avoidance and longer-term emotional distress that can be difficult to break.

⁶⁵ Sirois, F. M., & Giguère, B. (2018). [Giving in when feeling less good: Procrastination, action control, and social temptations](#). *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57(2), 404–427.

The Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination



The Science Behind Emotional Procrastination

The leading procrastination experts, Dr. Pychyl,⁶⁶ Dr. Sirois,⁶⁷ and other researchers in the field have identified several key factors that contribute to procrastination:

1. **Negative Affect Triggers:** When we associate a task with negative feelings, we're more likely to put it off.
2. **Task Aversion:** The more unpleasant or challenging we perceive a task to be, the more likely we are to procrastinate. This aversion can fluctuate over time, influencing our day-to-day decisions to delay or engage with tasks.
3. **Mood Repair Priorities:** Procrastination serves as a form of mood repair. We choose activities that improve our immediate emotional state over those that serve our long-term goals.
4. **Individual Traits:** Certain personality traits, such as impulsivity, neuroticism, and low distress tolerance, can cause us to use procrastination as an emotion regulation strategy more often. On the other hand, traits like conscientiousness can help us procrastinate less frequently.

⁶⁶ Pychyl, T. A. (2013). [*Solving the procrastination puzzle: A concise guide to strategies for change*](#). TarcherPerigee.

⁶⁷ Sirois, F. M. (2022). [*Procrastination: What it is, why it's a problem, and what you can do about it*](#). American Psychological Association.

So, we all seem to procrastinate for the same basic reason: to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that come up when we face certain tasks or projects.

But how we get to this point can vary significantly from person to person. Some people may be more susceptible to procrastination due to their personality traits or past experiences. Others might have developed more effective coping strategies over time.

This combination of our basic human emotional processes *and* individual differences really illustrates why procrastination can be such a complex and very personal problem.

Again, it's not just about willpower or discipline or motivation, it's a **dynamic process influenced by our emotional state, personality, and how we view the specific task at hand.**

The Battle Between the Present and the Future Self

What this all boils down to is that procrastination is a struggle between our present and future selves.

We often trick ourselves into believing our future self is a superhero who can easily handle whatever we avoid today. We overestimate our future capabilities and treat this imagined version of ourselves as a completely different person from who we are now.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Sirois, F., & Pychyl, T. (2013). [Procrastination and the Priority of Short-Term Mood Regulation: Consequences for Future self](#). *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(2), 115–127.

At its core, this disconnection fuels procrastination when we choose to feel good right now instead of tackling something we know we should do. When faced with a task that feels boring or overwhelming, our present self says, “Let's just put this off for a bit.” The problem with that is that our future self — who turns out to be just as human and limited as our present self — is the one who ends up dealing with the mess later.

Research shows that people who procrastinate have what psychologists call a strong *present bias*⁶⁹ — that is, they tend to live more in the moment and don't think much about what tomorrow will bring. They're more focused on enjoying today rather than worrying about the consequences down the line.

This manifests in several different ways:

1. **Short-Term Mood Repair:** As we've just seen, the primary driver of procrastination is our present self's desire to feel better in the short term. This immediate mood boost comes at the expense of long-term goals and the well-being of our future self.
2. **The Gap Between Present and Future Selves:** Even though we know we have different versions of ourselves over time, procrastination shows how hard it can be to connect our present self with our future self. This disconnect often leads to feelings of anxiety and avoidance instead of motivating us to get things done.

⁶⁹ Breig, Z., Gibson, M., & Shrader, J. (2020). [Why do we procrastinate? present bias and optimism](#). SSRN Electronic Journal.

3. **Unrealistic Expectations:** A lot of us fall into the trap of thinking we'll magically be more motivated or capable in the future. This unrealistic belief lets us prioritize our current comfort over what we really need to accomplish later.
4. **Neglecting the Future Self:** When we focus too much on feeling good right now, we overlook how our choices affect our future selves. This means that when deadlines loom or stress builds up, it's our future self who has to deal with the fallout — like missed deadlines and increased anxiety.

Understanding how procrastination works — especially the tug-of-war between wanting to feel good now versus facing future consequences — can help us find better ways to tackle it. By recognizing this internal struggle, we can create strategies that help us make choices today that support our goals for tomorrow.

Here are three practical strategies to strengthen your connection with your future self and make decisions that better align with your long-term goals:

1. **The Future Self Check-In:** Take a moment to mentally step into your future self's shoes. How will you feel tomorrow having completed today's challenging task? Imagine the specific relief, pride, and freedom you'll experience. When procrastination urges strike, pause briefly and ask: “What would tomorrow-me appreciate

most right now?” This quick mental shift helps reconnect your present actions with your future wellbeing.

2. **The 10-Minute Promise:** When facing a task you're resisting, make a simple deal with yourself: “I'll work on this for just 10 minutes, then decide whether to continue.” Set a timer and fully commit to those minutes. This gentle approach bypasses your brain's resistance by making the commitment manageable. You'll often find that once you've started, continuing becomes surprisingly easy as momentum naturally builds.
3. **Reward Pairing:** Create a simple “first this, then that” structure for your day. For example: “After I complete this report section, I'll enjoy a coffee break at my favorite spot.” By pairing productive work with immediate rewards you genuinely look forward to, you're teaching your brain to associate task completion with pleasure rather than pain. This transforms the procrastination equation and creates positive motivation loops.

By recognizing and addressing the gap between your present and future selves, you can develop a more cohesive sense of identity that supports consistent, positive action.

Emotion Regulation Interventions for Procrastination

Understanding procrastination as an emotion regulation issue has profound implications for how we approach interventions. Strategies

focusing solely on time management or increasing motivation often fall short because they don't address the underlying emotional drivers. Instead, effective interventions target the emotional roots of procrastination:⁷⁰

1. **Emotion Regulation Skills Training:** Teaching individuals how to recognize and manage their emotions can significantly reduce procrastination, especially in high-stress environments.
2. **Mindfulness-Based Interventions:** Mindfulness practices can help individuals become more aware of their emotional states and develop healthier responses to task-related stress.
3. **Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques:** Strategies focused on reappraising tasks and increasing emotional awareness can help individuals overcome procrastination tendencies.
4. **Momentary Interventions:** Emerging technologies, such as app-based support for mood repair, offer promising avenues for providing real-time assistance in managing procrastination urges.

These approaches show promise in helping individuals break the cycle of procrastination by addressing its emotional underpinnings rather than just its surface-level manifestations.

⁷⁰ Sirois, F. M. (2022). [Procrastination: What it is, why it's a problem, and what you can do about it](#). American Psychological Association.

Make it RAIN

A practical method anyone can use when procrastination starts to rear its ugly head comes from meditation and mindfulness practices — you can make it RAIN:⁷¹

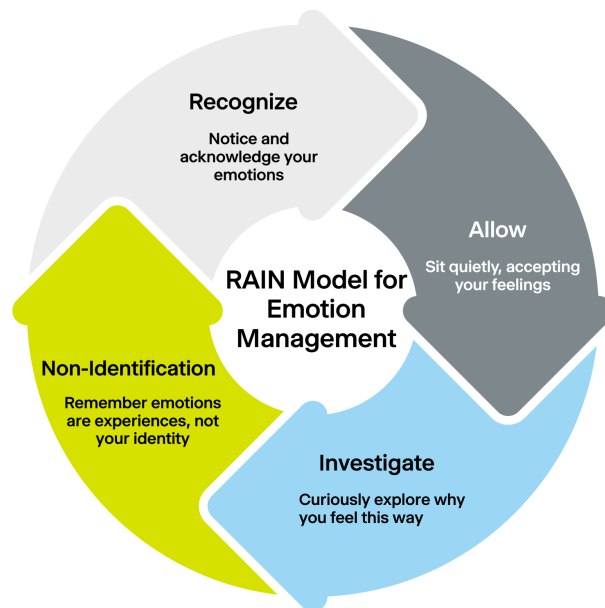
- **Recognize** in the moment when you are feeling uncomfortable or otherwise negative emotions in the face of a task you need to get done. We often get so caught up in our own reflexive habits of avoidance around these emotions that we don't even stop to realize we're feeling them.
- **Allow** yourself to feel these negative emotions. Instead of distracting yourself and finding ways to avoid these emotions, simply sit with them and allow them to exist. Feel them in your body. Let them run their course. Trying to cover up and repress negative feelings only gives them more power over you. You must accept that part of being human is having a wide range of emotional experiences, both good and bad.
- **Investigate** why you might be feeling this way about the task at hand. Get curious about these emotions and, importantly, do it in a non-judgmental way. Ask yourself why you feel vulnerable in the moment when facing a particular task. Don't try to steer your thoughts at this point, just let your mind go where it goes.

⁷¹ Pychyl, T. (2022). [Resistance Can Control Us](#). *Psychology Today*.

The Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination

- **Non-Identification/Non-Judgment** involves un-fusing your identity from your emotions. When we experience emotions, particularly intense negative emotions, we tend to identify with them as a central part of who we are. So we're not just angry, we *are* the anger. We aren't just afraid, we *are* the fear. The Buddhists teach us that we can detach ourselves from these feelings by using passive voice to describe our experience, such as “I am experiencing fear” rather than “I am afraid”. This highlights the temporary, transient nature of our emotions and allows us to experience and accept them more readily, knowing that they will soon pass.

This shift in perspective invites us to approach procrastination with greater compassion, both for ourselves and others. It's not about laziness or lack of willpower or finding ways to get more motivated. It's about managing complex emotional responses to challenging tasks.



The Emotion Regulation Theory of Procrastination

By developing better emotional regulation skills and addressing the underlying anxieties and aversions that drive procrastination, we can work towards more effective, long-term solutions.⁷²

Ultimately, the journey to overcome procrastination is not just about becoming more productive. It's about developing a healthier relationship with our emotions, our work, and ourselves. As we continue to unravel the emotional intricacies of procrastination, we move closer to transforming this age-old struggle into an opportunity for personal growth and emotional mastery.

⁷² Pychyl, T. A., & Sirois, F. M. (2016). [Procrastination, emotion regulation, and well-being](#). In *Elsevier eBooks* (pp. 163–188).

As you've seen, procrastination isn't just a bad habit. It's a response — a way your nervous system tries to protect you from discomfort, uncertainty, or failure.

Through RAIN, you can start to slow down that response. To notice it, name it, and sit with it. That's the beginning of real change.

But insight alone isn't enough.

If you want to keep making progress, you need something steady to come back to. A way to keep practicing, especially on the days when motivation disappears and your old patterns start knocking again.

That's what I created **Momentum** for.

It's not just another course or community or 30-day challenge. It's a space to keep showing up. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. Over the coming year, members will receive more tools, insights, and exercises to build their skills of emotional regulation, communication, self-awareness, and more.

[Learn more about monthly and annual options to join us here.](#)

The Six Types of Procrastinators

Dr. Linda Sapadin identifies six types of procrastinators, each with unique psychological drivers and specific strategies for overcoming their procrastination.⁷³ Here's a breakdown:

1. The Perfectionist: Fears making mistakes or producing work that isn't perfect, leading to endless revisions or delays in starting.

- Set realistic standards and deadlines.
- Focus on progress over perfection.
- Allow for imperfections and recognize that “good enough” is often sufficient.
- Use time limits to control over-polishing.

2. The Dreamer: Enjoys big ideas but struggles with execution due to boredom with details or lack of discipline.

- Break big goals into small, actionable steps.
- Use a structured plan to maintain momentum.
- Hold yourself accountable with deadlines and external commitments.
- Develop habits of consistency rather than waiting for inspiration.

3. The Worrier: Afraid of change, failure, or stepping out of their comfort zone, leading to avoidance.

⁷³ Sapadin, L. (1996). [*It's About Time! The Six Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them*](#). Penguin Books.

The Six Types of Procrastinators

- Reframe fear as excitement and growth.
- Take small, manageable risks to build confidence.
- Challenge catastrophic thinking with realistic outcomes.
- Use a support system for encouragement.

4. The Crisis-Maker: Thrives on last-minute pressure and believes they work best under stress.

- Set artificial deadlines to create urgency without the chaos.
- Recognize that high stress leads to lower-quality work.
- Develop self-discipline by scheduling regular work sessions.
- Reward yourself for early completion to shift motivation.

5. The Defier: Resents authority or imposed tasks, leading to passive resistance and delays.

- Reframe tasks as personal choices rather than obligations.
- Identify how completing the task benefits you directly.
- Use autonomy and self-directed deadlines to stay in control.
- Shift from a reactive mindset to a proactive approach.

6. The Overdoer: Takes on too much, leading to overwhelm and an inability to prioritize.

- Learn to say no and delegate tasks.
- Prioritize work using the 80/20 rule (focus on the most impactful tasks).
- Schedule time for self-care and avoid burnout.
- Set clear boundaries to prevent overcommitting.

The Six Types of Procrastinators

Before we move on to applicable takeaways and advice, it can be useful to know what “type” you are. By identifying which type(s) resonate with you, you can apply the right strategies to overcome procrastination and improve productivity.

The 80/20 of Procrastination

So now that we've gone through all of the philosophy and research into how and why procrastination happens, let's talk about the simplest and most effective ways to attack it.

Like everything, there are complicated and difficult ways to address procrastination. And then there are simple, highly effective ways to do so.

Let's start with the hard, ineffective ways to deal with it:

- Relying on willpower
- Self-flagellation
- Shaming yourself and others
- Leaving things until the very last minute
- Creating elaborate plans and goals that are likely unrealistic

Feeling anxious already? If yes, let's review 7 common sense ways to fix your procrastination issues, ordered from the easiest to hardest instead.

1. Find Your “Why”

Ask yourself what is motivating you. It could be that you're procrastinating simply because you *actually don't want* what you think you want. It's important to get aligned with your values and understand why you are pushing yourself to do uncomfortable

things, otherwise you will inevitably lose motivation.

2. **Environmental Design**

Designing your workspace to remove distractions and add helpful prompts makes it easier to begin and stay focused on tasks. By reducing “activation energy” (the effort needed to start), you’re less tempted to do something else instead. This works because humans naturally follow the path of least resistance, so an environment set up for work lowers barriers to **productivity**. Even small tweaks — like tidying up or blocking distracting apps — can significantly reduce procrastination.

Examples:

- Leaving your phone in another room while working
- Creating post-it notes in strategic places to remind you to focus on a task
- Writing the first sentence of an email
- Using software to block distracting websites and apps

3. **MVA (Minimum Viable Actions)**

Breaking tasks into the smallest possible next step (the “minimum viable action”) removes the intimidation factor that fuels procrastination. When the task feels emotionally manageable, you’re more likely to start instead of avoiding it. Once you begin, momentum builds, making it easier to continue and complete further steps. This approach transforms a daunting project into a manageable series of micro-tasks.

Examples:

- Putting on your shoes and driving to the gym
- Writing the first sentence of an email
- Reading one page of a book

4. Accept and Leverage Boredom

Boredom, when embraced, can become a catalyst for creativity and focus. Instead of seeking instant entertainment, let your mind wander or gently redirect it to the task at hand. This can spark fresh ideas and reduce the habit of jumping to distractions.

Learning to sit with boredom builds resilience and trains you to find or create interest in your current work.

5. Productive Procrastination

Ultimately, if you're going to procrastinate, why not procrastinate by being productive on some other, less important task? Make a deal with yourself that you can put off one task but only if you do some other task you've been procrastinating. Be careful with this one though. It can quickly turn into a productive procrastination avalanche, where cleaning up your office turns into an all day, whole house, deep clean and you're still no closer to working on what you really wanted to get done in the first place.

Examples:

- Procrastinate that presentation you need to write by cleaning out your inbox.
- Procrastinate cleaning your garage by organizing your kitchen.

- Procrastinate fixing the squeaky door by resupplying everything you need at the hardware store.

6. **Address the Underlying Emotions (RAIN Method)**

RAIN stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture — each step helps you understand and process emotions rather than running from them. Recognizing and allowing feelings reduces their power to trigger avoidance, while investigating reveals the real roots of the discomfort. Nurturing yourself during this process adds self-compassion, making it easier to move past emotional blocks. This works because emotional regulation addresses procrastination at its psychological core.

7. **Make It Fun**

Transforming tasks into enjoyable activities (through gamification, music, or “temptation bundling”) creates intrinsic motivation. When a task feels rewarding in the moment, you rely less on willpower and are more inclined to start and stay engaged. This shift in emotional tone reduces dread and builds a positive feedback loop around the work. Essentially, fun shortcuts the mental resistance that feeds procrastination.

Examples:

- Writing the first sentence of an email
- Creating a friendly competition with a friend to see who can get more done
- Create team incentives with other people

The 80/20 of Procrastination

- Gamify your work, track your progress, note high scores, try to set new records
 - Reward yourself with music and fun for each small success.
-

The Hidden Costs of Getting a Handle On Your Procrastination

Everything in life is a trade-off. Even great improvements to the quality of your life will require giving something up in return. And we are often unaware of what we must give up, which often increases and prolongs our suffering.

Procrastination is no different. If you want to overcome your procrastination habits, you have to be willing to give something up in return. Everyone's trade-offs will be slightly different, but here are some for you to consider:

- **The loss of hobbies, interests or diversions**

Are you willing to give up 50+% of your time on TikTok, playing video games, reading trashy magazines? Yes, we usually procrastinate with dumb diversions that don't add much to our lives. But sometimes we procrastinate by over-indulging in something we really love.

Sometimes, the roots of our procrastination aren't even based in the procrastination itself. You have a Wednesday night tradition of going out and drinking with your friends. That means you usually wake up on Thursday exhausted and hungover. This causes you to procrastinate most of your work on Thursday, leading to a stressful and hectic Friday. Eliminating the drinking on Wednesday, suddenly

but strangely alleviates the misery on Friday.

Really consider the root behaviors of some of your procrastination and try to note what would be easy to give up.

- **Lowering your standards, accepting finitude**

A huge part of procrastination is driven by either:

a) having irrationally high expectations for ourselves, and therefore becoming unnecessarily intimidated by the task,
or b) having irrationally high fears around failure at a task, therefore becoming unnecessarily intimidated.

A big part of this is simply lowering one's standards and expectations. Recognizing that whatever you do will not be perfect, and that's okay. But also relinquishing the idea that you are some special genius who cannot be understood and the whole world is going to laugh at you unless you paint the Mona Lisa in the first attempt or something.

Most of us are relatively average at most things we do, and that's fine. And most of the things we do are not *that* important in the grand scheme of things, which is also fine. Getting comfortable with these uncomfortable thoughts is a price that we have to pay to deal with our procrastination.

- **No more excuses**

Many people use procrastination as a tool to protect themselves from having to take responsibility for their lives. If they find

reasons why they can't do something, then they don't have to feel the pain of admitting that they failed.

As long as there's an excuse for why something didn't happen, you can keep the narrative in your mind alive that your life would be amazing *if only this, or if you could just do that*.

For most people, these narratives are more comfortable and safer than the real risk of failure by trying something. When you overcome your procrastination, you rid yourself of excuses as part of the process. And in ridding yourself of excuses, you are then forced to confront your own limitations and flaws. This is not a fun thing to do.

- **Disconnecting from bad influences**

In efforts to maintain our emotional regulation and prevent distraction, you will likely find at some point that there is someone in your life who is a bad influence on your ability to focus and get stuff done. This will force you to choose a difficult trade-off: would you rather stay connected with someone who is impeding your ability to manage your attention and emotions? Or would you cut them off — also something that is difficult to do and easy to procrastinate?

- **Higher external expectations and increased pressure**

When you get a better grip on procrastination, you expect to feel a sense of relief — finally, you're on top of things, meeting deadlines with ease. This is largely true, but sometimes there can also be a

shift in expectations that occurs, both from yourself and others. Once people see you as reliable and efficient, they may start assigning you more tasks, assuming you can handle it all. At the same time, you might begin raising your own standards, feeling the pressure to maintain your newfound productivity. What started as a victory over procrastination can easily morph into an endless cycle of high output and self-imposed pressure.

This productivity boost can also lead to overcommitment. Now that you have more control over your time, it's tempting to fill every available slot with something "useful" — taking on more projects, saying yes to every opportunity, and maximizing efficiency at every turn. Ironically, in trying to escape the stress of last-minute rushes, you may create a different kind of stress: one where you're constantly working, always pushing forward, and never allowing yourself to rest.

Well, now you know everything you could ever possibly know about procrastination. The question now is... *what will you do about it?*

Most people read all the books, listen to all the podcasts, take all the courses, and then, let all that knowledge sit in the corners of their minds. Sometimes even using it to make themselves feel worse, telling themselves “I know what I *should* do, but I’m not doing it.”

Inside **Momentum**, we have a system to help you change that.

Every day, you’ll get one action prompt or tool to test as an exercise for your personal growth. It will get you experimenting with what works for you, discovering what helps and doesn’t, and also — building supportive relationships to help you stay accountable to what really matters to you.

From here, you can continue with a 30-day challenge to stop the cycle of procrastination — all with the goal of you walking away with at least ONE new tool that works for you.

[Learn more and get started today, right here.](#)

Further Reading

Below are some of the best books my team and I read while researching and preparing for this episode:

- [*Procrastination: What It Is, Why It's a Problem, and What You Can Do About It*](#) by Fuschia Sirois
- [*Solving the Procrastination Puzzle: A Concise Guide to Strategies for Change*](#) by Tim Pychl
- [*Indistractable*](#) by Nir Eyal
- [*It's About Time: The Six Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them*](#) by Dr Linda Sapadin
- [*Atomic Habits*](#) by James Clear
- [*The Now Habit*](#) by Neil Fiore
- [*The Slight Edge*](#) by Jeff Olson and John David Mann
- [*Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*](#) by Oliver Burkeman
- [*Feel Good Productivity*](#) by Ali Abdaal
- [*Self-Compassion*](#) by Kristin Neff
- [*Deep Work*](#) by Cal Newport
- [*The Republic*](#) by Plato
- [*Nicomachean Ethics*](#) by Aristotle
- [*The Dhammapada*](#)