

The 5 Cures for Procrastination

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People with talent and ability often throw everything away because they cannot—or, more correctly, will not—make themselves finish projects on time, tackle unpleasant tasks, set a schedule, make a list or use any of the dozen routine systems that average professionals employ to get their jobs done reasonably well and on time. Here are some specific ways that procrastination can take its toll on you:

- **Wasted time.** Many people dream up all sorts of irrelevant things to do while wrestling with the urge to procrastinate. You've seen the type: Rather than pick up the phone and make a call that might be unpleasant, this person has to finish the crossword puzzle, get a third cup of coffee, read an editorial on garbage collection or fill out an expense account form not due until next week. In short, procrastinators are often prime wasters of their prime time.

- **Unsolved problems.** Some problems go away if you wait long enough. The Berlin Wall collapsed without war, and the Soviet Union dissolved on its own. But most problems do not just disappear. Procrastinators cannot—or will not—differentiate between the two.

Put off a solvable problem at work, and it may go away—by landing on someone else's desk. That person is no better qualified than you, but he gets it resolved. As a result, he is promoted and you are not, leaving you to wrestle with frustration and resentment, which you take out on other people, not on the real culprit—yourself.

- **Stalled career.** Procrastinators stay in jobs they hate and work for bosses they despise because they keep putting off a confrontation, delay the search for a new job or decide that the devil they know is better than the devil they don't. That last maxim makes sense during an economic downturn, when they really may have problems finding another job. But it doesn't wash during good or better times. Then the procrastinators are torturing themselves for no good reason.

- **Poor health.** Procrastination can affect your health. Men and women over 50, for example, should have a yearly checkup. Chronic pain should not be ignored. Yet people die needlessly simply because they put off going to the doctor, usually pleading that they "just don't have time." In fact, even the most intractable boss will give you time off to see a doctor if you ask.

Finally, procrastination is physically and mentally draining. Those who continually put things off come home exhausted from the daily struggle with doubt, delay and frustration.

WHY DO WE PROCRASTINATE?

There are practical and psychological reasons why we put things off. The practical answer focuses on the here and now:

We put off things that appear overwhelming, complex and time-consuming. Projects that you're not sure how to begin—let alone finish—are an example. So instead of starting the daunting, the procrastinator will work hard at the trivial and go home tired

and convinced that he has done a good day's work. There is, after all, a great deal of self-deception in all procrastination.

We put off the unpleasant, the difficult, the tedious, the threatening. All these things we are tempted to put off, sometimes so much that we put up no resistance to delay at all.

Procrastination is a handy cop-out for poor performance. Procrastinators never have enough time to start, do or complete a task—or do it well. Their explanation is “If I only had more time, I could have done a great job.” It’s like a gambler saying, “If only I’d had a few more bucks, I could have stayed in and won.” In fact, there’s little difference between them. Procrastinators are gambling—with their lives, their jobs and their careers.

It’s a way to wheedle sympathy from others, albeit a poor one. Procrastinators never have any time, never stop working. They are always harassed, under stress, always giving their all for the company. They are always late. But look at the good reasons they have to explain their tardiness and hide their failure to complete a job on time and on specification.

It’s a tactic sometimes used by poor delegators to get someone else to do the job. They don’t come right out and ask for help. They just put things off until crisis time, when they demand action from others. It’s all part of blaming other people for their own failures. One example that fits here: “Why didn’t you remind me to do that?” In point of fact, it’s not anyone else’s job to remind you, but yours to remember. Quite often you did remember but chose not to act until the situation had “ripened”—that is, somebody else could take over for you.

It’s a bad habit we develop somewhere along the line. Perhaps we found the teacher would let us turn papers in late, so we got in the habit of postponing them. Or we just happened to benefit from a delayed decision a few times, so now we delay all decisions.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES

Most procrastination has psychological roots that go back to childhood. It is, in short, a psychological response (often an unconscious one) to fear and implied threats—criticism, failure, the loss of opportunity. Procrastination is not a character defect. Rather, it derives from a fear of having our performance held out to public scrutiny, ridicule and judgment. It tends to hit people the hardest whose lives are most closely identified with their jobs; in other words, people who find their identity in their work.

Here are some of the common psychological roots of the procrastination syndrome:

Childhood traumas. Psychologists tell us that childhood traumas prowl our adult lives like werewolves unless we confront them and eliminate them. Grow up in a household where time was a perpetual crisis and you’re likely to repeat the pattern, no matter how much you may have disliked the role models you had. Parents who are habitually late for everything or who never attend Little League games or school pageants for “lack of time” imprint on their children behavior patterns that are hard to break later in life.

Fear of feeling. Fear of feeling is a strong motivator, for which procrastination serves as an instrument of protection. Emotions of pleasure and reward threaten many people and induce feelings of intense guilt. As a result, people postpone situations in which they may be exposed to such feelings. That holds double, of course, for feelings of pain, anger and other negative emotions.

The comfort of the familiar. Thrust into new situations, procrastinators will delay adapting, adjusting or taking advantage of the new situation. This happens often to managers promoted to new jobs; they are unwilling to let go of their old ones precisely because the old jobs are familiar and therefore comforting. Salespeople promoted to sales managers often fail because they are still out there selling instead of tending to the often-tedious paperwork of being a manager. R&D people promoted to managerial rank may hanker after the lab, not the office.

Avoiding confrontation and risk. Procrastination is the simplest avoidance mechanism. You postpone taking risk or you delay confrontation, especially when you know they are essential for your career, friendships or familial relationships. Responsibility is often handled in much the same way: You simply don't want to accept it and therefore pass it off on somebody else.

Expression of resentment. Procrastination is the perfect counterstrike weapon for those who fear confrontation or risk. What better way to blindside a boss you hate than to be consistently late with assignments—and have the most reasonable explanations for each incident. Resentment can trigger procrastination across the spectrum of life. When you delay or postpone an action, you are in charge; you have challenged authority successfully, for however brief a time.

Defense against failure. Fear of failure haunts perfectionists, who can never let go of a project unless it meets their high standards. To fall short is to risk virtual destruction of their self-worth. To such people, a C is tantamount to an F, and an F is unthinkable; who you are is equivalent to how well you do.

Usually, such people are workaholics with few other resources, so if they fail at work, they fail at life. Under those circumstances, it makes good sense not to begin, or at least to delay. That way, the chances of failing at life are reduced, or at least postponed. If procrastination makes them fail, they were not the cause; somebody else made the decision to give their project to someone else. As a protection device, this is a pretty good defense.

Fear of success. Like fear of failure, fear of success is just as strong in many people and as adaptable to procrastination. Success can lead to loss as easily as failure. Forging ahead in business can mean leaving people behind. Old friendships can become frayed, relationships broken.

Moreover, success brings challenge. Do well in a job, and you will be promoted or offered another position. Many fear leaving the safety of their already-achieved success for the dubious waters of the unknown, where they will again face the choice of

succeeding or failing. So they decide to stay where they are, or worse, they agonize over the decision, not just for weeks but for years.

Observation: The “agonizing,” of course, is just another form of procrastination. Note that the agonizers have not made a decision; they’ve only put it off. Even those who have “decided” to stay where they are really haven’t. They still wonder about moving on and up. The more time passes, the more regretful they become.

Quiz: Is Procrastination Holding You Back?

Do you have a procrastination problem? Take the following quiz to find out. Answer Yes or No:

- Do you have trouble keeping up? Is your list of “must do” projects growing longer despite the longer hours you work?
- Do you always feel like you’re under the gun?
- Are you easily distracted?
- Do you have trouble choosing between the important and the trivial?
- Do you go for easy solutions rather than better but more complicated ones?
- Do you have a hard time making up your mind lest you make a mistake?
- Do you delay finishing one project until you think it’s perfect and generally demand perfection in work and life?
- Do you have low self-esteem?
- Do you blame others while feeling ineffective yourself?
- Are you often tired—too tired to start or finish a project you know you should undertake?
- Are you easily bored?
- Do you think things will get better by themselves?
- Are you very shy?
- Do you regularly criticize others or at least gripe about them?
- Is it hard for you to ask others for help?
- Do you spend more time hoping and wishing than doing?
- Are your goals vague? Do you talk about “buying a house,” “losing weight,” “being promoted” and so forth without pinning yourself down on the steps you’ll take to achieve those goals?
- Do you duck confrontation?

If you answered yes to more than half the questions, consider yourself a part-time procrastinator with full-time potential. Then seriously consider the suggested cures discussed below.

CURING PROCRASTINATION: 5 TIPS

You can take several steps to overcome procrastination. The pragmatic solution boils down to willpower, or at least to the recognition that “I have a problem and I intend to start solving it now,” not tomorrow. What you do to solve it will depend on your own personality—and just how big a hurdle procrastination is for you. Here are several approaches to consider:

1. Tackle an overwhelming project in small steps

Large blocks of time, commensurate with the size of a complex project, are hard to come by. That’s why most jobs are done in bits and pieces, even important and imposing ones. Yet many people are reluctant to tackle such jobs when the available time is short.

Given the size of the task, allocating your 15 free minutes before lunch and 10 minutes before the 2 p.m. meeting doesn’t seem worthwhile. Procrastinators never even consider it. Instead, they pick some easy, insignificant task that can be completed in a short time, even if it’s only addressing a couple of envelopes. They go to lunch or to their meeting feeling as if they have accomplished something and are in charge of their time, when, of course, they’re not.

Even five minutes can be used to start or continue a major project. No project is so large that it can’t be broken down into manageable pieces. One approach, therefore, is to use your free 15 minutes to make a project “to do” list and then decide on priorities. In effect, you’re only nibbling at the edges, but at least you are nibbling—that is, beginning the task.

Another way to start is to “read in.” Get a file or start making one. If you are working on a report, print relevant material from websites. It’s a mindless task and one likely to quell the butterflies in your stomach—probably the most important thing you can do to overcome procrastination.

Once you’ve charted your course, use your free 10 minutes to make that first phone call. Once it’s out of the way, the others almost make themselves. Don’t give up if the person you’re trying to reach is not available. You rarely have only one call to make. Draw up a list and go down it until you hit pay dirt. You’ll be surprised how often you can make six calls in 10 minutes and get some useful information.

Of course, you cannot complete a two-week job or even a 12-hour job in five- or 10-minute bites. But getting started on a big project is a lot like starting an exercise program. Try 25 push-ups on your first day, and you’ll likely collapse after 10 and never try again. But do five at a time for a week, and you’ll soon be doing 10 and will hit the 25 mark much sooner than you’d thought possible.

Observation: What staggers most procrastinators is the magnitude of the task. As a result, they despair of ever finishing. Start with little steps, however, and the larger ones will come by themselves. You’ll train yourself into post-procrastination shape.

2. Force yourself to tackle unpleasant tasks

Unpleasant tasks don't ever really go away; they just get worse. Not many of them lend themselves to the piecemeal approach outlined above.

A meeting where you must announce bad news can be postponed just so long, and each postponement makes actual delivery that much harder. The phone call you dread making will not become less threatening by postponing it yet one more time. Yes, you should rehearse what you want to say; that will make it easier. But it won't be easier if you rehearse your speech three times every morning for 10 days without ever delivering it. When you finally do give it, you will be so over-rehearsed that you'll likely blow your cues.

You have to walk a fine line in these cases. A little procrastination can be a good thing; a lot is deadly.

Observation: Forcing yourself to do something unpleasant can become habit forming if you do it regularly. For example, you can talk yourself out of lame excuses—such as the one about working so well under deadline pressure. Tell yourself that pressure-cooker tactics are a myth. They leave you tired and unable to think clearly. That can keep you from stalling, and it works to counter any excuse, no matter how logical. There is an added benefit to twisting your own arm: Once you get going, you'll find the task was never as bad as you imagined.

3. Don't reward yourself for procrastination

The relief of postponing a decision is often augmented by the pleasant activity you substitute for it—having a cup of coffee, say, or idly discussing last night's ballgame. Instead, face the consequences of your inaction. Lock yourself in your office without coffee or conversation. It's a bit like self-flagellation, but it's a lot more effective.

4. Do reward yourself every time you conquer it

You've earned it. Don't skimp on the self-praise. It's warranted—especially if you licked a two-week project you'd put off for six months and then did it in eight days.

5. Use positive self-talk

Procrastinators often talk the language of victims. Things happen to them; they don't make things happen. They don't choose to act but are forced to do so. You can talk your way out of the procrastination trap by using language that will make you stop feeling victimized and start taking charge of your life. Here are a few examples of how to go about it:

- Say *"I want to do X"* rather than *"I should do X."* The difference? Decision versus compulsion. You're in charge, not adrift.

- *Dump the “should” concept; accept “is.”* “Should” has an oppressive connotation; it’s a striving for the ideal, for the way the world is not, but should be. “Is” accepts reality.
- *Think start, not finish.* The end is forever and you haven’t even begun yet. Don’t focus on ending a project—that puts pressure on you to finish and makes the distance to the end even longer. Change your attitude from “I’ve got to finish this” to “I can’t wait to start”—even when that’s the last thing you’re thinking. The point of talking to yourself is to persuade yourself to change. Use the language of positive reinforcement long enough and it will become part of your interior vocabulary.
- *Cut the project down to size psychologically.* It is, after all, only a project, not an avalanche hurtling down to bury you. However you feel, you are not going to be crushed by the project; you are being asked only to solve a problem. As a manager, you have problem-solving skills, but you must be willing to apply them.