SHORTFORM

Summary of The Now Habit

Original book by Neil A. Fiore

Why do we put off the things that matter most to us, even when we know that doing so makes us unhappy in the long run? According to psychologist and productivity coach Neil Fiore, the problem isn't that we're lazy—it's that **procrastination is a symptom of the fear and anxiety we sometimes feel about our work**. In his 1988 book *The Now Habit*, Fiore explains what procrastination is, why we do it, and most importantly, how to avoid it.

The Now Habit combines psychological insights and time management tips designed to eliminate procrastination by lowering our resistance to work. Fiore promises that if you follow his system, you'll get more done while enjoying a more relaxed and balanced life.

In this guide, we'll examine Fiore's theory of procrastination and share his ideas about how to fix it. Along the way, we'll update Fiore's advice by drawing on more recent work in the fields of psychology and productivity.

1-Page Summary

Why do we put off the things that matter most to us, even when we know that doing so makes us unhappy in the long run? That's the question at the heart of Neil Fiore's classic *The Now Habit*, which teaches you how to overcome procrastination by understanding why we do it. Fiore argues that procrastination isn't caused by laziness and can't be fixed by trying harder. Instead, **procrastination is a symptom of the fear and anxiety we sometimes feel about our work**—and to solve it, you have to address those underlying emotional struggles. Fiore explains how to do just that using psychological and time-management strategies. He asserts that if you follow his advice, you'll get more done, feel better about yourself, and enjoy life more.

Fiore is a psychologist, trainer, and productivity author. *The Now Habit* draws on previous productivity literature as well as Fiore's own coaching experience to present a comprehensive program for correcting procrastination. The book was originally published in 1988. In 2007, Fiore released a second edition that includes a new introduction and additional suggestions for dealing with internet-related distractions, but the core of the book remains the same.

In this guide, we present Fiore's program in two parts. First, we'll look at why Fiore says we procrastinate in order to understand the reasoning behind his recommendations. Then, we'll explore those recommendations, which involve changing how you structure your time as well as how you think about yourself and your work. Along the way, we'll expand on and update Fiore's advice by placing it in conversation with more recent work in the fields of psychology and productivity, including authors such as Nir Eyal and David Allen.

(Shortform note: Fiore ends *The Now Habit* with advice for dealing with employees and family members who procrastinate. Since the main focus of the book is correcting your own procrastination, we've chosen not to include that information in this guide.)

Part 1: Why We Procrastinate

Fiore argues that before we can tackle procrastination, we need to understand why we procrastinate in the first place. His central idea is that **procrastination isn't a character flaw—it's a symptom of underlying psychological distress**.

Debunking the Myth: Procrastination Isn't Laziness

Fiore says that traditionally, we tend to think that procrastination results from laziness. In this view, procrastination in itself is the fundamental problem: It results from a failure of motivation or willpower, and the solution is to try harder and be more disciplined. In contrast, Fiore argues that procrastination isn't the primary problem—instead, he says that **we procrastinate because we're anxious about starting (or finishing) a task**. In his view, procrastination is a natural coping mechanism that we adopt in order to deal with the stress we feel about the task.

Differing Views on Willpower

More recent studies support Fiore's suggestion that willpower isn't the answer to procrastination. In *The Willpower Instinct*, Kelly McGonigal argues that willpower is a limited resource and that once you run out of willpower while trying to change a behavior, you're likely to backslide. She also argues that

exercising willpower tires the brain, which leads to impulsive short-term behaviors like procrastination.

Conversely, in *Indistractible*, Nir Eyal argues that thinking of willpower as a depletable resource means that we use it as an excuse to procrastinate. Instead, Eyal recommends treating willpower as an emotion that you can manage in order to get to work even when you don't feel like it—an approach that, as we'll see, lines up with many of Fiore's suggestions.

Unfortunately, Fiore argues, we've been conditioned by parents, teachers, supervisors, and society at large to believe the laziness interpretation—which only makes the problem worse. He says **we're taught that work should be difficult and unpleasant and that playing and relaxing are frivolous wastes of time**. As a result, he says, we come to dread work, which makes us want to avoid it—but then we feel guilty whenever we're *not* working, and we're unwilling to schedule deliberate time to play (since that time could be "better" used by doing more work).

These attitudes combine to form a vicious cycle: **We feel so much stress and guilt about work that we hide from it by procrastinating, which only adds to the stress and guilt, leading to more avoidance**. And because we feel we *can't* play (at least, not until our work is done, which it never is), we begin to resent work for keeping us from the things we'd rather be doing.

(Shortform note: This "all work, no play" mentality has only intensified in recent years with hustle culture promoting the virtue of being busy all the time. But not only is play good for your physical and mental health—ironically, it actually boosts productivity. For example, non-work pursuits can build strengths like creativity and communication skills that directly apply to the workplace. Similarly, as Gretchen Rubin argues in *The Happiness Project*, focusing on play can expand your horizons and make productive tasks more fun. Even doing nothing is sometimes helpful, as studies suggest that daydreaming is good for both your mood and your work.)

Fiore says that **the solution is to undo our traditional assumptions about work and play**. His idea is that by making time for leisure and relaxation, we lead more balanced and fulfilling lives, and we stop resenting work for taking up all our time. Likewise, instead of assuming that work should be difficult and unpleasant, he recommends finding ways to make it easier so as to lower the pressure we feel around it.

Procrastination Affects More Than Just "Work"

We use the terms "play" and "work" throughout this guide. Fiore uses the word "play" to refer to a variety of activities: fitness and exercise, creative endeavors, hobbies, games, social engagements—anything that you find fun, relaxing, fulfilling, and personally meaningful. Meanwhile, "work" often refers to the tasks and projects that make up the core of your job, but for Fiore, it also refers to any productive (rather than fun or relaxing) tasks and projects you encounter in other parts of your life.

This focus on productivity might be misleading. It's worth keeping in mind that while we traditionally think of procrastination as an obstacle to productivity—by which we generally mean getting a lot of tasks done, getting ahead at work, and so on—**procrastination can get in the way of the things we most care about**. In *The War of Art*, Steven Pressfield argues that resistance is the chief enemy of creativity and innovation—and that the top symptom of resistance is procrastination.

Similarly, in *Start Finishing*, Charlie Gilkey identifies a specific form of procrastination he calls "thrashing," which happens when you spin your wheels *thinking* about a project without actually

moving it forward. Gilkey argues that we only thrash when it comes to projects that are deeply important to us—the professional, creative, or personal endeavors that make a difference in our lives and lead to fulfillment.

In short, fixing procrastination isn't just about checking off more tasks on your to-do list. If there's *anything* in your life that you want to work on more than you already do, Fiore's anti-procrastination ideas might help you do just that.

Why We Dread Work

Fiore says that procrastination is a symptom of anxiety about work, so in order to better understand why we procrastinate, we'll start by looking at some of the reasons we find work so stressful in the first place.

Perfectionism

Fiore argues that **the most common reason we dread work is perfectionism—we set impossibly high standards for ourselves and tell ourselves there will be dire consequences for not meeting those standards**. For example, a student might tell herself she has to get straight As or else she's a failure who'll never get a good job. Fiore points out that we often adopt these standards from others—parents, teachers, bosses, and so on. (Shortform note: The problem could also be socially prescribed perfectionism—the tendency to believe (often falsely) that other people expect us to be perfect. In other words, sometimes we attempt to live up to standards that nobody actually expects of us.)

According to Fiore, **perfectionism makes it hard to even start working on something**. If your goal is to be perfect, you're all but guaranteed to fail—so why even put in the effort? Then, Fiore says, once we procrastinate, we typically feel bad and tell ourselves we're lazy. That negative self-talk creates more anxiety, which in turn only makes it harder to get back to work by creating even more pressure. (Shortform note: Research shows that perfectionism causes problems beyond just procrastination. For example, as Brené Brown suggests in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, perfectionism can lead to shame, self-judgment, depression, and even an increased risk of suicide.)

Fear of Success

Whereas perfectionism makes us avoid working because we fear failure, Fiore says that **it's also possible to procrastinate because we fear success**. Fear of success can occur for several reasons:

1) We fear that we'll alienate our friends, colleagues, or family if we outperform them. For example, a straight-A student might deliberately reduce the effort she puts into her schoolwork for fear that her friends will brand her a "nerd" or "teacher's pet."

2) We're uneasy about the major life changes that sometimes come with success. For example, a successful job search might mean moving to a new place, adapting to a new social environment, and learning a new set of skills and responsibilities.

3) We fear that succeeding will raise other people's expectations until we hit the point where we're guaranteed to disappoint them. For example, our hypothetical student might not *want* to earn straight As because she suspects that earning them once will make her parents and teachers expect her to earn them every semester.

(Shortform note: Fiore largely describes the fear of success as a conscious phenomenon. However, other experts warn that we can also harbor such fears unconsciously and express them in subtle ways. In other words, it's possible that many people struggle with such fears without ever realizing it.)

More Reasons We Fear Success

In addition to the reasons Fiore gives, experts speculate that there are even more reasons why we might fear success:

1) Highly qualified people sometimes suffer from *impostor syndrome*—the belief that you've achieved your job or other position through luck and that you'll inevitably be revealed to be a fraud. If you experience impostor syndrome, you may fear that further successes only increase your risk of exposure.

2) Women in particular might fear that they'll face social backlash for defying traditional gender roles if they succeed at work (or other traditionally male domains).

3) We may have been taught as children not to get too full of ourselves, which can lead to holding ourselves back to avoid future criticism.

4) We might be uncomfortable with the idea of attracting attention through our successes and therefore hold back in order to avoid the spotlight.

Whatever the cause, fear of success is further complicated by the fact that you might be embarrassed to admit that you suffer from this fear. Many societies glorify success, so it can be easy to feel like there's something wrong with you if you're ambivalent about the idea of achievement.

Frustration and Powerlessness

Lastly, Fiore argues that **we sometimes procrastinate as a way of controlling our situation.** For example, if you feel powerless in your job, you may subconsciously feel that avoiding work is the only way to express yourself. Similarly, Fiore points out that if you've internalized the lesson that you should always be working and should never take time to play, you might conclude that there's no point in working hard because hard work just leads to *more* hard work. When that happens, we procrastinate because **procrastination seems like our only possible escape from the drudgery of life itself**.

(Shortform note: According to Johann Hari, powerlessness at work causes a number of problems in addition to procrastination. In *Lost Connections*, Hari points to studies showing that the less control you have over your work, the more susceptible you are to depression and health problems like heart attacks. And the problem is widespread—Hari cites surveys that worryingly suggest that about 87% of people feel disconnected from their work. Given that depression and procrastination are linked, there's reason to agree with Fiore that at least some procrastination results from this feeling of disconnection.)

The Pattern of Procrastination

Now that we've explored *why* we procrastinate, we'll examine what procrastination actually looks like so that you can recognize it in your own life. Fiore says that procrastination tends to follow a predictable pattern:

1) You make a task seem more momentous than it really is by thinking that your identity, happiness, worthiness, and so on depend on your success. For example, if you have a job interview, you might tell yourself that you need this job to keep your life on track and that if you don't get it, you'll be a failure. Suddenly your entire future—and your value as a person—seems to rest on a brief conversation with a stranger.

(Shortform note: In many cases, society encourages us to think this way. For instance, in *Black Box Thinking*,

Matthew Syed points out that many of our social and cultural institutions are based on the assumption that experts never make mistakes, which in turn means that mistakes prove there's something wrong with you. This kind of pressure can lead to procrastination, as Fiore argues—but Syed points out that it can also lead to behaviors like scapegoating, covering up your mistakes, and so on.)

2) You determine that only perfect success is good enough and that anything less would be catastrophic. This makes the task seem impossibly difficult and frightening. For example, you might tell yourself that you have to completely blow away your interviewer. All your answers need to be eloquent and insightful. You can't misspeak or look the slightest bit unprepared. Obviously, this is a completely unreasonable standard to expect of yourself.

(Shortform note: In fact, this kind of thinking is based on what mental health experts call cognitive distortions—incorrect and unhelpful ways of interpreting the world that lead to psychological distress. In *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond*, Judith S. Beck lists a number of distortions—such as catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, and exaggeration—that might contribute to procrastination by causing anxiety about work.)

3) Because of the pressure you've piled onto the task, you freeze up—instead of starting on the task, you just keep thinking of all the things that could go wrong. For example, instead of planning for the interview, you just keep telling yourself how difficult and stressful the interview will be and how likely you are to screw it up. In other words, **when the self-imposed stress becomes too much, you procrastinate** by avoiding the task altogether.

(Shortform note: One of the difficulties in treating procrastination is that distorted thoughts tend to reinforce each other. For example, first you create stress and anxiety by telling yourself that your whole life hinges on giving a perfect interview. Then, because of emotional reasoning, you believe that *the interview itself* (rather than your thoughts) caused your stress—which in turn seems to prove that you have no chance of succeeding. On top of that, if you then criticize yourself for procrastinating, the added stress of self-judgment similarly seems to prove that you're lazy, inadequate, and so on.)

4) Finally, you wait until some external pressure—like an impending deadline or consequence—forces you to do the task. Because you're rushed, you're likely to do the task in a haphazard way, which means you won't do it as well as you were capable of. For example, your job interview is on the calendar—no matter how much you procrastinate, you'll have to show up whether you're prepared or not. (Shortform note: This reliance on external pressure explains why self-imposed deadlines generally don't work to prevent procrastination. If we know that there's no real consequence attached to a deadline, we don't feel the necessary push to get started.)

Fiore argues that **part of the reason procrastination becomes ingrained is that it has several dubious benefits**:

1) It gives us some short-term relief from the stress we feel about the task. This relief is only temporary, as it leads to more stress and guilt down the line—but that's not always obvious in the moment. (Shortform note: As Rhiannon Beaubien and Rosie Leizrowice explain in *The Great Mental Models Volume 3*, we sometimes form harmful habits because of the gap between short-term and long-term feedback from our behaviors. In other words, a behavior like procrastination creates positive feedback in the short term while its negative feedback happens late enough that it's hard to make the connection between behavior and consequence.)

2) It relieves the burden of perfectionism because when we procrastinate, we *know* we're not doing our best. This means that any flaws in our results seem to reflect on us less than if we'd tried our hardest. We

tell ourselves that any mistakes or imperfections resulted from our lack of time and effort, not our lack of ability. (Shortform note: In other words, procrastination is a form of self-sabotage—a phenomenon that can also manifest as more obviously damaging behaviors such as substance abuse and self-harm.)

3) On some level, procrastination *works*. Most of the time, the task does get done in the end. Whether that's because an external pressure forces us to do it, because somebody else completes the task for us, or because we wait so long that the task becomes irrelevant, we learn that procrastination is a flawed but viable strategy. (Shortform note: This might be why so many of us claim to work best under pressure. We've so internalized the process that Fiore describes that we don't know a better way to motivate ourselves than by waiting until a task is an emergency.)

Part 2: How to Overcome Procrastination

Now that we've seen what procrastination is and where it comes from, we can look at some strategies for changing it. Because procrastination comes from our anxiety about work and because that anxiety in turn stems from how we think about and approach work, most of Fiore's suggestions involve *changing* your relationship to work (and to play). Specifically, he suggests developing more positive self-talk, changing how you plan your week, changing your approach to work, and learning how to focus while working.

Strategy #1: Change How You Talk to Yourself

One way to change how you think about work in order to avoid procrastination is to change your self-talk. Fiore argues that procrastinators typically talk to themselves in "have to" and "should" statements—both of which only build negative feelings that then lead to procrastination. According to Fiore, **if you tell yourself you "have to" do something, you make yourself a powerless victim of circumstance** because you feel like other people or external circumstances are coercing you to do whatever it is. This causes undue stress, pressure, and resentment.

(Shortform note: One way to overcome "have to" thinking is to focus on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. In *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari explains that extrinsic motivation means treating an action as a means to an end whereas intrinsic motivation involves enjoying an action for its own sake. For example, extrinsic motivation is running a mile because you're trying to lose weight. Intrinsic motivation is running a mile because you enjoy running. In the former case, you're more likely to feel like you "have to" go for a run, whereas in the latter case running is something you *choose* to do.)

Likewise, **if you tell yourself you "should" do something, you make that thing into a moral issue—you're a bad person if you don't do it**. If you tell yourself that things "should" be different than they are, you start to think that the world is bad and unfair. And if you tell yourself you "should" be more like someone else, you devalue yourself and define yourself as inadequate. In short, Fiore says that "should" statements lead to depression that saps your energy and motivation to work.

Valid and Invalid "Should" Statements

To help identify distorted "should" statements, psychologist David Burns argues that there are only three valid uses of the word "should":

- **Legal "shoulds"** in situations where an action is forbidden by law. For example, "You shouldn't speed on the highway because you'll get a ticket."
- **Laws of the universe "shoulds"** that express the certainty of an outcome. For example, "If I

drop this pen, it should fall on the floor."

- **Moral and ethical "shoulds"** that name ethically permissible or impermissible behavior. For example, "You shouldn't steal because it's wrong."

Obviously, there's room for interpretation when it comes to ethics, as not everyone shares the same moral code. But most of the time, Burns suggests, we attribute this moral meaning to things that aren't really moral issues. For this reason, if you find yourself thinking that you "should" or "shouldn't" do something, Burns suggests interrogating whether the statement meets any of the three categories. If not, he says, it's distorted thinking.

The answer to these problems, Fiore says, is to change your self-talk to emphasize choice and agency. In other words, **instead of telling yourself you "have to" or "should" do things, tell yourself you "choose to" or "want to" do things**. Doing so, Fiore says, removes the unnecessary stress and judgment and puts the emphasis on your wants and your agency.

(Shortform note: Fiore's suggestion is an example of cognitive reframing, a technique whereby you change your mindset by finding alternative ways of thinking and talking about a situation. The technique is commonly used when treating a wide range of mood disorders, as it typically requires you to look for a more positive or helpful spin on a situation.)

How to Deal With Worry

Fiore says that sometimes we procrastinate because we're worried about what can go wrong with a task or project. This happens especially when, as discussed earlier, we artificially inflate the stakes of a task and demand perfection from ourselves. But **worry only worsens procrastination by making you more stressed**. To defuse worry, Fiore suggests that you:

1) Realistically determine the worst thing that could happen. Often this worst-case scenario (if we're realistic about it) isn't as bad as our unexamined worry makes us think.

2) Think about how you'd respond if the worst *did* happen. What would you do? How would you handle it? Whom could you turn to for help? Fiore says that questions like these help you see that even if something truly catastrophic happens as the result of failure, it won't be the end of the world.

3) Think about *what you can do right now* to avoid the worst-case scenario and instead move yourself toward your goals. Doing so forces you to turn your worry into a practical and actionable plan.

(Shortform note: As Daniel Goleman explains in *Emotional Intelligence*, the ostensible purpose of worrying is to rehearse difficulties and dangers before they arise. The problem is that worry easily blows itself out of proportion by generating catastrophic scenarios and sweeping predictions of doom. Moreover, Goleman says, worry is a rigid and linear thought process, which means it saps your ability to think creatively and find solutions to whatever's bothering you. Goleman agrees with Fiore's suggestion that you challenge your worried thoughts, though he adds another question to the ones listed above: He advises that you ask yourself whether your worry is helping you or just getting in the way.)

Strategy #2: Change How You Plan Your Week

In addition to addressing the psychology of procrastination, Fiore gives detailed time management suggestions designed to counteract procrastination before it has a chance to get started.

Plan Play, Not Work

Fiore's fundamental planning idea is that **you should plan your week around your leisure time, not your work**. He recommends that you start by writing down specific appointments as well as necessary activities like eating and sleeping. Next, add scheduled leisure time—which can include play, socializing, hobbies, self-care (for example, exercise or meditation), and so on.

Fiore recommends scheduling *at least half an hour* of recreation or relaxation per day. He also recommends dedicating one day entirely to play—in other words, one day completely free of work (though he says it's okay to tackle a few small chores that you didn't have time for elsewhere).

Fiore says that following these guidelines forces you to see how little time you actually have for work in a given week—which in turn motivates you to make the most of what time you *do* have. He says that this approach also guarantees that you take time to play and that you don't feel guilty for doing so. The idea is to reduce your resistance to work by making it seem less overwhelming.

An Alternative Approach to Scheduling

If Fiore's emphasis on fun and recreation doesn't speak to you, you might consider the scheduling recommendations Nir Eyal lays out in his book *Indistractable*. Like Fiore, Eyal suggests balancing your work and non-work time, but he emphasizes values rather than fun. Here are Eyal's guidelines:

1) Start by scheduling activities that line up with your personal values. For instance, if you value being active, things like workouts and hikes should go into your schedule first along with necessities like eating, sleeping, bathing, and so on.

2) Next, schedule regular, non-negotiable time with family and friends. Eyal explains that it's easy to neglect your loved ones and friends and that the best way to avoid that is to set aside regular time to spend with them.

3) Finally, when scheduling your work, allot your time to activities that support your goals. For example, if you're seeking a promotion, he suggests communicating with your boss to make sure you spend your time on work that moves both you and your company forward (rather than busywork that doesn't).

Note that Fiore's and Eyal's approaches differ mostly in their emphases. Like Eyal, Fiore recommends scheduling time for self-care and socialization, but he classifies these as types of leisure time, whereas Eyal makes them the fundamental focus of his method (raising them above other types of leisure like fun or hobbies). That's because Fiore's underlying goal is to get you to prioritize the things you *enjoy*, whereas Eyal wants you to think about what's *most important* to you. Both writers want you to place your work in the larger context of a balanced and fulfilling life—they just have different ways of getting there.

Don't Schedule Your Work—Track It

You probably noticed that Fiore's scheduling guidelines mention necessities, appointments, and play, but say nothing about work. That's because Fiore advises against scheduling work in advance. Instead, he recommends that **throughout the week, you record work *as you do it*,** and only if you follow these rules:

1) Only record blocks of work *after* you've done at least half an hour of uninterrupted quality work on a project. This rule has two goals: 1) To break your work into manageable chunks so you don't get overwhelmed, and 2) to encourage you to stick with a project even when it's challenging.

2) Take a break after each block of work. Either rest or move to a more enjoyable task. The idea is to reward yourself for starting and sticking with something hard and to recharge your motivation and creativity.

3) Total up your hours of quality work each day and for the whole week, and celebrate your accomplishments. Fiore says that simply keeping this record is rewarding and that you'll feel motivated to do more work as you watch your tally of hours accumulate.

(Shortform note: Potential downsides to not planning your work: You might spend longer on a task than you meant to, and you might have a hard time balancing competing responsibilities. To avoid these problems, Nir Eyal also suggests organizing your work into blocks called timeboxes, but unlike Fiore, he recommends entering your timeboxes into your calendar in advance. Doing so allows you to strategize your time and balance your work. In fact, Eyal recommends timeboxing all of your activities (not just work), arguing that explicitly scheduling all of your time is the only way to accurately judge whether you're actually sticking to your plan or getting distracted.)

Strategy #3: Change How You Approach Projects and Goals

Fiore says that his scheduling guidelines will change how you think about work's relationship to the rest of your life. But even if you feel less resentful about having to do work, you might still find yourself procrastinating. Sometimes, the problem might be how you think about the work itself—especially when tackling a large or complex project. Therefore, Fiore gives several suggestions for how to approach large projects while avoiding procrastination-spawning emotions like fear and anxiety.

Avoid Overwhelm by Breaking Down Projects

Sometimes we procrastinate because we're overwhelmed by the enormity or complexity of the task in front of us. We're not sure what to do, and we doubt our ability to complete the work. Other times, we underestimate how much work will be needed or how long it'll take. To help avoid these problems, **Fiore recommends breaking down large projects into smaller steps**.

For example, say you want to buy Christmas presents for your friends and family. If you just add "buy Christmas presents" to your to-do list, you might find yourself avoiding the task—it sounds like a lot of work, and you're not immediately sure what needs to be done. Plus, it's only October, so you have plenty of time. This is a recipe for procrastination: The task itself is complex but ill-defined, which encourages you to put it off until you start panicking about the deadline and beating yourself up for not starting sooner—neither of which will help your shopping (or your holiday spirit).

(Shortform note: Productivity expert David Allen develops this idea further by distinguishing between tasks and projects. In *Getting Things Done*, Allen defines a project as anything that requires more than one step to complete and argues that you *can't actually work on a project*—only its component tasks. In other words, if you aren't careful to distinguish between projects and tasks, you might end up procrastinating simply because you're erroneously trying to "do" a project (like "buy Christmas presents") rather than a task.)

Fiore says you can avoid these problems by breaking down "buy Christmas presents" into its component tasks. These tasks might include making a list of everyone you want to give presents to, brainstorming present ideas for each recipient, and so on. Next, **Fiore recommends that you set deadlines for each step in the process**. For example, if you're mailing presents, you'll need to know the last date to ship with guaranteed delivery by Christmas.

How to Chunk a Project

Productivity writer Charlie Gilkey cautions that it's possible to break a project down to the point where you lose the overall shape of the project amid a long list of tasks. To avoid this problem, he recommends breaking projects into "chunks"—major steps that represent roughly two hours of focused work. For example:

- "Hire a new software developer" is a project.
- "Interview candidates" is a chunk of that project.
- "Email Sheila to schedule an interview" is a task that falls under the "interview candidates" chunk.

Gilkey's point is that chunks are discrete and specific enough that you know what to do next, but they're still large enough that you can see how they fit into the project as a whole, whereas a long list of specific tasks like "email A," "email B," and so on might just become overwhelming and distracting.

Breaking down projects in this way has two benefits. First, it gives you **a more realistic sense of your timeline**. You avoid unpleasant surprises and undue stress by figuring out ahead of time how long things will probably take. Second, you create **a manageable action plan, which in turn makes it easier to actually do the work**. Instead of trying to nebulously "buy Christmas presents," it's much easier to motivate yourself to take half an hour to pick out a new sweater for Uncle Bob.

How to Set Attainable Goals by Breaking Things Down

Fiore mentions that this approach can be also used to set goals, but he gives only a brief explanation of how to do so. Luckily, many other writers offer detailed suggestions for goal-setting. One popular approach is what Charles Duhigg calls SMART goals. Like Fiore's approach to projects, a SMART goal works by breaking down a big idea into a set of actionable information. Specifically, in *Smarter, Faster, Better*, Duhigg defines SMART goals as:

- **Specific:** Be clear about what you hope to accomplish and how you intend to do it.
- **Measurable:** Determine how you'll know when (and to what extent) the goal is complete.
- **Achievable and Realistic:** Make sure it's actually possible to complete the goal given your knowledge, ability, and resources.
- **Timely:** Set a specific deadline or time frame for your goal so that you can plan accordingly.

Avoid Perfectionism by Emphasizing Starting Rather Than Finishing

Even once you have a detailed plan for tackling a major project, you might still find yourself procrastinating instead of doing the work. Fiore says this is another place where perfectionism gets in our way. He explains that **we often focus too much on the end product**—and because we want the finished product to be perfect, we never take the first steps of actually starting.

To counteract these tendencies, Fiore recommends you **think of a project as a series of small starts**. This advice works well with the previous suggestion to break down projects into their component tasks—instead of worrying about how you'll *finish* all of your Christmas shopping, you can consult your list of small tasks and decide which one to *start* in your next 30-minute work session. (Shortform note: There's value in getting

started especially when you don't feel like doing so or when you feel like you don't know how to do something. As Mark Manson points out in *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, we often wait to be inspired to work on something when in reality, action leads to feeling inspired.)

Focusing on starting is also a psychological shift—it doesn't literally mean that you always start something new and never come back to a partially completed task. The idea is that **emphasizing starting instead of finishing removes the pressure to be perfect or to get things right the first time**. Fiore warns that sometimes we *think* we're working on a project when in fact we've fallen into a trap of never-ending research, preparation, and planning—past a certain point, he says, activities like these are just another form of procrastination.

(Shortform note: Starting sometimes means *deliberately* doing an imperfect job. For example, in *Bird by Bird*, writer Anne Lamott suggests beginning every writing project with a "sh**ty first draft"—just getting words down on the page without worrying about phrasing, typos, or even whether your ideas make any sense. The idea is to break through perfectionism with the knowledge that once you've made a first effort, you'll have something you can later refine into a more polished product.)

Strategy #4: Learn to Focus While Working

As we saw with the previous work-tracking guidelines, Fiore points to the importance of staying focused while working. For him, being focused means getting into a *flow state* and avoiding distractions.

Getting Into a Flow State

Fiore argues that **you can avoid procrastination and work more efficiently if you get into a *flow state*—a state of enhanced calm, concentration, creativity, and ease**. Fiore suggests that you can enter a flow state by performing focusing and relaxation exercises before starting a work session. Fiore gives detailed instructions for the exercises, which combine deep breathing, mindfulness techniques, and positive affirmations. (Shortform note: It might not always be possible to create flow on demand. For example, in *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (the psychologist who introduced the concept of flow states) argues that in some cases, you might need to change jobs in order to find work that triggers flow for you.)

Dealing With Distractions

To help you concentrate and get into a flow state, Fiore recommends having a plan to deal with distractions as they arise. He argues that **most distractions can be handled the same way: Write down the distracting thought or impulse and get back to work**. That way, you don't procrastinate on one task by doing another, but you also don't forget to do genuinely important things later. He says the one exception to this technique is strong emotions, which might require you to take a few minutes to sort through your feelings before returning to work.

An Alternative Approach: Avoiding Distractions

It might not be as easy to simply dismiss distractions as Fiore suggests. In *A Mind For Numbers*, Barbara Oakley defines procrastination as a habit: When we encounter certain *cues*, we perform a behavioral *routine* (for example, browsing social media) which gives us a *reward* (such as relief from work-related anxiety) that reinforces the routine.

Oakley agrees with Fiore that one of the cues in this behavioral cycle is our anticipation that work will be painful—but she adds that **distractions themselves are also a powerful cue for procrastination**. That's because over time, the habit of anxiety continuously rewards us for following rather than ignoring distractions—and that's a hard association to break. That's why Oakley

recommends avoiding distractions altogether when you can. For example, if you tend to get distracted by your smartphone, Oakley says that you can deliberately work in places where you don't get cell reception or wifi.

Anticipating Procrastination

Finally, Fiore recommends tackling resistance in advance by mentally rehearsing before you get to work—in other words, **visualize what you plan to work on as well as the resistance and distractions you expect to face**. This way, Fiore says, you can come up with strategies for overcoming resistance and distraction ahead of time and you'll be prepared when these obstacles come up.

(Shortform note: One way to anticipate procrastination and avoid it is by forming what Nir Eyal calls *precommitments*—choices you make in the present that guide your behavior in the future. For example, if you know what sites you tend to visit when procrastinating, you can install apps that will automatically block those sites during work hours. This is a precommitment because you're making a choice now that will prevent you from making an undesirable choice later.)

Exercise: Analyze Your Own Procrastination

According to Fiore, we procrastinate because we're overwhelmed by fear and anxiety about our work. Therefore, one of the first steps in correcting procrastination is recognizing when that happens so we can adjust.

Describe a recent time you've procrastinated on something. What was the task? What exactly did you do to procrastinate?

What fears or anxieties did you have concerning the task? Remember, some common anxieties include perfectionism, fear of failure, fear of success, and frustration.

The next time you face this task (or one like it), which of Fiore's techniques would most help you reduce your anxiety and avoid procrastinating? Why?