



# Book Procrastination

## Why You Do It, What to Do About It

Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen

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## Recommendation

Approaching unwelcome tasks with an “I’ll do it tomorrow” mindset is not unusual behavior. The problem is, tomorrow quickly becomes today, so the procrastinator sets a new tomorrow goal. This tomorrow goal eventually becomes a next week goal, then a next month goal, then a next year goal – that is, a never goal. Time runs out for everyone, but it does so far more quickly for procrastinators. If you procrastinate, do you know why? Psychologists Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen outline the reasons and roots of procrastination. More importantly, they show you how to fix your vexing, life-sapping procrastination problem. *BooksInShort* suggests that anyone who procrastinates should buy this book. Now would be fine.

## Take-Aways

- Procrastination is the result of a mix of biological, emotional and experiential factors.
- It can stem from poor self-confidence, lack of self-esteem or fear of failure.
- Procrastinators often associate negative feelings with tasks they don’t like.
- Though the tasks may be benign, procrastinators avoid them to dodge their depressed feelings.
- Most procrastinators are unrealistic about how long tasks take.
- To avoid procrastination, break projects into discrete steps and set short-term daily goals.
- Routinely reward yourself as you proceed from step to step.
- Adjust your goals or deadlines if you cannot achieve your objectives in a timely manner.
- A “perfect” time to do something never exists. Just do it.
- Ultimately, you are in charge of your life and your time. Make a conscious choice not to procrastinate – on a task-by-task basis.

## Summary

### Procrastination Isn’t a Laziness Issue

One in four adults tends to put things off until "tomorrow." Usually it does not stem from laziness, irresponsibility or lack of discipline. It comes from fear, emotion, lack of self-esteem, perfectionism, catastrophic thinking and even poor upbringing. Life’s challenges scare procrastinators, so they delay to shield themselves. This fear-generated thinking prevents them from moving ahead. Procrastination can involve unhelpful biological factors, including genetic inheritance, an inadequate sense of time or “wishful thinking.” Many procrastinators have mistaken ideas, such as, “I have to be perfect.” “Everything I do should go easily.” “I must avoid being challenged.”

“It’s safer to do nothing than to take a risk and fail.” “If I do well this time, I must always do well.” Such all-or-nothing thinking constitutes the “Procrastinator’s Code.”

“Because procrastinators compromise their well-being in many ways, procrastination has serious consequences for health.”

People who fear life or are unsure of their abilities tend to avoid challenges by delaying them so they don’t have to deal with external – or internal – criticism if they fail. After all, you can’t mess up if you never try. Procrastinators are often perfectionists who cannot tolerate doing something wrong. They believe if you fail at a task, you fail as a human being. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” becomes “Nothing ventured, nothing failed.”

“The emotional roots of procrastination involve inner feelings, fears, hopes, memories, dreams, doubts and pressures.”

Procrastination even creates its own convenient reasons for failure: “I started the project late, so I didn’t have enough time for it. Therefore, my failure to complete it doesn’t count.” Such thinking allows procrastinators to see themselves as capable individuals who just never have enough time to perform up to their potential (because they always put things off). And yet, they feel like failures when they are unable to complete projects on time or up to standards. Procrastinators are motivated by another common, subtle and difficult to identify phobia – fear of achievement. This often manifests itself in these flawed mindsets:

- **“Competition”** – When you compete (by doing something well and on time), you showcase your ambition. Avoid the spotlight.
- **“Commitment phobia”** – If you proceed steadily toward your goal, you are liable to achieve it. What then? Are you sure this is what you really want?
- **“I’ll turn into a workaholic”** – “If I stop fooling around, I will always have to work hard. I don’t want that.”
- **“Success is dangerous: Somebody always gets hurt”** – Complete tasks on time and people may think you want to show off. So you lose. Or those who don’t accomplish what you do feel bad about their efforts and may retaliate in some way against you. So you also lose. If you always lose when you win, why win at all?
- **“I don’t deserve success”** – “I was a rotten kid,” or “I am a bad adult.” Therefore, I deserve to suffer by being late.
- **“What if I’m too perfect?”** – “I’ll make people jealous if I do well. I don’t want that.”

“Many people who procrastinate are apprehensive about being judged by others or by the critic who dwells within.”

Procrastinators are often control freaks who don’t like to be pushed. They tend to dig in their heels like stubborn mules when people expect them to do something on time. Typical thinking: “The electric bill is late? Fine. I’ll pay it when I’m good and ready.” Or, “My new client wants me to call her at 4 p.m. Who is she to dictate when I call her?” The procrastinator may respond unconsciously by just not calling until 4:15 p.m. Or, “I have asked my husband 10 times to clean out the garage, but he never does. I’m tired of begging him to do it.” The wife’s unconscious response to this conflict may be to hang back and be tardy when she and her husband go out. Procrastinators often are late out of a need to express their autonomy.

“We are more likely to pursue goals that are pleasurable and that we are likely to attain...and we will most likely procrastinate any tasks that are unpleasant in the present and offer recompense only in the distant future.” (Piers Steel, psychologist)

Some procrastinators exhibit their independence in relationships, including their fear of “being too close or too far away,” by not accomplishing things on time. For example, some individuals find it difficult to function well unless they have close friends or family members immediately available for help at all times. Others cause trouble by procrastinating as an S.O.S. to solicit assistance. Some people fear intimacy and connections. They procrastinate to keep others at a distance. For example, they are always late to meet friends because they worry that being on time will tie them too closely to other people. Procrastinators often don’t work to establish healthy – indeed, essential – boundaries in their most intimate, important relationships.

## The Time Enigma, Neuroscience, Emotions and Upbringing

Even for philosophers and scientists, time is not concrete. Aristotle questioned if time even exists if people are not around to mark it. For Einstein, time was a muddle in which the past, present and future were mere illusions. Procrastinators have their own markedly different sense of time. Indeed, many procrastinators seem to regard clock time as beneath them. For some procrastinators, 7:00 sharp means 7:10 or 7:20 or even later. Many procrastinators engage in “future discounting.” For example, since small children won’t need to go to college for many years, some parents don’t consider it important to start saving now. However, since the big game is on TV this weekend, they feel compelled to run out and buy a giant-screen television. Procrastinators must work with time so that it works for them.

“People who procrastinate may suffer internal consequences, feelings that range from irritation and regret to intense self-condemnation and despair.”

Procrastination has a neurological component. People who suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), chronic stress, sleep disorders or executive dysfunction (inability to coordinate thoughts and feelings with goal-directed actions) may also be procrastinators. The brain, an ever-changing biological entity, constantly builds new neural connections and disengages old ones. If you do something repeatedly (for example, if you are always late), the brain reorganizes itself to make this neurological action your “default” behavior. On the contrary, if you improve your tardiness, the brain will develop new neural pathways to establish punctuality as your default mode.

“You have a choice. You can delay or you can act.”

For whatever reasons (some tracing back to childhood), many procrastinators associate painful emotions, negative thoughts or sad memories with certain tasks, so they put those chores off, even if they involve activities that most people would find pleasant and perfectly enjoyable.

Your parents’ influence may be partly to blame for your procrastination. As a child, did they insist that you meet unrealistically high expectations? Do you constantly feel burdened to meet such lofty standards today? If so, do you assume the burden of too many tasks and responsibilities, making it impossible to achieve everything on time?

“Get your ideas and plans out of your head and down in writing in a place that works for you.”

Or did your parents always undermine you, making you feel like a failure before you even began working toward a goal? If these feelings carry over into your adult life,

they may explain why you put things off, perhaps believing deep down that you can't accomplish anything anyway. Procrastination can, in effect, be hardwired in your brain by your upbringing.

## Overcoming Procrastination

If procrastination is a major problem in your life, you may be addressing your internal and external pressures with a flawed defense mechanism that has deep psychological roots. Most people procrastinate because of four primary factors:

1. **“Low confidence”** – Choose realistic objectives that you can definitely accomplish.
2. **“Task aversiveness”** – Just because you don't like a task doesn't make it onerous. You may fear the negative feelings tied up with the task. Deal with those emotions and you may enjoy the tasks you delayed. If not, set specific time limits to get the task done.
3. **“The goal or reward is too far away”** – Establish work intervals for all long-range tasks and reward yourself in some way at each interval.
4. **“Difficulties in self-regulation”** – You stand a better chance of attaining goals in a timely manner when your mind and body are relaxed.

“You do not have to be perfect to be of value.”

Give the following techniques an honest chance. Don't expect to change overnight – change is a process, not an event. If you don't achieve what you want right away, don't give up. Try again.

- **Choose a “behavioral goal”** – Clearly define your objectives. Not: “I will stop procrastinating,” instead: “I will prepare the marketing report by June 1.”
- **Don't aim too high at the start** – Begin with one goal at a time. This goal should be “minimally acceptable,” not lofty, ambitious or difficult-to-reach. Not: “I will lose 75 pounds.” Rather: “I will lose two pounds this week.” Be flexible. Maybe two pounds is too ambitious – be prepared to adjust your goals.
- **“Make a public commitment”** – Use family, friends and even Internet support groups to commit to change. Look for help and support online.
- **“Optimize your chances”** – If your goal is to write a novel, don't try to work in a noisy lunchroom or beside a blaring TV. Find a work space that works for and not against you.
- **“Break your goal down into small, specific mini-goals”** – Huge enterprises can be foreboding, so break goals down into a series of discrete, manageable tasks. List all necessary steps. Start with those you can quickly complete so you achieve positive results from the start. Build from there.
- **“Visualize your progress”** – If positive imagery works for athletes and entertainers, it can work for you, too. See yourself achieving the steps to your goal, as well as the goal itself.
- **“Don't wait until you feel like it”** – You may never feel like it. Plunge in anyway.
- **“Be realistic (rather than wishful) about time”** – Procrastinators tend to minimize the time that tasks and activities take. Inevitably, things take longer than anticipated, so set realistic deadlines and allow yourself time to meet them.
- **“Just get started”** – “Little by little” should be the procrastinator's philosophy. Take one step at a time. Not: “I must finish this job now.” Instead: “What is my first step?”
- **“Use the next 15 minutes”** – No matter how much you hate a task, you should be able to do it for 15 minutes. With numerous 15-minute work sessions, you can accomplish a great deal. Not: “I can only spend 15 minutes on this, so I won't bother to start.” Instead: “I can do something worthwhile in 15 minutes.”
- **Expect setbacks** – In life, things seldom go smoothly. Expect roadblocks and obstacles, but don't let them stop you. Keep moving forward.
- **Delegate** – If someone else can do a portion of the job, assign the task out. And ask yourself: “Is it vital to complete this task?” If not, dump it.
- **Guard your time** – Sometimes, it's best to say “no” if people ask you to do things.
- **Plan your time wisely** – Don't set a goal of 30 minutes of exercise in the morning if you're not a morning person. Set yourself up to achieve goals, not to fail at them.
- **Avoid excuses** – Stop making excuses about never getting anything done on time. Not: “I am really worried, anxious and depressed, so I'm not going to work.” Instead: “I am exhausted, so I will work for 15 minutes then take a quick break.”
- **Reward yourself** – “Focus on effort, not outcome.” Not: “I won't stop until I complete this job.” Instead: “I am moving ahead nicely. So, I'll take a break, have a nice lunch, nap for 20 minutes and then start again.”
- **Look beyond the procrastination** – When you procrastinate, ask yourself why. Get in touch with your feelings. Feelings are often everything to procrastinators. Learn what is really going on inside. Not: “I hate myself because I procrastinate.” Instead: “Why do I feel the need to procrastinate right now? What is this really all about?”
- **If you suffer from ADHD or executive dysfunction** – Keep track of your immediate tasks with visual reminders, such as Post-It notes and lists. Your brain works faster than others', so “think like a waiter.” Focus on one task, then the next. Stay on track.

## Breaking Free from Procrastination

The choices you make are your own. This means that “you can delay or you can act.” So act, even if you feel strange or uncomfortable. Put away the Procrastinator's Code. Adopt a different, constructive standard – a “Freedom From Procrastination Code.” Some of its most important tenets include: “It is not possible to be perfect.” “Making an effort is a good thing.” “Failure is not dangerous.” “Challenge will help me grow.” And, “the real failure is not living.”

“Got everything done. Died anyway.” (Epitaph)

Life is about taking risks. You may fail. You may do well. Whatever happens, at least you are moving gallantly ahead. No one can ask you to do more. Don't hide behind the false protection of procrastination. Put this flawed tactic aside and engage with the world around you. Make your life as relevant and meaningful as possible. Start today – not tomorrow, next week, next month or next year. Come what may, it's time to live your life fully.

## About the Authors

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