

Seven Ways to Put Procrastination Behind You



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

Don't chalk it up to a lack of motivation.

Victor's subordinates were pushing him to make up his mind about a proposed major acquisition. He knew the clock was ticking, but he was worried about the downside. What if the promised synergies didn't materialise? What if they bought a cat in the sack? The pressure was wearing him down. He felt low and exhausted.

Victor was reluctant to admit it to himself, but he always had the tendency to put off difficult tasks and decisions. Overthinking and procrastination were his modus operandi. He excelled at finding distractions and reasons to keep looking for more information.

Although procrastination can offer relief from unpleasant tasks, the relief is only ever temporary. Putting off dealing with something only makes matters worse, as the Victors of this world usually find out the hard way. And there

are many of them: In the United States, an estimated **20 percent** of men and women are chronic procrastinators.

Classic signs of procrastination

Does Victor's behaviour sound familiar? Do you share his tendencies? To find out, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you quickly feel overwhelmed after being assigned a task?
- When faced with a major assignment, do you tend to focus on nonessential activities instead of what needs to be done?
- Are you very easily distracted?
- Do you often wait until the last moment to do things?
- Do you rarely finish projects on time?
- Do you tend to live from deadline to deadline?
- Do you often hope that if you ignore a task, it will just go away?
- Are you good in finding excuses for not doing something?
- Do you have a lengthy to-do list?
- Do you tend to be late for appointments?

A procrastinator will answer "Yes" to most of these questions.

Procrastination is more than simply putting things off or deciding not to act; it is also a failure of self-regulation. In other words, it's a coping mechanism that's gone haywire.

In fact, procrastination contributes to several negative emotions, particularly shame and guilt. For extreme procrastinators, however, these negative feelings become additional reasons to put things off for longer. Eventually, this self-defeating behaviour turns into a form of self-sabotage. The longer people like Victor avoid a task, the harder it becomes to break the dark cycle of procrastination.

Over time, procrastination can jeopardise both personal and professional relationships, leading to resentment among friends, family members and colleagues. So why do people procrastinate?

Causes of procrastination

People can procrastinate for many conscious and unconscious reasons. Sometimes they fear they won't like the task. They may also fear they won't do it very well or feel overwhelmed by its complexity.

Returning to Victor, it is also possible that he felt the potential rewards of the acquisition lay too far in the future. When making long-term decisions, most of us don't feel that strong a connection with our future self. Even if we know that putting off a task will create future stress, our brains are wired to be more concerned with removing a present threat.

On an unconscious level, Victor might have a fear of failure. He might do something wrong. The acquisition might not work well. Many procrastinators tend to be perfectionists for whom it may be psychologically more acceptable never to tackle a job than to face the possibility of not doing it perfectly. But failure is a part of life. Everyone makes mistakes.

Character types

Generally speaking, certain personality types are more likely to become procrastinators. For example, procrastination is more common among people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Procrastination can also be driven by other factors, an important one being rebelliousness. The procrastinator may have problems with authority and letting a deadline slip can be a way of adding drama to their lives. Even though they may appear pleasant, or even cheerful on the outside, some people experience anger and resentment when asked to do something.

Procrastinators may first experience a sense of control over their lives by not taking action. But this rapidly dissolves into feelings of lack of control, as time constraints begin to restrict their ability to successfully execute the assignment. This comedy of judgmental errors is aggravated by self-deception: Some procrastinators believe they perform better under pressure. But last-minute sprints often produce second-rate results.

In contrast, non-procrastinators focus on whatever needs to be done. They tend to score high on the personality trait known as conscientiousness, one of the broad dispositions identified by the "[Big Five Theory of Personality](#)". People who score high on conscientiousness also tend to have high scores in other areas, including self-discipline, persistence and personal responsibility.

A call for action

What to do about procrastination? One way of embarking on a change process is to engage in a structured regimen of behavioural interventions under the supervision of a coach or therapist. In the short term, the following cognitive “tricks” can help keep procrastination at bay.

Break the task into smaller ones

Maybe you postpone getting started by telling yourself that the task is too big. Reframe the task by breaking it up into several smaller parts that you tackle one at a time. Just focus on completing the first one. This will make you feel much better about the assignment and better about yourself, which will reduce your desire to procrastinate.

Set micro-deadlines

Set yourself deadlines for each smaller part. Each deadline you meet will reduce your stress level. It can also be helpful to start with the most difficult one. If you tackle it immediately, the easier tasks will seem to take care of themselves.

Be realistic

Make sure you set aside enough time for a task. Maybe you’re over-optimistic about what you can do. Maybe you’re deluding yourself about your abilities. Consistently underestimating time commitments can make you procrastinate more than you would normally do. Try to manage your time more realistically.

Recognise busyness

Frittering away time on trivial pursuits rather than getting on with work-related projects can be enjoyable at first. But what you are doing is filling your days with busyness to avoid getting down to business. As the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev wrote, “If we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything, is ready, we shall never begin.”

Create a to-do list

Writing down a to-do list can have a wonderful effect on your mental state and can often galvanise you into action. Put a due date next to each item on the list, or go one step further and prioritise. Concentrate on the three most important items that need your attention each day.

Have some fun

You should also keep in mind that the time you enjoy wasting isn't always wasted time. We all need variety and downtime. So, intersperse your work with rewards, relaxation and celebration of tasks completed. Planning these breaks will make it easier for you to fight procrastination.

Practise self-compassion

Treat yourself with kindness and understanding in the face of your potential mistakes and failures. Self-compassion will reduce the psychological distress that enables procrastination. It will boost your motivation and enhance your feelings of self-worth. It can also foster positive emotions like optimism, curiosity and personal initiative.

Getting help

Every time you judge yourself harshly, pay attention. Such inner work can be difficult to do alone, especially as your superego may get at you in any number of unconscious ways. Discussing harsh self-talk with a non-judgmental, supportive, understanding person, like a friend or family member, will make you more aware of it.

If your procrastination has become a chronic or debilitating issue, it could indicate more serious psychological problems. In such case, you may need professional help. Coaches, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts can point out specific self-defeating habits and thoughts that lead to procrastination. They can help you evaluate your personal goals, strengths, weaknesses and priorities.

Should Victor turn to helping professionals, they might point out that his procrastination is a form of self-destruction. They could make him realise that when there is a mountain to climb, waiting won't make it smaller. Or as the famous psychologist William James said, "Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task."

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