

Overcoming Procrastination

"I work better under pressure." "I can do it tomorrow." "I don't have everything I need, so I'll wait." "I don't have time right now." "Someone else can do it better." Could this be you? The truth is, everyone at some time experiences the feeling of not wanting to get a job done, for whatever reason, and deciding to put it on the back-burner for a while. At Cornell, teamwork is essential, deadlines related to grant applications/conference scheduling/coursework are commonplace, and stellar individual achievements in research/publishing/customer satisfaction are not only honored, but also expected. Chronic procrastination may slow an entire team down, thus reducing productivity and efficiency which in turn invites workplace conflict and reduced staff morale. On an individual level, procrastinators risk being seen as unreliable, slow, or just plain lazy; promotion and career progression are at risk if procrastination is not held in check.

Procrastination is the avoidance of a task that we perceive to be painful, uncomfortable, burdensome, or distasteful. It is a means of coping with the anxiety and discomfort that we might feel were we to begin the task. This "solution," however, is temporary and ultimately ineffective. When we procrastinate, we cannot be fully relaxed and calm because on some level we are aware of eventually having to return to the task that we dread.

Characteristics of Procrastination

Most of the time, procrastinators have an optimistic view of their ability to complete tasks on time. This results in delaying the work until their back is against the wall and there are no other alternatives other than finishing the task. This is then followed up by a spurt of anxious effort toward completing the tasks accompanied by the justifications such as "I work well in pressure situations." Common characteristics of procrastinators include:

- Difficulty coping with pressure
- Too many commitments to projects/tasks
- Easily distracted
- Fear of change and facing the unknown
- Fear of failure
- Lack of organization
- Perfectionism
- Overwhelmed with the situation
- Too "busy" to do things
- Overworked and tired
- Indecisive
- Low self-confidence/self-doubt

Why do people procrastinate?

There are many reasons people procrastinate. Some of these include:

- A fear of failure; perfectionism ("I can't begin this task, for it needs to be perfect. Given such a high 'bar,' I will never finish it!")
- Equating one's self-worth with performance on a task



- A fear of evaluation by authority figures (i.e., parents, professors, etc.)
- A belief that tasks should be accomplished easily and without effort

Tips to overcome procrastination:

- **Recognize the problem.**
Recognizing the problem and understanding the cause of it is the first step towards overcoming procrastination and increasing your productivity. For this you need to prioritize your tasks by placing the important ones up front. If you find it difficult to do this, the reason is likely that the tasks are either too unpleasant or overwhelming.
- **Abandon rationalizations for procrastination.**
People often say, "I work best under pressure" or "I can't do work until the last minute anyway." Frequently, these statements are not accurate and the reality is that the person has not actually ever tried to do work before the last minute. The point here is that, when you find yourself procrastinating, take a second to think about what rationalizations may be going through your head.
- **The importance of the workspace.**
Think about all the things that could take you away from your work (i.e., internet, phone, television, break room, iPod, temptation to visit colleague, etc.). You are bound to be more efficient in a less distracting space. While it may be true that some people actually do work better with lots of "stuff" going on in the background, most don't.
- **Allow productivity to be the motivator.**
Avoid waiting until you "feel like" doing the task. Psychologist David Burns, author of "The Feeling Good Handbook," suggests that the main difference between procrastinators and non-procrastinators is that procrastinators wait until they "feel like" doing a task, while non-procrastinators just begin the task and let their productivity be the motivator. Rarely does anyone just "feel like" starting a task in the first place. This approach uses the philosophical idea that 'action must sometimes precede motivation.'
- **Divide tasks into manageable parts.**
A publication or report is a lot harder to write all at once than if split into manageable parts over the course of time. Devise a very specific plan (i.e., to do one page per day for two weeks and to be completed in a quiet space) and stick to it. Check back with your schedule every day and enjoy the feeling of checking things off your list.
- **Be organized**
Know what you're going to write about before sitting down at the computer. This mental preparation may alleviate some of your anxiety about beginning the task.
- **Develop a work system**
Learn what works best for you and follow this "plan" whenever you begin a task or project. For instance, if you're composing a paper or report some people find that writing an outline first—while taking more time initially—ultimately leads to more efficient work later on. Some people find that starting their work first thing in the morning is a good "work habit" and becomes part of their system. Whatever works best for you, repeat it every time, thus developing a system/routine. In so doing, you won't have to continuously reinvent the wheel.
- **Defeat Perfectionism.**
Perfectionism may at first seem an obvious cause of procrastination, but it can be a serious detriment to your ability to act. It is related to fear of failure, in that it is the belief that everything you do needs to be perfect, otherwise you have failed. The pressure to be perfect becomes overwhelming, and so you never get around to taking action. Perfectionism is like having an impossible standard to meet, so why even bother trying? Rather than experiencing a failure to meet an unreasonable expectation, you may just put off taking any action.



You can't be perfect all the time, and it is really the mistakes and failures that help you to ultimately succeed. It is the process that is important, not the final outcome, so focus on learning from errors and less than perfect results, and don't let expectations of perfection hold you back.

- **Reward yourself for not procrastinating.**

For every hour that you work on a task ahead of time, treat yourself to an hour of play or enjoyable activity. Go out to dinner with friends, see a movie, go for a walk, have some chocolate, enjoy a glass of wine on your deck. It's important to reinforce and reward your "non-procrastinating" behavior!

Seeking help

If you have trouble with procrastination and feel that you've missed opportunities, that your work time is chronically frenzied, that you're stressed out, or that you're feeling resentful and guilty over not getting things done on time, then take advantage of FSAP's experience and professional expertise in these time management areas that faculty and staff are routinely challenged by. We can be reached at 255-2673, 8:30-5:00, Monday through Friday.

"You may delay, but time will not." - Benjamin Franklin



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