

How to Stop Procrastinating

This is the second of a series of two newsletters that explore the dynamics of procrastination. In my last newsletter, you learned what procrastination is and why people do it. In this issue, you will learn how to change your procrastination behaviors and enable yourself to be more productive.

You will have the greatest success if you read the first newsletter and take some time to observe your own procrastination patterns. Once you have accomplished that, choose a few of the strategies outlined here. Keep working at it until you understand what you need to do to stop putting things off.

Set Specific Goals

The most effective goals are specific, measurable, and achievable. An example of a good goal is, "I will buy paint on Friday and paint the living room on Saturday." This is better than saying, "I am going to get the house ready to sell."

Set Priorities

Write down all the things that you need to do, and place them in order of importance. The most important tasks belong at the top of your list and the distractions go at the bottom. Start at the top of your list and work your way down.

Organize Your Work

Set up a system for yourself. Prepare a daily schedule and keep it within view during your working time. List the tasks for each day. Check things off as you complete them. When you are working on a project, lay out all of the needed supplies or materials before you begin.

Divide and Conquer

Sometimes a project is overwhelming if you think about all of the work that is involved. Do yourself a favor: Break the activity down into smaller steps and set progress goals for each of the steps. This is especially helpful when you are beginning a writing project, studying for a degree, or building a new set of skills.

For example, if you need to write a report, make an outline before you start writing. If you have to clean your house, make your goal to do the first two rooms by 10:00, two more by noon, and two more by 2:00. Check tasks off your outline as you complete them.

Make It a Game

Turn the temptation to avoid working into a challenge. Use your imagination. For example, if you need to study the first five chapters of your history book, pretend that you are a substitute teacher and will need to lecture on the material tomorrow. Take notes and organize the information into an outline that you could speak from. Sometimes changing the frame around a situation makes it more interesting and less of a chore.

Schedule a Small Amount of Time

Tell yourself that you will only spend ten minutes on the task right now, just to get your feet wet. Work on the task for the ten minutes and then choose whether to continue for ten *more* minutes. Continue doing this until you decide to stop, or when you are finished with the task. If you stop working on the task before it is finished, spend a few more minutes to plan a strategy for the next steps.

When you are tempted to substitute a fun but unimportant activity (such as reading a magazine or watching the weather channel) for an important project (such as finishing pages of your report), make the substitute activity your reward for doing the important task. Do the high-priority job first and reward yourself with the fun activity.

Ward Off Self-Defeating Thoughts

Telling yourself that you are going to do a poor job or even fail can seriously undermine your ability to function. It is important to realize that your negative statements are not facts. Keep your focus on the present moment and the positive steps you can take toward accomplishing your goals. If these thoughts are based on a need for perfection or low self-esteem (described in the “Managing Perfectionism” newsletter), you may want to work on these issues.

Make a Commitment

Make a verbal and written commitment to completing the task or project. Write a contract and sign it. Tell someone about your plans and ask them to follow up with you.

One trainer wanted to create a how-to workbook and market it to other training professionals. After weeks of procrastination, she decided to motivate herself by creating a deadline. She wrote an ad for the workbook and placed it in the professional publication that she knew her colleagues would be reading. When her telephone began to ring with orders for the workbook, she suddenly became very focused.

Remind Yourself

Write notes to yourself and post them in conspicuous places. Leave them where you will see them—on places like the outside of your briefcase, the bathroom mirror, refrigerator, television, your front door, and the dashboard of your car. The more often you remind yourself of what you plan to accomplish, the more likely it is that you will follow through with action.

Reward Yourself

Reinforcement is a very effective way to motivate yourself. When you complete even the most minor task, be sure to acknowledge what you have done. This is especially important in the beginning when you are struggling with procrastination behaviors. After you have mastered these issues and have regained your peak productivity, don’t forget to celebrate the completion of the big projects. You worked hard for it and shouldn’t take it for granted.

Use the information from this newsletter to develop your personal program for accomplishing the things that are most important to you.

How will you use this information to improve the quality of your life? Write your notes down.