

What Makes You Procrastinate?

The first in a series of two newsletters, this issue deals with why we procrastinate.

All of us procrastinate on occasion. For some people, it's a chronic problem; for others, it's only a problem in certain life areas. Procrastination is always frustrating because it results in wasted time, lost opportunities, disappointing work performance, and generally feeling bad about yourself.

When you procrastinate, you allow less important tasks to take up the time and space that should be devoted to more important things. You do things like hanging out with friends when you know that an important work project is due soon, or going shopping instead of doing your homework. It can also be evident in behavior such as talking about trivial things with your partner to avoid discussing important issues in your relationship.

Most people don't have a problem finding time for things they *want* to do. But once they see a task as too difficult, painful, boring, or overwhelming, the procrastination behaviors begin. You are not alone if you have ever made any of the following excuses to yourself:

1. It's too cold to exercise outside today. I'll wait until tomorrow when it's warmer.
2. I've got too many other things to do first.
3. I'll do a better job when I can concentrate on this project.
4. I still have lots of time to get this done.
5. They don't pay me enough to do a more complete job. This is good enough.
6. This problem is too hard to talk about. I wouldn't know where to start.
7. I work better under pressure.
8. It's too noisy to work while my teenager is at home.
9. I should get the shopping done now because the stores will be more crowded later.
10. I can eat this pie tonight, because I'm starting my diet tomorrow.
11. My tooth doesn't really hurt that much. The pain will probably go away tomorrow.

Most of the time, these excuses seem fairly innocuous. However, they're not as innocent as they seem, because they cause us to postpone important duties and projects. Ultimately, these excuses can keep us from accomplishing important goals and make us feel bad about ourselves.

Why People Procrastinate

If you were hoping for a simple answer to this puzzle, you will be disappointed to learn that there are many reasons why people put things off. Here are a few of the most common (check those that apply to you):

_____ **Avoiding discomfort.** Wanting to avoid pain makes lots of people shift into procrastination mode. However, the longer we delay, the worse the uncomfortable problem usually becomes. The rash gets bigger, the tooth hurts more, or the brakes squeak even more loudly.

_____ **Perfectionism.** Those who believe they must produce the perfect report may obsess about uncovering every last information source and then write draft after draft. Their search for the perfect product takes up so much time that they miss their deadline.

_____ **Laziness.** Sometimes people delay tasks that involve fairly slight inconvenience or minor discomfort.

_____ **Thinking you're not good enough.** Some people are certain that they are incompetent. They think that they will fail, and procrastinate to avoid ever putting their skills to the test.

_____ **Self-doubt.** If you second-guess yourself, you probably suffer from procrastination. You may avoid new challenges and opportunities unless you are certain that you will succeed. Perhaps you make feeble attempts to begin a project, and you tell yourself that you could do a better job if you put in more effort.

_____ **Workaholism.** At the other end of the spectrum, many people who work excessively also fall into this category. They drive themselves ruthlessly, fearing that if they stop working, they will not be able to start again. Most self-doubters are driven by the belief that they must meet strict standards in order to see themselves as successful.

Physics Review

Remember the concept of inertia: a mass at rest tends to *stay* at rest.

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Why Don't We Just Say No?

Since procrastination produces mostly negative outcomes, why don't we just change our behavior and eliminate these undesirable consequences? The reason for this is that *procrastination reinforces itself*. For some reason, it is more difficult for most humans to *start* change than to *keep it going*. We avoid getting started by cleverly diverting our attention from the things we really should be doing. We do something else instead or make up a story about how we will accomplish the task in the future—when we are inspired, or when we have completed a preliminary step, or some other trick.

Although recognizing how these diversions work won't automatically cure your procrastination, being aware of it is a good place to start working on the problem. Once you are aware of the ways that *you* procrastinate, you can start to change your behavior. In my next newsletter, I'll offer some tips to help you get started. Until then, begin the change process by thinking about which causes apply to you and writing down examples of these behaviors as you observe them.