

How to Stop Procrastinating

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Introduction

Procrastination can be an enormous problem. In the modern world, when we all have so many things to do, it is increasingly important to know how to manage our time and our life management. What really helps is learning to manage the emotional reaction we have when we need to do something we don't want to do, don't like to do, or are convinced we just can't do. Learn to understand why we avoid something, and it is a great deal easier to find a way to deal with it.

There are many reasons why people procrastinate. Sometimes we put things off because we just don't like doing them. Sometimes we don't do something because we think we can't actually do it. Often we don't start something because we don't think we can do it well enough. For some people, there is a deep rooted psychological reason for not doing things. For others, it can just be a question of realizing that you don't enjoy doing something, or really dislike doing something.

It is important to find out our own reasoning for putting things off, as this is the best way to devise methods of overcoming the problems of procrastination.

There are all sorts of ways in which we can overcome procrastination. Not addressing the problem can be very life damaging. Procrastination can easily become habit forming, and can have a serious impact on our life, the lives of the people around us, and ultimately our health, both physical and mental.

Methods of overcoming procrastination range from doing a little bit of self analysis to work out why we put things off; using some basic time and job planning; to getting proper behavioral therapy.

For most people, it is a question of establishing that there are underlying emotional links between the tasks we put off and our inability to deal with them. So spending some time seriously questioning our feelings, as well as our actions, is really helpful. We also need to recognize that only Superman is likely to both enjoy and be good at everything. It is not to our detriment that we are not good at everything. Our self esteem does not need to be given a hammering if we accept that we have aspects of life that we are not good at, or just plain don't like dealing with.

If you know you are not particularly good at organizing the finances, and accept that, you are more likely to be able to convince yourself that you should spend an hour or two dealing with the bank statements etc, than to spend it worrying that you won't be able to make the figures balance.

Take the emotion and the fear out of the equation, and suddenly it's a whole lot easier. When you suddenly feel that sinking sensation, don't get up and find something else to do. Stop, and think about why it is you need to do this particular job. Think about the fact that, in deciding to do the job, you are doing something that will improve your life and something that is definitely in your best interests.

The worst thing you can do if you are a procrastinator is to do nothing. The best thing is to begin by putting some effort into understanding why you do it, and by establishing some fairly

straightforward organizational rules about how to use your time.

For most of us, there will be one or two things, at least, that we will put off dealing with. It is quite normal to procrastinate over something or other. For most of us, the problem is not too great, and doesn't threaten to destroy the quality of our lives. So time management, time boxing, etc is the way to deal with getting things back on track.

Find a time each day when you will deal with something that you know you don't want to do. Give yourself a pat on the back when you have put in the time - even if you haven't finished the job completely. What you have achieved is important - you have made a start, and you have not run away from it.

However, for some people, procrastination is a much more serious problem. For some people, there are deep seeded reasons for putting things off, or just not dealing with things at all! Some people have a subconscious reaction resulting from over controlling parents perhaps. Some have a deep rooted fear of failure, which has led to a resistance when dealing with certain tasks. Some people are frightened of not doing something perfectly.

It might be painful to establish the reasons why we procrastinate, but it will certainly help to spend some time thinking it through. There are lots of fairly straightforward ways of helping ourselves improve our ability to deal with the million and one things that need to be done to keep our lives on track, and still have time to enjoy our leisure.

Getting to grips with the idea that better time management, better task management and better self management is really about getting the best out of life. Wasting time is really not in our best interests. Making time for enjoyment is!!

Chapter One –

Some Reasons for Procrastinating

There is a significant link between procrastination and perfectionism. Some people are frightened that they may not do something perfectly, and if they think they can't do it perfectly, they don't want to do it at all.

Studies about perfectionism and procrastination vary in their arguments about the links between the two. Some indicate that striving for perfection is a positive thing. Others indicate that the desire to do everything perfectly is linked with strong need for order, tidiness, neatness, cleanliness, and generally very high standards that can become obsessive.

Some studies link the intense desire for perfection with depression, and even suicide. There are studies that indicate that high achievers are perfectionists, and that even very successful people can have a propensity towards procrastination.

How can one be a procrastinator and a highly successful person? Possibly one can achieve great success in one field, but at the expense of success in other aspects of our lives. Being driven by

work can mean having little time or energy to deal with other areas of life. If someone else is always responsible for all the 'other' aspects of life, you don't get to build up the experience that means you know how to deal with them. Eventually they can appear too difficult to even contemplate.

Managing life in this way can be done by having other people take responsibility for those aspects of our lives that we find we don't have time for. Perhaps areas of our lives that we just don't feel equipped to deal with, or uncertain about.

For example, the gender divide and the division of labor has, for generations, meant that women have been able to remain in the domestic environment and avoid competing with men in the commercial and economic world. Similarly, men have been able to shy away from domestic management, emotional involvement with their children, and direct all their energies to their work and work colleagues.

This is, of course, a gross generalization. Many men would dearly love to spend more time with their children and take a full part in their emotional and educational development, but are unable to find the time because they need to work outside the house and bring home the bacon.

Similarly, there are many women who would dearly love to be able to be working and fulfilling their potential in other ways than just being at home with the children.

Nevertheless, sometimes we just choose to do what comes easiest, and choose not to do what doesn't. Often we can find ways like this to justify where we direct our energies, and where we leave stuff to someone else.

So is this procrastination, or is this being tactical in ensuring we use our energies most effectively?

Should we feel guilty if, in fact, we are not good at everything, or there are things we just don't like doing? Is there any reason that women should want to deal with car repairs, mowing the lawn, building a garden shed, mend the roof, deal with the mortgage applications, the house insurance, and have to go out to work, and take responsibility for earning the money to keep the house and family going, and raise the children and manage the home in every respect? Do we have to try and be super woman?

Is there any reason that men should want to not only be successful as a provider, but to be able to co-ordinate a household full of children and dogs and want to do the household chores, the shopping, and help with homework and be responsible for all the household maintenance, the garden and all the finances?

No, of course it's not reasonable to expect everyone to want to be doing everything. However, we are bombarded with messages telling us that we should be good at everything. Mostly of course, we come to a deal with our partners - either along traditional gender lines, or just choosing to each be responsible for the things we enjoy or are good at. Maybe we each end up with some things we would rather not do, but not too many of them.

Sometimes we need to just take a step back, and have a good think about our lives. Perhaps just too much is being expected of everyone these days.

The thing is whether or not we are making conscious decisions to become involved with or to avoid certain life experiences.

It is healthy to consider and make decisions about our lives. It is not so healthy to consistently avoid rational decision making about how we spend our time. It is not healthy to pretend to ourselves that, as adults, we can just avoid making life decisions.

At the same time, we postpone the things that we don't like to do, the things that we are not too good at, and the things that we just think are less important.

So if this is the case, are we procrastinating? Well perhaps not, perhaps we are just subconsciously, rather than consciously, planning our time and our efforts.

Mostly in this busy world, we have little option but to plan our time and our objectives - both in the short and long term. So it's best to plan well, and divide up the chores in the way we feel most comfortable with.

However, let us assume that within this division of labor, one of us is supposed to be, for example, managing the household finances. This is an area where procrastination can cause major problems, and it is very common for people to neglect their domestic financial management. Subconsciously, perhaps, we all would like to have more money, and be able to live a better lifestyle. Kidding ourselves that we can buy that new suit, even when we know there is not enough money in our account, or our credit limit is about to crack, and we know there is another payment to be made on the house insurance next week!! This is called living beyond

our means. This is called getting into debt. We are deluding ourselves, we do not earn as much money as Bill Gates, and we cannot afford to live the way he could. No, we are generally living within a budget, which means we have to accept a lifestyle that is reasonable for our income.

No, it doesn't take a genius to know that if you spend more money than you actually have, you will end up having debts. If you have debts, you have to repay them. Repaying a debt means less money to pay for things you need now and in the future.

So common sense says you should balance the books and make sure you don't spend more than you can afford. This doesn't mean you cannot use borrowed money. Most of us have a mortgage to buy a house, or a loan to buy a car or some major items of furniture. Perhaps loans to pay for a big holiday or something like a family wedding.

Borrowing money doesn't mean bad financial management. Sometimes we need to take advantage of credit in order to pay for those big things over a period of time. This means deciding on how much you can repay for a mortgage or loan, or both, and still buy groceries, pay for petrol, give the kids some spending money, and have some left over for unexpected car repairs etc.

Sadly, in our materialistic world, we are bombarded with advertising, and surrounded by material goods that somehow 'everyone' has, and therefore so should we.

So maybe if we don't look sufficiently clearly at our household finances, it could be that we are just falling for the hype, and wanting that

'better' lifestyle too much, and concentrating on living, and not organizing our lives.

On the other hand, if we are not organizing our lives we are subconsciously avoiding the need to use our powers of intelligence to plan, to prioritize, and to act in our own best interests. In fact, we are avoiding even thinking through the options, and therefore unable to assess what our best interests are.

Financial management is not, of course, the only essential area that requires conscious intelligent consideration and decision making.

Some people manage to avoid organizing almost everything. The consequences can be enormous. Not knowing when to renew the car insurance, or our health insurance, or when to book things, or getting that holiday sorted - well the consequences are disorganization, chaos and lots and lots of anxiety.

Fear of Failure is often considered to be linked with procrastination. We become anxious if we think we are unlikely to do something well enough. For serious procrastinators, that anxiety may be enough to stop us from doing something.

Fear of success is also a problem that many people unknowingly deal with. With success comes more responsibility, more work, more demand on our time and our energy - and of course we would still have to deal with other things.

Fear is an emotion. When we feel fear, we have a physical reaction. Our body temperature changes and our brains trigger the release of chemicals that were originally intended to help us react to danger. We are not always aware that we are

feeling fear, and may just not associate our physical response with the cause or origin of that fear.

However when it is a fear of failure, we do know subconsciously that we would prefer not to deal with whatever it is that is frightening. So we turn our attention to something else. We find a reason (?) for doing something else instead. Displacement activity is something most of us are good at.

Displacement activity is finding a non essential task that suddenly seems to take precedence over that really essential task that we would dearly love to not have to do.

For example - a cup of tea to be made, a phone call to be made, a quick clean up of this or that which just 'has' to be done right now!

Anything will do, if it can put off the dreaded moment when you just have to try and do something you know you are going to mess up, do badly, or just not be able to finish. In other words, you know you are going to fail!

Failure can mean embarrassment and shame. Failure can mean being exposed as incompetent, inadequate, unsuitable, useless, second rate, etc., etc.

Generally when we are afraid of failing, we have quite unrealistic expectations of ourselves. So fear of failure is linked to low self esteem, or serious self criticism.

Sadly, the likelihood is that seriously low self esteem, or being unable to be realistic about our own, and other peoples' expectations of us, is linked also to depression.

Depression is a debilitating illness that often requires some time, and a combination of medication and therapy to overcome. Depression can make it almost impossible for someone to maintain their working and home lives without great difficulty. Concentration becomes very difficult, and being able to think clearly and rationally is just beyond us. When we start to believe that it's just not worth doing anything, it is time to get some serious and essential help.

Thankfully, most of us don't suffer from serious depression, even if we can get a bit fed up with life's trials and tribulations. Generally we need to give ourselves a little kick in the pants, acknowledge that we need to get some self discipline in our life, and make ourselves deal with those jobs we would like to put off forever.

Chapter Two –

The Consequences of Procrastinating

The more we put things off, the more anxious about them we are likely to become. Anxiety is bad for our health and bad for our relationships because it usually impacts on our behavior with others. Anxiety can depress our immune system, and therefore we are less likely to fend off virus infections. Anxiety can affect our ability to concentrate, and we are more likely to have accidents. Anxiety can, over time, lead to depression and serious mental illness.

The more we find we cannot deal with some essential tasks, the bigger the workload we end up with. The more things we have to deal with, and the bigger the backlog we carry around with us, the more stress we are under to manage our time and our actions. Stress is good, up to a point. However, too much stress is not good for us. Too much stress can cause physical illness, and make everything appear harder to deal with.

The more we convince ourselves that we can put something off, the more we are deluding ourselves.

The less control we exert over our lives, the less likely we are to be getting the most and the best out of life.

If we don't manage our lives well, we basically lose out.

By procrastinating about our finances, we can end up in serious debt. This will affect our lives for at least the short to medium term, if not longer.

Generally, debt will affect others - family members - our children - our partners. It can be easy to just not deal with a review of our spending. It is never easy to deal with a huge overdraft, more loans, and a block on our credit - need we say more?

If we procrastinate about health matters, the consequences can be extremely serious. If it is the dentist appointment that really frightens us, we can put it off until the point of having to have all our teeth removed - on the other hand, we could explain to the dentist that we are very frightened and ask for sedation before any work is carried out.

If we put off going to the doctor because we have symptoms that seem to us to be indicative of something serious - well the likelihood is that it isn't - but it could be, and delays could have major consequences.

Many of us work to deadlines. In many cases it is good to have deadlines. It can help us plan our work load and schedule our tasks when we have deadlines. However, if we have certain jobs that we don't like doing, and we postpone them, this can have an impact on the business, our colleagues, or ultimately our employment.

Not everyone wants to do DIY or can afford to get someone in to do the maintenance and repair jobs. However if you neglect these jobs, and then want to

sell the house, you may find it difficult to find a buyer, and ultimately end up selling the house for less than its worth.

In almost every sphere of our lives, there are things that need to be done, and we don't always like doing them. However, putting them off almost always causes more problems than we had in the beginning.

So whichever way you think about it, you need to get down to dealing with your procrastination, and learn how to ensure that you get things done.

Chapter Three –

How to Stop Procrastinating

First, in order to identify procrastinating, as opposed to re-evaluating priorities, it's a good idea to have a serious think about what we do and don't like doing. Secondly, identify those things that we don't like doing sufficiently to postpone them.

Clearly we do review and adapt our priorities all the time. It is unavoidable these days when everyone seems to have so many things to do.

However, we generally do know which things we put off, but also we tend to pretend to ourselves that we don't.

We all have the ability to justify our task planning decisions. We all know people who put off doing one thing by finding another 'urgent' thing to do.

So get out the pen and the paper, and make a list of the things you don't like doing. By each of them, write in a short phrase, the reason you don't want to do it. Be brave, and admit it if something is difficult, if something is unpleasant, or if it is something you feel you are being made to do by someone else.

If it is something you just don't like doing, think about whether it will benefit you if you just do it anyway. Is the benefit of completing that task (like filling in your tax return) worth the discomfort of doing it? Generally you have to admit it. There is no question that you can get into difficulties if you don't complete and submit your tax form.

Filling it in is a question of

- a) Getting the right papers - check books, bank statements, phone bills, whatever it is that you need.
- b) Spending some time getting everything in order
- c) Working through the form and filling in the information.

You know that once you start, it won't be too bad.

So already, by taking a job and dividing it into smaller and more manageable tasks, it doesn't sound quite so daunting.

Nearly all complex tasks need some planning time and some preparation time.

So when something you have to do just begs to be postponed because you know it will take ages - just divide into manageable jobs.

Similarly, if there is something you are scared of doing because you think you might not be able to do such a good job, try and break it down into smaller and less frightening elements.

So if you need to produce a piece of work for college, or for your employer, allocate some time

to just sit and think about it first of all. Think about what you being asked to do, and then about what you need to do to enable you to complete the task.

- 1) Do you need to do all the work yourself?
- 2) Do you need to provide something to someone in order that they can do their part of the job?
- 3) Do you need to have a proper work plan before you start?
- 4) Try and calm any immediate fears about the standard of the work, and concentrate on what needs to be done, and how it is to be done.
- 5) Identify what bits of the job seem to be frightening, and ask yourself why.
- 6) Ask yourself if you would benefit by talking about these aspects of the job with someone else - someone you think would find that job straightforward.

Don't launch yourself into the project in a blind panic and start trying to do the job without planning and preparing properly.

Do write out a timetable for the job so that you can organize the work in a sensible sequence.

Sometimes jobs seem to be just too complicated to deal with. If breaking it down doesn't make it seem easier to tackle, try and find one part of it that you can do, and get that done. Then see if there is another bit you can do, and tackle that. Keep thinking about how you can organize the rest of the task so that it becomes less and less

difficult in terms of complexity, and more manageable in terms of sub-tasks.

One way of dealing with things is to organize them into categories of A, B and C tasks.

The A tasks are the ones that are the most important, but they can be the ones that are most complex and difficult to start.

A tasks are tasks that generally cannot be done in one period of work, and that almost always need you to spend time gathering information from other people.

B tasks are of secondary importance, but still need to be done, and might take time, and might need some input from someone else.

C tasks are the easy ones to do, but not necessarily the most important ones.

The easy thing to do is to start on the C pile. This gives us a sense of achieving something, but frankly doesn't get the important things done. Not only do A and B tasks not get done - they don't even get started!

However, sometimes we need to get into it a bit. Let's say we get into the office in the morning, and while we are settling into 'work mode' with a first cup of coffee, we need a straightforward job to get into. So we do one or two things from the C pile.

The trick is to leave the rest of the C pile for another day, and to start on an A task. At the very least spend an hour working on an A task - even if you don't complete it, but enough to make a dent into it. If at all possible, get to the point

where you are ready to start on phase 2 of the A job.

Although the A jobs are the most daunting and generally the most complex, it is the completion of these that gives the most satisfaction. So when you begin the day, spend a moment consciously considering how good it will be to leave the office at the end of the day knowing that you have made a real start on that A job.

The next morning, do the same thing. Review your A B and C piles of tasks. Start by picking one or two of the C jobs to do first. Then identify the A job and a B job that you can start when the C jobs are done.

Each evening, review the work of the day, and list the priorities for the following day. Keep thinking of the jobs in terms of A B and C priorities. Review the timescale needed to complete the A and B tasks. Make sure that when you pick your A and B tasks, you don't avoid the ones where you need to do something yourself in order that someone else can do their part. Always ensure that you give other people the maximum opportunity to do their bit.

This applies at home too. Allocate an hour or two one evening when there is nothing worth watching on the TV and you are not out at the gym or doing anything at all.

Make lists of the tasks you need to do, and rate them in terms of importance and the time they will take.

Don't include the every day tasks that you do as a matter of course and don't even need to think about. This is not a list of everything you have

to do. This is a list of the things you need to do and need to make yourself do.

Don't include the shopping you will do on your way home from work tomorrow because you will do that anyway.

Don't include sorting the laundry if you are the one that sorts the laundry every morning while checking the kids' activities for the next couple of days.

Do include checking the kids have the right things for school if you are unexpectedly responsible for child care this week

Don't include washing the car if you do it every week end.

Do include checking the car tires if you are taking a trip during the weekend.

Seriously, this list should be the jobs that you need to do but generally put off doing. Once you have your list, identify the most important, and try and start on one of those. Try not to leave the most important tasks while you concentrate on doing the less important but the easiest ones. Somehow you could postpone the important ones for ever that way.

Another time management technique is to break down tasks into time chunks.

In the office or at home, you might find that filing papers is one of those put off tasks that you leave and leave and leave.

Allocate an hour for filing. Find as many of the bank statements as possible and file those in date

order. Don't worry that you won't file all of them. You can allocate another hour for another day to finish it off. You will be gradually dealing with this task and it will be less of a problem.

Or, allocate an hour for working out how much money you are paying out each month and each year.

Another day, allocate an hour for working out what expenditure is essential and what is not.

Just divide each job into a time chunk. This is called time boxing.

These are methods of planning time and tasks to make them appear, and to actually be, more manageable. These work for people who just need to get themselves more organized. These work for very busy people who are very successful, as well as for the rest of us who still just always have things we don't want to do but know we have to do them.

These methods work for people who, while experiencing a degree of anxiety or fear about not doing so well on some tasks, understand that acknowledging the fear goes some way toward working through their tendency to procrastinate.

For some people however, it is almost impossible to use these or other methods of dealing with their procrastination.

Some people have such deep rooted reasons for not doing things that it can destroy their lives. These are people who really need help to establish what lies underneath their failure to organize their lives.

If you understand that you have an emotional reaction to something, and that as a consequence

you defer doing it, then you can also work out that you need to try and overcome that fear. If you can establish that your life will be much happier, and easier, if you can deal with something, then you are on the road to getting over the problem.

However, if you are overly worried about doing everything to a perfect standard, this can freeze you and stop you doing something.

If you feel unable to take control of your life because, underneath your competent exterior are subconscious difficulties surrounding the issue of control, you will probably need some professional help to deal with it.

Lack of self confidence and self esteem can lead to difficulties in managing life's challenges. Consider whether or not you are asking too much of yourself or, conversely, not asking enough.

Try some of the many techniques to improve your self esteem. If you have become used to being told you are dull, dumb or stupid, you may be believing people who just don't have your interest at heart, or who may be jealous of you, or just enjoy bullying you.

Building self confidence and self respect is a start to self determination. This doesn't mean you are suddenly going to be good at everything you turn your hand to.

However, self confidence is about establishing that you can deal with things not always going right, and cope with things that are problematic, in a calm and rational way.

So self confidence should help you accept that, while something may present itself as difficult,

and demanding, you can think about it calmly and work though how and where to start.

Think about how you want your life to be. Do you want your life to be chaotic, disorganized, and a series of crises, one after the other? No, of course you don't.

Do you want your life to be enjoyable, and worry free as far as is possible? Yes, of course you do.

So when each scary task presents itself as something you would rather not do, and would love to just wish it away, think instead of the feeling of control you will have when you have dealt with that scary thing. Think about how you will have more time to do more pleasurable things, if you get those unpleasant jobs all done.

Conclusion

Procrastination is something we don't tend to put off. Dealing with our tendency to procrastinate is something we should definitely not put off.

For most of us, there are the things we really like to do, and things we don't. It is quite normal to want to ignore the unpleasant or demanding, or scary things.

The consequences of putting off necessary tasks can, however, be far greater than we imagine. The greater ease in our lives if we deal with these things is not hard to imagine, but somehow needs to be given a bit more thought.

Different methods of planning and preparation work best for different people.

Try allocating a certain amount of time each day, or every other day, to deal with some specific task that you have been putting off. Accept that you don't want to do it, and accept that you may feel nervous, anxious or tense about it. Accept that you must calm that feeling, and concentrate on the decision you are making to get it dealt with because it is in your best interests to do so.

Try grading tasks into A B and C levels of complexity. Try and ensure you make inroads into the A and B tasks, and don't just clear the C pile and leave the others to mount up.

Do try and ensure you have realistic expectations of your abilities. No one is brilliant at

everything, and no one should expect you to be brilliant at everything. Acknowledge you are not the world's most organized person, but try to be as organized as you can. Ask yourself why you need to be organized and tell yourself out loud that this is necessary to make your life much much easier.

Congratulate yourself for making a start on a difficult task. Try and find sensible rewards for your achievement in overcoming procrastination.