

10 Strategies for Overcoming Procrastination

Do you want to save time and lower stress? That's exactly what you will do if you learn and consistently apply the strategies to overcoming procrastination outlined below.

Like most people, I have struggled with wasting time and creating self-induced stress by waiting until the last minute to get things done. I can often remember telling myself, "This is the last time I'm going to put something off until the last minute," only to do the same thing a short time later.

Sometimes when we're stressed because of everything we have to do, it's because we're not actually *doing* it. Procrastination often triggers worry and anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, frustration, poor eating habits and many other unpleasant outcomes. Timothy A. Pynchyl, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, studied 374 undergraduate students and discovered that subjects who put off completing homework were more likely to eat poorly, sleep less and drink more compared to subjects who got their homework done early. We know from years of scientific research that stress compromises the immune system. Based on his research, Dr Pynchyl concludes that "procrastination is a stressor," which means it can literally make you sick.

Many of my coaching clients ask how they can overcome procrastination because they realize it not only creates unnecessary stress, but it is also a huge time waster and can cost money if you incur late fees, interest and penalties on your bills. One client recently told me that he gets so stressed by putting things off that he has to look for ways to calm himself down. His favorite coping strategy is surfing the internet and playing time-wasting games, both of which ultimately help to create even more stress.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

There are a number of contributing factors that influence and reinforce the habit of procrastination, but some of the most common include: tasks that are dull, boring, unpleasant or difficult, self-doubt, poor organization, forgetfulness, indecision and impulsivity.

As I mentioned earlier, procrastination is a habit – a habit of thought, feeling and behavior. If you intentionally or unintentionally experience the same thoughts, feelings and behaviors on a regular basis, over time your brain develops strong neural pathways that help to maintain the habit. These well-entrenched ruts become very difficult to escape, especially because most people fall into a pattern of starting, getting discouraged, quitting, and then starting the cycle over again.

The good news is that bad habits *can* be eliminated, and I want to share 10 key strategies that have significantly helped a lot of us overcome procrastination.

How do I get over Procrastination?

It goes without saying that you should start *today* – don't wait until tomorrow. Whether you want to lose weight, make it to appointments on time, stop paying late fees, or meet your deadlines at work, start putting these strategies to work for you right away.

Get your brain on board

Your brain is a trainable organ. It doesn't know the difference between fact and fiction so you can re-train it by reinforcing positive thoughts that will replace the misbeliefs that lead to self-defeating thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Henry Ford is quoted as saying, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't – you're right." Rehearse these self-affirmations every day, especially just before you go to bed and as soon as you wake up. If you don't fully believe the statements – no worries – in time you will.

"I complete all my tasks on time."

"I consistently strive for excellence, not perfection."

"I am capable and competent to complete my work."

"I am organized and make good and timely decisions."

"I am focused and able to delay gratification."

"I am more efficient, happy and healthy when I complete my tasks promptly."

This habit of thinking will help to eliminate self-doubt and perfectionism and promote proactivity and motivation.

Get organized

Develop a simple system for keeping track of what you want to complete and when it is to be done and keep this information within reach at all times. I use a notebook to write down and track all my tasks and keep it with me wherever I go – low-tech, but effective. Many people use smart phone apps or computer programs for this purpose. Regardless of what you use, keep it current and review it regularly. Pick a time of day that works for you and think through what you need to accomplish and what steps you will take to do it. This habit of daily behavior will help to eliminate disorganization and forgetfulness.

Get scheduled

Plan and schedule sufficient blocks of time to implement the steps you identified to either make significant progress on a task or to see it through to completion. Make sure your schedule is what guides your decisions instead of your emotions. It's the emotionally driven decisions we usually live long enough to regret, since most of us would rather check Facebook, stop for coffee, or do almost anything but the task at hand.

Get realistic

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, of course! When you have a big project, be realistic about how much you can accomplish each day or you risk becoming overwhelmed and discouraged. Identify different elements of the project and list them separately. For example, if your project is to arrange a meeting of your company's national sales team, your break-out list might include elements such as Facility, Transportation, Agenda, Food, etc. and each of these can be broken into even smaller bites including tasks, calls, reservations, etc. As you check these manageable chunks off your list, you'll gain momentum and enthusiasm. In order to avoid boredom, fatigue and disinterest, it is also important to schedule in breaks every 45 minutes or so. Breaks are a great time to positively reinforce your effort by using that time to take a brisk walk, eat a snack, call a friend or catch up on your favorite sports team.

Get free from distractions

Life is full of "shiny objects" that grab our attention. When your goal is to make significant progress on a task you must remove the things that can easily tempt your five senses. Turn off your telephone ringtone and other notifications; close your door and even your blinds, if necessary. Only open computer programs directly related to your project and leave the television off. Since your brain can only process one language-based function at a time, even music with words or a radio station with an announcer talking will short-circuit your concentration. This may sound extreme, but when you know you only have to focus for a specific period of time – like 45 minutes – it isn't so daunting.

Get it done when you have the most energy

For most of us, morning is our peak performance time and right after lunch we are much less focused. You can judge your best time of day to tackle harder tasks or projects, but the point is to give yourself the advantage of bringing your "A" game to the toughest challenges. If you schedule the big chunks of a project at your lower-energy time of day, it will feel like you're never going to get it done, which is exhausting, discouraging and self-defeating. Something to consider, also, is that there are things you can do – choices you can make – to be sure you have more energy when

you need it. Good nutrition, rest and self-care will strengthen your brain and your body, while junk food, intoxicants and staying up too late the night before will make your project much more difficult to achieve. Success always requires smart decisions.

Get the hard stuff done first

Virtually every job or project has elements you will enjoy more than others, and some you will find boring, frustrating, or time-consuming. Schedule some of your least favorite tasks at the beginning of each day and then reward yourself with a break. In order to end your day on a positive note, also schedule a part of the job you enjoy after the unpleasant work is done for the day. This will leave you feeling more positive when you begin again the next day.

Get it done early

You've probably heard, "If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would ever get done." We see this played out every April 15th as cars line up at the post office so taxpayers can get their returns posted by midnight and in jam-packed retailers on December 24th. If you put things off to the last minute, you not only increase the stress associated with the looming deadline, but you add the stress of knowing that there is no margin for error. Think of how much more calmly you would be able to approach a project if you gave yourself an earlier "soft" deadline, worked consistently to meet it, and had confidence in one of two likely outcomes – either the satisfaction of being finished early or the comfort of knowing you have more time to work the bugs out. In Part 1 of this series we talked about training your brain, and reinforcing an earlier deadline for yourself can help you stay focused and on task, which prevents procrastination.

Get others onboard

One factor in breaking down your project into bite-sized pieces is to determine if any of those pieces should be done by someone else. Consider who has the information or resources you need and ask for their help as soon as possible. Remember, other people struggle with the tendency to procrastinate, too, and they'll need adequate time to provide you what you need. Another factor in gaining cooperation from others involves those outside the sphere of your project. The real world includes people who need or want some of your time and attention. Balancing good relationships with keeping your nose to the grindstone can be challenging. One key strategy is to invite others to contribute to your successful project completion by scheduling their time with you when it doesn't interfere with your peak efficiency. If coworkers stop by, let them know what time you will be available, *after* the block of time you scheduled for your work. Record your phone greeting to indicate what times you will accept and/or return calls and ask family and friends to call at convenient times, if possible. Others can be the most helpful if you politely offer clear boundaries for your availability.

Get rewarded

So, you've finished your project – you scheduled wisely, exercised self-discipline, beat your deadline, and didn't lose any friends in the process. So, whether it's just a round of high-fives at the office, a special dinner at your favorite place or a luxury cruise, do something to celebrate. Be sure to share the credit with others who helped because that is an investment in creating an environment in which everyone can work together to overcome procrastination and achieve success together.

Don't put it off another day. The sooner you start, the sooner you succeed in overcoming procrastination!