



Procrastination

I'll Get On That Right Away – NOT!

by JUDY BERANGER

“Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on to an uncompleted task” ~ William James

If I start marking now I can finish long before my two-week due date, or maybe I will wait until Sunday night;

I know I need to move more so maybe I will start walking ten minutes a day ... deadlines are good for me, I think I will start next month;

I always get more done toward the end of my goals so maybe I will wait until after Christmas to get started.

We are all guilty of procrastinating to a point of frustration while finding it difficult to focus at one time or another. As teachers, we are all too familiar with the comment: “I finished my assignment, I just left it at home.”

The literature abounds with advice to fight procrastination by encouraging us to break big tasks down into steps (www.psychologytoday.com/basics/procrastination). If I commit to marking five papers this evening I can feel satisfied and maybe stimulated to go a little further. Achievable goals that give focus and stimulation can be delayed when steps needed to launch them are compromised by speculative thinking: when the kids graduate, when I save extra money, when the mortgage is paid off. Haven't we all repeated or heard similar reasons for delay?

Procrastination is universal, is habit forming and when left unchecked, can create considerable anxiety. Have you ever felt the anxiety and panic that can arise over an approaching due date? Some report that in addition to panicking over not having enough time to complete the task, they also start freaking out about panicking. Where are you on the continuum of procrastination? Consider taking a procrastination quiz: www.verywell.com/quiz-are-you-a-procrastinator-2795418.

In *The Procrastination Equation*, author Piers Steel says that 95% of people, at some point, regretted putting off tasks. Such behaviour can reduce respect from others, make us appear lazy and compromise our feelings of well-being. We lose the joy that living in the moment can bring. In another study,

De Paul University research suggests up to 20% of adults are chronic procrastinators who habitually pay bills late and start on deadlines the night before. Procrastination can become a very bad habit of delaying good feelings. Delaying the action of completing a task delays the happiness and meaningfulness that comes with achievement. According to *The New Yorker*, 65% of students faced with writing a term paper said they would like to avoid procrastinating because they knew the delay would make them unhappy. Ignoring a deadline can seriously affect your mood.

The Science Behind Procrastination

Understanding what is happening in our brain can help in initiating strategies to reduce our need to procrastinate. Emotions motivate everything that we do. Our limbic system is accountable for our base emotions and reactions as it is the part of our brain that is responsible for emotions. The prefrontal cortex, dedicated to more complex functions like planning and reasoning, allows us to integrate information and make decisions. “This is the part of the brain that really separates humans from animals,” says Professor Tim Pynchyl, author of *The Procrastinator's Digest*. The prefrontal cortex, located immediately behind the forehead gets the job done, but it is not automatic and needs to be kicked into gear. (“I have to make that call... I have to write that email!”). The moment you're not consciously engaged in a task telling yourself to keep it up your limbic system takes over. If we give in to soon to what feels good, we procrastinate.

Neurologically, when the limbic system identifies an action as negative, whether it is or not, it coerces our more rational prefrontal cortex to act. It tells us to do good things such as pull our hand from a hot stove and the not so good things such as to avoid tasks that appear disagreeable. This triggers procrastination symptoms. It directs us to opt for “immediate

mood repair,” explains Dr. Pychyl. “We often turn to more enjoyable pastimes until the immediate consequence of our procrastination kicks our brain into ‘fight or flight’ mode, allowing us to accomplish our task with a rush of adrenaline.”

Delaying a simple task can turn it into a larger one. Avoiding multi-tasking or task switching can be helpful to the brain when facing deadlines. Just as it is difficult for the brain to switch gears and focus on new tasks, it is also tough to let go of unfinished pieces. There can be an encounter between the limbic system – the unconscious zone that includes the pleasure center and the prefrontal cortex – the conscious internal “planner”. When the limbic system wins, and that’s often, the result is putting off for tomorrow what could be done today.

Strategies for Reducing Procrastination

We can choose to reduce procrastination time by learning more about how it compromises our self-control. Some suggestions to consider:

- **Strive to increase our energy levels.** We are more likely to meet our commitments when we are well rested and energetic. Energy and motivation can be depleted when we put off goals, or we live in fear of failure, and are more impulsive and self-absorbed. This increases the difficulty of focusing on a task.
- **Being intentional about our close relationships.** Being mindful and present to others will foster supportive friendships. This in turn will provide us with resources to assist, coach or even to cheer us along when we need help.
- **Address our fears** and challenge our negative thinking. Some of us fear making mistakes, while others fear failure. Susan Whitbourne of *Psychology Today* suggests that by addressing the fear that is keeping us from getting started, we can begin to overcome a procrastination habit.
- **Eliminate as many distractions** as possible.
- **Set realistic, achievable goals** – take baby steps with deadlines. If we want to exercise thirty minutes a day commit to at least ten minutes as a start.
- **Make a list and get started with the tasks we most dislike.** Review the list often, check off what is completed and add anything that may be missing. Notice the energy boost, feel the flow that is being created as we get to the less difficult tasks. Scott Peck affirms that: “Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with.”
- **Do something – even a small task or two.** Focus on being better, not perfect. Gene Hayden reminds us that following through is the only thing that separates

dreamers from people that accomplish great things.

- **Identify procrastination triggers.** If using activities like surfing the net, Netflix or Facebook to the extreme it may eat up more time than we realize. Even putting our phones away can be helpful.
- **Feel the success and joy that comes with a job well done** – even little jobs. Dr. Tim Pychyl advises procrastinators to practice ‘time travel’ – projecting themselves into the future to imagine the good feelings they will have after finishing a task, thus relieving the anxiety and worry we subconsciously feel about the future.
- **Consider adding a little mindfulness practice.** This can modify our brain’s circuits to improve our ability to stay calm in stressful situations. Tasks that could take hours are accomplished in thirty minutes when a pressure deadline appears. For an example of mindfulness tips check out this link: www.verywell.com/search?q=mindfulness%20practice&offset=0.
- **Consider the costs of delay.** If our goal is to hike Gros Morne, hanging out at the bottom will not make it happen.
- **Acknowledge success.** Plan rewards or treats for tasks completed. Follow through on your promises to yourself about getting the job done, or else your brain won’t make the link between your work and the rewards.
- **More tips:** www.unstuck.com/how-we-procrastinate/

Procrastination that causes stress and anxiety is a bad habit and the longer it is ignored the more serious the consequences become. In *Stop Procrastination in Its Tracks*, Briallyn Smith reminds us that procrastination can lead to anxiety, stress, and frustration. Procrastination behaviors can significantly affect our mental/brain health, our relationships, and our overall well-being. Stress and the brain have a complex relationship. If we have too little stress the brain is in a state of disengagement. If we have too much stress the brain can seize up with the release of hormones. The ideal is to have balance, producing just enough stress hormones to keep balance with focus, mindfulness, energy and action.

Setting goals that create new emotional memories of success will guide us in developing a pleasant habit of achievement. Having a plan to notice when procrastination starts to creep in and overcoming the tendency to postpone a task allows for increased self-control, courage and confidence. We can make it happen! It isn’t easy, but it is possible.

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