

We're here to help.

Controlling Procrastination

WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION?

The word procrastination means: *'to put off until tomorrow'*. Procrastination can be characterised as a breakdown in our ability to regulate and organise our thoughts and efforts to achieve an important outcome for ourselves within a reasonable time. Typically this breakdown starts when we perceive negativity or unpleasantness in aspects of an upcoming priority (e.g. completing and submitting an assignment on time). Typically we substitute a less important activity for the more important one. This pattern of delaying and postponing things can overtime make us feel anxious and stressed. It may also adversely affect our academic achievements and experience of university life.

Often our thoughts interfere with starting tasks. For example, we see the task as being *'too big'* or we tell ourselves *"I can't do it"*. It is important to challenge these thoughts. We may also have high levels of 'perfectionism' where we think that we have to know everything before we can start an assignment. Extreme levels of perfectionism may also stop some students from starting an assignment because they are afraid that they may make a mistake and make a fool of themselves.

TIPS FOR OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION

Reframe your thinking

What you think, will directly affect how you feel, which will directly affect what you do. Understanding the link between your thoughts, feelings and actions are important to overcoming procrastination.

For example if you think: *"There's no point doing this because I will get a low mark and I'm not suited to this course"*... you are likely to start feeling:

- anxious
- stupid
- unmotivated

When you are feeling this way you are likely to:

- find it difficult to concentrate
- look for distractions that make you feel better or 'numb' the anxious feelings

These actions will reinforce and strengthen the original thoughts and hence the cycle continues.

One way to break this cycle is to reframe your thoughts. Let's see what might happen if you were to start approaching the situation differently:

If you think...

- *"I've gone well in my studies in the past; it is likely I will go well again."*
- *"I chose this course because I really want to work in this field."*

... you are likely to feel:

- hopeful
- connected to what is important to you
- motivated

You are then likely to:

- start studying!

You do have control over what you think, however it is important to acknowledge that it can be hard to 'just change your thoughts'. Sometimes certain thoughts have been around for so long that it can feel like you have no control over them. Sometimes these thoughts have been introduced to you at a young age. Sometimes these thoughts are constantly being reinforced by people or other outside factors in your life.

Take time to analyse your thoughts – write them down – sometimes people can get caught up in 'thinking traps' that affect how they view a situation. Examples of thinking traps are:

Black and white thinking: *"Everyone in the course understands the work better than me."*

Catastrophising: *"If I don't pass the exam I might as well stop studying."*

Labelling yourself: *"I am so stupid if I can't pass first year."*

Discounting the positive: *"The only reason I went well on the test was because it was easy – anyone could pass that."*

Focusing on the negative: *"I always do things wrong."*

If you find your thinking has elements of these traps try to examine the evidence for the thought and find a more 'balanced' view of the situation. For example, rather than thinking: *"I always get things wrong"*, you could think: *"Sometimes I make mistakes but that's okay because I'm learning."* Sometimes it can help to do this process with a university counsellor.

Stop avoiding!

If you are aware that you are unable to start a task, or if you want to prematurely stop a task, ask yourself: *"Is this about planning and organisation, or about AVOIDANCE?"* If it's about planning and organisation – you can take practical steps to deal with this. If it's about avoidance you can use a variety of approaches to overcome the URGE to move off task.

For example, when you get the URGE to leave – it's important that you STOP, and stay where you are. Notice the sensations associated with the URGE to leave. Can you locate the sensations in your body? Are you feeling a specific emotion? (i.e. worry, dread, guilt, fear). Can you identify which thoughts or images (about your fears or inadequacies) preceded the URGE to leave? Observe and be present with the sensations rather than being overwhelmed by them.

You can ACCEPT any sensations, feelings, thoughts or images by:

- Staying in the present moment and focusing your attention.
- Understanding that the URGE to move away will pass when you just ACCEPT and OBSERVE whatever is happening WITHOUT REACTING.
- Saying something positive to yourself: *"I want to be able to resist this URGE. If I just stay with it I'll be OK and I will continue studying."*

When the URGE has passed and you feel more in control you can visualise yourself successfully carrying out the task and enjoying the benefits.

Break the task into small pieces

Revising the whole year's work can be too daunting, but just revising chapter one today is manageable. Every task can be broken down into smaller, more manageable parts. It is very important to have an overview of the year's work but equally important to schedule tasks each day into small pieces. Make sure the goals you set yourself are achievable. If you set them too big, you are likely to not meet them, which is most likely going to reinforce some of the unhelpful thoughts that you are trying to challenge.

Estimate the time a task will take

Underestimating the time you think a task will take justifies procrastination because it seems there is plenty of time and therefore no real urgency to get started. Overestimating the time a task will take may be intimidating in that you perceive the task as too large and difficult and may result in difficulty getting started. Feeling overwhelmed by having too much to do can be paralyzing. Learning how to accurately estimate how long a task will take and setting personal deadlines ahead of the external deadlines are important skills. Personal deadlines are dates set prior to the formal due date. These are essential not only in case an unplanned event gets in the way of completing the task but also in developing a sense of being in control and confident about your work.

Make lists

Lists are useful to keep track of what needs to be done. They are most useful when used in conjunction with making priorities, and scheduling. In other words: lists of tasks in order of priority with the times that you intend to both do the tasks as well as when they will be completed. Be careful not to get too carried away. Too long a list on non essential tasks can be overwhelming.

Give yourself reminders

Making the task conspicuous makes it more difficult to avoid. For example, placing the task where you will see it most often means it is more difficult to overlook. Constant daily reminders are sometimes necessary to counter more pleasant distractions.

Prepare study tools and eliminate distractions

If procrastination is an issue in your life then you will probably find that you need little to lure you from the allotted task (e.g. getting up to get an eraser; answering the phone; responding to questions or comments from family/friends; working with the television on in the background or working on a cluttered messy desk). Being honest with yourself about distractions, organising the tools you need before you start and choosing the most appropriate environment are important factors if you are serious about overcoming procrastination.

Determine the best times of the day

Most people have certain times of the day where they are the most productive. Early afternoon is often a time when most people are a bit sluggish and find it difficult to concentrate. Some people are at their best first thing in the morning while others don't get going until mid morning. Once you have established when your most productive time is, keep that for the most important or difficult tasks and leave your least productive time for the more routine tasks (e.g. photocopying, finding texts in the library, reviewing draft, etc). One strategy many people find helpful is to decide to do just one task first thing. This then sets the scene for the rest of the day in that by accomplishing something early you feel empowered to do more.

Set aside time for other thoughts

If you have other worries or concerns on your mind, allot a specific time in the day to think about them or deal with them. If you start thinking about these issues while studying, acknowledge the thought or the worry, perhaps write it down as a reminder for when you do have time to attend to it, and then reassure yourself that you have a specific time to focus on these sorts of concerns.

Reward yourself

A technique helpful for some is using incentives for tasks achieved. This can be combined with breaking larger jobs into smaller pieces and rewarding yourself when you have finished each small piece. For example, having a coffee break after reading

chapter one, lunch after chapter two and so on. Watching television after the work is complete is a good incentive provided the quality is not compromised to get the job done before a particular program begins.

Organise support

Telling others of your intentions or enlisting their company can sometimes take the loneliness or feelings of deprivation out of studying. Studying with other people can make a huge difference to productivity provided you do not sabotage each other. It is useful to establish when you will take breaks and rules around interrupting each other. You don't have to be studying the same topic. Simply having another's presence can be helpful. When joining a gym you are more likely to keep going if you have a commitment to someone else to attend, and meeting a friend to study together can work in the same way.

Most of us procrastinate about study at some stage but if this has become a pattern in your life it is worth taking steps now to stop it.

Procrastination tends to become insidious when linked with academic work and can result in disappointing academic records that do not reflect academic potential.

NEED MORE HELP?

To explore options for managing your time differently you may wish to peruse/borrow books from the Support and Equity counselling resource library or make an appointment to speak to a counsellor.

FURTHER READING

The Procrastination Workbook by William. Knaus, 2002. New Harbinger Publications, USA.

We would like to acknowledge our gratitude for the information obtained from the University of Adelaide's fact sheet on procrastination.