

11 Ways to Overcome Procrastination

Easy tips to stop putting things off.

Everyone has fallen victim to putting off a task at some point in their life. Take, for example, this article that I had planned on posting yesterday...

Ever wonder why you — or others — procrastinate? While some view it (in themselves or other people) as laziness, there might be something else at play here.

In the world of psychology, it has long been believed that people who procrastinate have a faulty sense of time, thinking they will have more time to get something done than they actually do. And while that may be true for some, more recent research suggests procrastination is linked to difficulty managing distress. Specifically, it seems that task aversion is to blame. That is, when people view the task in an unpleasant manner (“It will be tough, boring, painful...”), they are more likely to put it off.

While procrastinators may be trying to avoid distress, ironically it can cause more in the long run. Procrastination can lead to increased stress, health issues, and poorer performance. Procrastinators tend to have more sleep problems and experience greater stressful regret than non-procrastinators. What’s more, procrastination can also hinder your self-esteem with the guilt, shame, or self-criticalness that can result from putting off tasks.

So, if you struggle with putting things off, try any of these tips to get you on track.

1. Get rid of catastrophizing.

One of the biggest reasons people procrastinate is because they catastrophize, or make a huge deal out of something. It may be related to how tough, how boring, or how painful it will be to complete the task. The underlying theme is that doing the task will be “unbearable.”

In reality, challenges, boredom, and hard work will not likely kill you — or even make you sick. Procrastination, on the other hand, is associated with more issues. Think of the stress you feel when you avoid making that phone call you know you need to make. So keep things in perspective: “Sure, this is not my favorite task, but I can get through this.”

2. Focus on your “why.”

Procrastinators focus more on the short-term gains (avoiding the distress associated with the task) as opposed to the actual long-term consequences (the stress of not doing it, as well as the results of you avoiding this task). Instead, try focusing on why you are doing it. What are the benefits of completing the task?

If you have been putting off cleaning out a closet, imagine walking into the closet when it is de-cluttered and how good that feels to you. And consider how much money you will make by selling the items on e-bay, or how those in need will feel when they receive these items as donations.

If it is an exercise program you have been avoiding, focus on how exercising will help you have more positive energy, give you a boost of self-esteem and serve as a great role model for your children.

3. Get out your calendar.

“When I have time” (as in “I will do it when I have time”) doesn’t happen very often, if ever. You need to schedule when you are going to work on a project. Block out that time, just like you would an important meeting.

And when it is time to do your work, set a timer so you can stay focused the entire allotted time.

4. Be realistic.

As you establish your schedule, set yourself up for success. Projects often take much longer than expected, so bake in some extra time in case you need it. And look for ways to make it easier on yourself. If, for example, you are not a morning person, don’t expect yourself to get up an hour early to do the exercise program you have put off for months. It might be better to schedule that during lunch or before dinner.

5. Chunk it.

When a task seems overbearing, procrastination often follows. So how can you break that task into smaller, more manageable parts? For example, if you want to write a book, you may choose to make an outline, identify each chapter, figure out the sections in the chapters, and then commit to writing one segment at a time. Chunking it down like this will help you feel less overwhelmed and more empowered.

6. Excuses be gone.

Any of these sound familiar?

“I need to be in the mood.”

“I will wait until I have time.”

“I work better under pressure.”

“I need X to happen before I can start.”

Stop it!

Be honest with yourself: these are excuses. Sure, it might be nice to “be in the mood,” but waiting for that to happen can result in never starting your project.

7. Get a partner.

Establish specific deadlines for when you are going to complete a task. Then find someone who will help you be accountable. It could be a promise to your boss or client that you will complete the job by a certain date. Or it may be a coach who helps you stay on track. Or find an accountability partner. In this latter relationship, you meet (on the phone, for example) at certain time intervals (such as once per week) and commit to what you will do before your next meeting. Not wanting to go back on your word, this can be a great way to squash procrastination.

In an effort to save your relationship with your significant other, I recommend this person not be your partner. You don’t want a lack of follow-through to cause tension between you two.

8. Optimize your environment.

Your environment can help or hinder your productivity. Beware of technology, such as your email or messenger that keeps pinging to let you know someone has reached out. Social media (“let me just check Facebook before I get started”), internet “research” that leads you way off your path, or phone calls can also lead to procrastination.

So try this: during your scheduled block of time when you are working on a particular task, close your email and IM, turn off your phone (or at least set it on “Do Not Disturb” and put it in your bag), and don’t let yourself get on the internet until you have completed the task. Just hold off any internet searches until the end.

9. Reward good behavior.

Establish a reward if — and only if — you do what you set out to do. Do not let yourself watch that Netflix show, check your social media, or get lunch until you complete what you scheduled. So instead of using these tasks to procrastinate, make them contingent on you actually finishing what you schedule to do.

10. Forgive.

Stop beating yourself up about the past. Thoughts such as “I should have started earlier” or “I always procrastinate; I am such a loser” will only make matters worse. Research shows that forgiving yourself for past procrastination will help you stop pushing off working on a task.

Instead, use past procrastination to your advantage. How? Determine what went into your avoidance: fear, stress, not having a good understanding of how to progress, lack of accountability. Then address those obstacles in the present and future. If, for example, it was fear that contributed to your procrastination, what steps can you take to feel more empowered and less fearful next time around?

11. Drop the perfectionism.

Perfectionism is an all-or-nothing mentality. Something is either “perfect” or it is a “failure.” People with perfectionistic tendencies tend to wait until things are perfect in order to proceed. So, if it's not perfect, you cannot be finished. Or if it is not the perfect time, you “can't” start. This all-or-nothing mentality can hold you back from starting or completing your tasks.

Instead, focus on being better than perfect. Being better than perfect means to still strive for excellence, creating excellence or setting yourself up with excellent conditions. But at the same time, you focus on getting the job done.

#DoneIsBetterThanPerfect