



Procrastination and Task Paralysis: How to Get Unstuck

An explainer, task-starting ladder, and 5-minute tracker (ADHD-friendly) · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Procrastination is not laziness. It is usually a way of avoiding uncomfortable feelings.
- Task paralysis is especially common with ADHD, anxiety, depression, and perfectionism.
- Making the first step tiny lowers the emotional barrier to starting.

Procrastination is an emotion problem

Research shows that procrastination is less about time management and more about mood management. When a task brings up boredom, anxiety, confusion, or fear of failure, putting it off gives instant relief. The problem is that the relief is temporary, and the task (and the stress) grows.

What task paralysis feels like

- Knowing what you need to do but feeling physically unable to start
- Spending hours "getting ready" without beginning
- Switching to easier tasks or your phone
- Feeling frozen when there are too many tasks to choose from
- Shame that builds the longer you wait

For people with ADHD, the brain's motivation system often responds more to interest, novelty, urgency, or challenge than to importance. That isn't a character flaw. It just means strategies need to work with your brain, not against it.

What the research says

Procrastination is best understood as prioritizing short-term mood repair over long-term goals (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013).

A major meta-analysis found that procrastination is strongly linked with task aversiveness, impulsiveness, and low confidence in completing the task (Steel, 2007).

Tool: My Task-Starting Ladder

Break one task you're avoiding into the smallest possible steps. The first step should feel almost too easy.

Step	Tiny action	Done?
1	(e.g., open the document)	☐
2		☐
3		☐
4		☐
5		☐
6		☐

5-Minute Rule Tracker

Commit to working on the task for just 5 minutes. After 5 minutes, you can stop or keep going.

Day	Task	Kept going?	How I felt after
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Strategies to try

- **Body doubling.** Work alongside someone, in person or online, to make starting easier.
- **Make it interesting.** Add music, a timer race, or a reward to boring tasks.
- **Reduce choices.** Pick one task for the next hour and hide the rest of the list.
- **Externalize time.** Use visible timers or alarms, especially if time feels slippery.
- **Forgive yourself.** Self-forgiveness for past procrastination is linked with less procrastination in the future.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Use an "if-then" plan.** Write, "If it's 9 a.m. and I've poured my coffee, then I'll open the report." These implementation intentions significantly improve follow-through.
- **Bundle temptations.** Pair a task you avoid with something you enjoy, like a favourite podcast that you only listen to while doing laundry. Researchers call this temptation bundling.
- **Write the "ugly first draft."** Give yourself permission to do it badly first. Or start in the middle, wherever feels easiest.
- **Meet your future self.** Imagine yourself next week, vividly. What will future you thank you for doing today?

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What feeling do I most want to avoid when I put off this task?

What story do I tell myself about procrastinating? Is it fair?

When have I started something hard and been glad I did?

What support would make starting easier?

When to reach out for support

If procrastination or task paralysis is affecting your work, studies, or self-esteem, or you suspect ADHD might be part of the picture, therapy can help you build strategies that fit how your brain works.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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