Procrastination: Putting Off ‘Til the Tomorrow That Never Comes

David Plaut

Consider two definitions: “Procrastination is the thief of time.” Edward Young

“Procrastination is the intentional and habitual postponement of some important task that must be done.” James Sherman

There is no consensus as to whether procrastination is a time management issue. Some think that those of us who procrastinate know exactly what should be done, but choose not to do it. At the other end are those who feel that procrastination is the biggest time waster of all. Maybe it’s both. It certainly wastes time coming up with reasons not to do something now. As in the time management article in this series, I ask that you consider this only a sketch of what is for some a severe problem and for others something that needs but a bit of work to avoid. I will try to give some tips to help overcome procrastination.

Deciding that you need to stop procrastinating is an excellent first step. That decision is not simply a matter of making a promise to yourself to do things sooner. Procrastination is a habit and bad habits need to be replaced with good habits. It has been said that it takes at least three weeks to replace a bad habit. You will need to work on this bad habit diligently and continuously. But you can make the change.

Are there any rewards to overcoming procrastination? Yes. You will

• Gain the trust of your family, friends, coworkers, and supervisors.
• Avoid disappointing those who are depending on you to provide them with a finished project.
• Erase your feelings of guilt by not finishing on time.
• Avoid your feelings of anxiety and stress both from trying hard to avoid doing something that needs to be done but not doing it.

What Causes Procrastination

Fear of failure. Perfectionism is a heavy, heavy burden. You can never achieve it. By not starting a project, you cannot, or so you may argue, fail. But of course, you will have failed to do something that needs to be done and something that others are depending on you to do. Procrastination is really a no-win situation.

You may put off finishing a project for fear of succeeding. Completing a task may increase your responsibilities, may put more demands on you, and add more tasks you don’t want.

You may say that the task is too difficult. Is this true or simply another excuse for not starting?

You may say you don’t want to do it. You don’t have to anything but die. But consider the consequences of not doing it.

Procrastination is a way to manipulate others. A power play that we may not recognize.

Arguing that the task takes too long. There’s not enough time. Did you not plan time for the project (review time management)? Is this another excuse?

Do you feel that you lack skills or knowledge or tools? Are you sure or is this another excuse?

“Forgetfulness.” Freud talks about forgetfulness as escaping something. “I forgot” could be another excuse.

Excuses, excuses, excuses. Wasted time.

You may want to write this list on a sheet of paper and ask yourself which of these ways you use to procrastinate. Add a column for the disadvantages of using the reason (excuse) to postpone something. Add another column for the imagined advantages. Keep this sheet nearby and use it when you find yourself putting something off. Overcoming procrastination is a work in progress.

How to Prevent Procrastination.

Let’s review these reasons and discuss them from the other side.

Fear of failure. Try replacing Perfectionism with Permission to be Human. Accept the fact that like everyone else, you are human. You will make errors. You can avoid some of them by starting your project early enough to allow time to revise it, rework it, and ask others for their input.

You are less likely to fail if you start now and divide the task into chunks you can manage.

Fear of success. Believe it or not, this is often a cause for putting something off. “What if I do this well? Will I be asked to do it again? Will I be given a harder job next time?” Now is not the time to deal with those ‘issues.’ Complete this task on time. It’s possible that will find you enjoy this job if you get to it now and get it done on time. When you are asked next time to work on a project, your success with the last one may motivate you to take on the new one. You may have the opportunity to say no.

If you think the task is too difficult, take a few minutes to look at it. Would it be easier if you had some help at certain points? (Einstein didn’t write the
theory of relativity alone. He had help with some of the math.) Would it look less difficult if you broke it down into small pieces? Would it be easier if you had access to another tool?

You feel the task will take too long. Is this because you didn’t start early enough? Or is it that you haven’t looked at it bit by bit? Can you ask for some help? Can you delegate part of it? Or are you looking for an excuse? Think this through.

Lacking skills or knowledge or tools. Again, avoid using this as an excuse. Look at it from another point of view. Do you know someone who has the knowledge or tools to help you (but not do it for you)!

After all these years working with statistics, thanks to a friend of mine whom I asked, I found a tool for comparing more than two means that is not only better than the old one statistically but is even easy to understand graphically. Could you accomplish the task if you had another tool?

Having a ‘coach’ to egg you on is a good idea. Gather a support system to encourage you and hold you accountable will be a help. Another tool that will aid you is to write a contract with yourself. Give a copy of the contract to your coach for this project. Ask the coach to remind you when the next due date is. The contract commits you to the project and to a date to complete it. Do not consider just another form!

Delegating a portion of the project to someone with better skills at a part of the task will help.

“Forgetfulness.” Freud talks about forgetfulness in some cases as escaping something. This could be another excuse. Here is where your planner can help. (Again, review time management.)

Procrastination as a way to manipulate others. It’s a power play that we may not recognize as such. I am sure this works at the time, but in the long run, it can spoil relationships and even careers. Again a no-win move.

A few other tips that might help:

Replace “Have to…” with “Want to…” Sometimes I think of life as me against ‘them.’” When I tackle a project I don’t want to do, I tell myself once I’ve finished it, I beat ‘them.’ I win.

Replace “Finish it” with “I will begin with…” When I was in graduate school, one of my advisors suggested that I not think about taking my oral exams four years hence but think about the next hourly quiz. This is like breaking a task into manageable portions — divide a large project into small pieces then set a time to do each. Use your planner here.

Writing an SOP could begin with an outline. Preparing the budget could begin with looking at last year’s budget and the variances in it. These are beginnings and can be done in a short period and leave you with the feeling that you have achieved a goal.

Replace “I’ll work for an hour” with “I’ll work for 15 minutes.” Often you will find that if you promise yourself to work a short period on the project you will find yourself engaged in it, even enjoying it, and spend more time on it. It might be a good idea not to stop at a tough part as that could give you an excuse to avoid returning to it. Finish the tough part now so there will be easier work when you return. (All of the project can’t be hard, now can it?)

Replace Deprivation with Earned Fun. When you have finished the 15-minute period of work, allow yourself a treat -- a cup of coffee, ONE game of solitaire, or a call to a friend. When you finish a large chunk, then the treat can be bigger. And when the whole project is done, it could be a trip to the movies, a new pair of shoes, even a dinner out. Perhaps take your coach along. This is a reward for you both. It lets the coach know you appreciate the help; you both will get positive feedback. That will make the next task easier.

Do not volunteer for things you do not like to do. If you hate baking, volunteer to make place cards. Don’t even volunteer to find the folks to bake.

Dividing a task into small portions is a good idea to help overcome procrastination. In managing time, it is a good idea. When setting out to do a task that might take more than an hour or two, get out the planning tool you have found that works for you and divide this new task into bits and put those bits on the schedule with a realistic amount of time you will need to complete the entire task. It might help to prepare a folder with the schedule taped to the inside or on the cover. Add the contract to the folder. Put competed parts of the task when possible inside the folder and check them off. This allows you to keep track of where you are and gives you a feeling of accomplishment each time you check off a part. Perhaps you can keep some of the tools you need in the folder. Or consider a small flat box, say, 1 - 2” high, that will hold a disk/CD with necessary files and maybe even a need ed book or other folders to help you keep much of the task in one place.

Procrastinators can be big dreamers. Sometimes those dreams can be very vague. “I will be more responsible at work,” sounds like a fine goal until you try to define what it means. It’s too general and amorphous. “I will get my reports in before the deadline” is better. It’s focused and achievable.

Procrastination feeds on itself. You need to find ways to break the pattern. When you find yourself saying something like, “I will save that ‘til tomorrow,” stop and ask yourself why you would do that. Don’t you agree that most of the time you will find that your reason is one we’ve talked about here?

When you give an excuse for not starting a project is a good time to start the project. Even if it’s only the outline or collecting material for the folder.

Tomorrow never comes.
Questions for STEP Participants

Answer questions only on the official STEP answer sheet. If you do not have the official STEP answer sheet, a year’s supply can be obtained (at no cost), simply by writing to: STEP Program Answer Sheets, American Medical Technologists, 10700 W. Higgins Road, Rosemont, IL 60018, or by fax: 847/823-0458, or by e-mail: paula.simoncini@amt1.com.

In addition to marking your answers, be sure to include all the required information on the answer sheet and a processing fee of $3.00 per article.

In the following, choose the one best answer for each question.

1 Procrastination is a habit.
   A. True
   B. False

2 “I won’t do it now,” could be a definition of procrastination.
   A. True
   B. False

3 You must work alone to overcome procrastination.
   A. True
   B. False

4 Procrastination might be considered a time-waster.
   A. True
   B. False

5 Both fear of failure and fear of success are reasons for procrastinating.
   A. True
   B. False

6 Which of these is not a sensible goal?
   A. I will have my budget in on Dec. 15th.
   B. I will have the time cards in by 3 pm on Thursday.
   C. I will start the performance reviews on Wednesday.
   D. I will not be late to work ever again.

7 Which of these is not a good reward for 30 minutes work?
   A. Do the cross word puzzle from today’s paper
   B. One cup of coffee/tea/soda pop
   C. One phone call
   D. All are good

8 Which of these is a good starter?
   A. An outline of the project
   B. A time line for the project
   C. Dividing the project into pieces
   D. All are good

9 It takes about _______ to replace one habit with another.
   A. 3 days
   B. 3 weeks
   C. 3 months
   D. 6 months

10 The project folder should contain
   A. your written contract
   B. your coach’s name, e-mail and phone number
   C. the project schedule
   D. all of the above
Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. — Thomas Jefferson. There are two cardinal sins from which all others spring: Impatience and Laziness. Procrastination usually results in sorrowful regret. Today's duties put off until tomorrow give us a double burden to bear; the best way is to do them in their proper time. — Ida Scott Taylor. It's a job that's never started that takes the longest to finish. — J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973). To be always intending to live a new life, but never to find time to set about it; this is as if a man should put off eating and drinking and sleeping from one day and night to another, till he is starved and destroyed. — Archbishop John Tillotson (1630–1694) Later attributed to Walter Scott and also see