



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

PROCRASTINATION

Student Life - Counselling Support

WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION

The word procrastination actually means..... "to put off until tomorrow".

Procrastination is not just a simple problem of time management. Efforts to reduce procrastination solely through improving your time management skills are likely to fail. It is not simply a problem with indecision either although some people will procrastinate about making decisions as well.

Procrastination occurs when you make a decision to do something, the outcome is valuable to you but you don't follow through with the action necessary to achieve it.

WHY DO WE PROCRASTINATE?

There are a range of factors that contribute to procrastination such as:

Perfectionism

"If I can't do it well now, I'll do it later when it will be done better."

Fear of Failure

"I would be so humiliated if I didn't get a good mark, I just couldn't face it!"

As an Excuse

"I could have done better if I had more time"

The effect of messages you have received in your past

"You are stupid so you will have to work much harder than anyone else"

Internal thoughts

"I am a hopeless case if I don't get a good mark"

Problems with decision making

"I don't know which is the most important or where to begin?"

Feeling overwhelmed and paralysed by too much work

"There is too much, I can't get it done in time"

Have you found yourself using the following thoughts to put off the work you need to do?

"I won't be able to do it properly today because...there isn't enough time: I'm too tired: I need more references; I need to read everything before I can start; there are too many distractions; I'm not in the right mood..." etc

HOW TO OVERCOME PROCRASTINATION

1. Reframe Your Thinking

What you think, will directly affect how you feel, which will directly affect what you do. What you do can influence how you feel and what you think about yourself. 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 if I can't get another distinction"

"Everyone else in the course understands the work so much better than me"

"I'm a fraud – I don't know how they let me into this course"

"My Dad was right – this is just a waste of time"

You are likely to start feeling:

- Anxious
- Worried
- 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.

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 really 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. If you are finding it difficult to reframe your thinking, try the tips listed below:

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

Black and white thinking

"Everyone in the course understands the work better than me"

Making assumptions

"People will know I am nervous about the presentation and will laugh at me"

Catastrophizing

"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 get 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 is ok because I am learning”. Sometimes it can help to do this process with someone – a university counsellor can help you with this technique.

Surround yourself with the new – write down on brightly coloured cards the positive and motivating thoughts you want to be thinking and display these in places you will see them, particularly in places that are a source of distraction – on your TV, on your computer, on your mirror in the bathroom, or your fridge.

Practice mindfulness

- A.** Take time out every day to internally ‘check out’ how you are feeling. Building in to your daily routine just 10 minutes of ‘quiet reflection’ will help you start to notice your thoughts and the feelings connected to these. This can take a bit of practice at first – and there are some techniques that you can learn to make this process easier. The counselling centre has workshops where you can learn these techniques. Come in to the centre to grab a timetable of the workshops or speak with a counsellor.
- B.** It can be helpful to try to not engage with the unhelpful thoughts and feelings. When an unhelpful thought comes into your mind, notice and name the thought (e.g. “I am having an anxious thought”), accept/acknowledge that you are having it, and then let the thought go. Sometimes it can help to imagine the thought drifting away on a raft out to sea or in a hot air balloon into the sky. Or let it just move across your mind like it was a movie screen.

2. Breaking the Task into Small Pieces

Revising the whole years work can be too daunting but revising just one chapter a day is manageable. Every task can be broken down into

smaller more manageable parts. It is very important to have an overview of the years work but equally important to schedule tasks each day into small bite sized pieces. Make sure the goals you set yourself are achievable, as 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. Ask yourself the following question – “On a scale of 1 – 10, how confident am I at achieving this goal?” Research shows that if you give yourself a score of more than 8, you are most likely to achieve the goal.

Any score under 8, means that you have set yourself too big a goal and need to break it down. Start small (e.g. 10 minutes study), complete the goal, and then build up from there.

3. Estimating the time a task will take

Underestimating the time you think a task will take justifies procrastination because there is plenty of time and therefore no real urgency to get started.

Overestimating the time a task will take may be intimidating and have you perceiving the task as too large and difficult. This may result in you finding it hard to get 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.

4. Making 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.

5. 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.

6. Prepare Workplace 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 your 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.

7. 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, word processing, 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.

8. 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. Sometimes events or incidents can happen in your life that will have a big impact on how you are feeling such as the death of someone close to you, a relationship break-up, or a family emergency. It is normal for these sorts of circumstances to affect

your ability to concentrate and focus on your studies. If this is the case and you are worried about falling behind, make an appointment with one of the counsellors who can help you with possible options.

Studies have shown that generally students, who procrastinate, perform less well. There is however some evidence that expert procrastinators are individuals with high academic potential.

9. 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. 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.

10. Organise Support

Telling others of your intentions or enlisting their company can sometimes take the loneliness or feelings of deprivation out of studying. Knowing that you are not the only person in the world that is deprived can be very reassuring. 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.

To speak to a counsellor about this issue either phone the centre to make an appointment on 8313 5663, or drop in to the centre, located ground floor, Horace Lamb Building.

CONCLUSION

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.

Undertake further reading on the topic, attend workshops run through the Counselling Centre or make an appointment for individual counselling.

Further Reading

Living Without Procrastination. How To Stop Postponing Your Life
by M. Susan Roberts, 1995 New Harbinger Publications, USA

Procrastination. Why You Do It. What To Do About It
by Jane B. Burka, and Lenora M Yuen, 1983. Harper Collins Publishers,
New York

Counselling Support is available to assist students with personal difficulties that are affecting their study.

The service provides:

- Individual Counselling by appointment
- Telephone Counselling by appointment
- Mental health emergency response

Counselling Support

Ground Floor, Horace Lamb Building

The University of Adelaide

Ph: +61 8 8313 5663

After hours support: 1300 167 654 or sms 0488 884 197

This pamphlet was written by Flinders University Health and Counselling Services and has been reprinted as part of a collaborative project between the counselling services at Flinders and Adelaide University. Modified by Student Life Counselling Support.

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