

Suggestions for Procrastinators

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October 1, 2008

This document is intended for my coaching clients who are struggling to get things done and find themselves procrastinating. It is composed of my notes and excerpts from researching Internet resources and the relevant section of a book, Never Check E-Mail in the Morning by Julie Morgenstern. Feedback and suggestions are welcome.

This document has three parts: background information about procrastination, thoughts from leading procrastinators (!), and suggestions for dealing with procrastination.

PART I - UNDERSTANDING PROCRASTINATION

from Psychology Today's article "Procrastination: Ten Things To Know" by Hara Estroff Marano. Note that this article analyses procrastination but isn't particularly helpful for addressing it.

(found at <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20030823-000001.html>)

1. Twenty percent of people identify themselves as chronic procrastinators.
2. Procrastination is not a problem of time management or of planning. Procrastinators are not different in their ability to estimate time, although they are more optimistic than others. "Telling someone who procrastinates to buy a weekly planner is like telling someone with chronic depression to just cheer up," insists Dr. Ferrari.
3. Procrastinators are made not born. Procrastination is learned in the family milieu, but not directly. It is one response to an authoritarian parenting style. Having a harsh, controlling father keeps children from developing the ability to regulate themselves, from internalizing their own intentions and then learning to act on them. Procrastination can even be a form of rebellion, one of the few forms available under such circumstances. What's more, under those household conditions, procrastinators turn more to friends than to parents for support, and their friends may reinforce procrastination because they tend to be tolerant of their excuses.
4. Procrastinators tell lies to themselves. Such as, "I'll feel more like doing this tomorrow." Or "I work best under pressure." But in fact they do not get the urge the next day or work best under pressure. In addition, they protect their sense of self by saying "this isn't important." Another big lie procrastinators indulge is that time pressure makes them more creative. Unfortunately they do not turn out to be more creative; they only feel that way. They squander their resources.
5. Procrastinators actively look for distractions, particularly ones that don't take a lot of commitment on their part. Checking e-mail is almost perfect for this purpose.

- They distract themselves as a way of regulating their emotions such as fear of failure.
6. There's more than one flavor of procrastination. People procrastinate for different reasons. Dr. Ferrari identifies three basic types of procrastinators:
 - a. arousal types, or thrill-seekers, who wait to the last minute for the euphoric rush.
 - b. avoiders, who may be avoiding fear of failure or even fear of success, but in either case are very concerned with what others think of them; they would rather have others think they lack effort than ability.
 - c. decisional procrastinators, who cannot make a decision. Not making a decision absolves procrastinators of responsibility for the outcome of events.

from Wikipedia's entry for Procrastination (found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procrastination>):

The tense-afraid type of procrastinator usually feels overwhelmed with pressure, unrealistic about time, uncertain about goals and many other negative feelings. Feeling that they lack the ability or focus to successfully complete their work, they tell themselves that they need to unwind and relax, that it's better to take it easy for the afternoon, for example, and start afresh in the morning. They usually have grandiose plans that aren't realistic. Their 'relaxing' is often temporary and ineffective, and leads to even more stress as time runs out, deadlines approach and the person feels increasingly guilty and apprehensive. This behavior becomes a cycle of failure and delay, as plans and goals are put off, penciled into the following day or week in the diary again and again. It can also have a debilitating effect on their personal lives and relationships. Since they are uncertain about their goals, they often feel awkward with people who appear confident and goal-oriented, which can lead to depression. Tense-afraid procrastinators often withdraw from social life, avoiding contact even with close friends.

PART II - THOUGHTS FROM PROCRASTINATORS

from the Structured Procrastination web site by procrastinator Prof. John Perry (found at <http://www.structuredprocrastination.com/>):

All procrastinators put off things they have to do. Structured procrastination is the art of making this bad trait work for you. The key idea is that procrastinating does not mean doing absolutely nothing. Procrastinators seldom do absolutely nothing; they do marginally useful things, like gardening or sharpening pencils or making a diagram of how they will reorganize their files when they get around to it. Why does the procrastinator do these things? Because they are a way of not doing something more important. If all the procrastinator had left to do was to sharpen some pencils, no force on earth could get him do it. However, the procrastinator

can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important.

Structured procrastination means shaping the structure of the tasks one has to do in a way that exploits this fact.

From Perry's article on "Procrastination and Perfectionism":

Procrastinating was a way of giving myself permission to do a less than perfect job on a task that didn't require a perfect job. As long as the deadline was a ways away, then, in theory, I had time to go the library, or set myself up for a long evening at home, and do a thorough, scholarly, perfect job refereeing this book. But when the deadline is near, or even a bit in the past, there is no longer time to do a perfect job. I have to just sit down and do an imperfect, but adequate job. The fantasies of perfection of replaced by the fantasies of utter failure. So I finally get to work on it. Now it would have been simpler for me, and for the publisher, and for the author, if I had sat down and spent four or five hours on the manuscript right off the bat. If only I had been able to give myself permission to do an imperfect job right at the outset. Is there anyway we can bring that about?

You have to get in the habit of forcing yourself to analyze, at the time you accept a task, to consider the costs and benefits of doing a less than perfect job. You need to ask the questions: how useful would a perfect job be here? How much more useful than a merely adequate job? Or even a half-assed job? And you need to ask the questions: what is the probability that I will really do anything like a remotely perfect job on this? And you need to ask: what difference will it make to me, whether I do or not?

And the answer, in an enormous number of cases, will be that a less than perfect job will do just fine, and moreover it's all I am ever going to do anyway. So I give myself permission to do a less than perfect job, rather than waiting until it is overdue. I may as well do it now.

from Paul Graham's "Good and Bad Procrastination" (found at <http://www.paulgraham.com/procrastination.html>):

I think the way to "solve" the problem of procrastination is to let delight pull you instead of making a to-do list push you. Work on an ambitious project you really enjoy, and sail as close to the wind as you can, and you'll leave the right things undone.

PART III - SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PROS

from Never Check E-Mail in the Morning, by Julie Morgenstern, pages 124-127:

1. One of the best ways to fight procrastination is to understand why you're hesitating, right as it happens. Is the task too big? Do we have

- performance anxiety or are afraid to make a decision? Are we afraid of what comes next if we get this done? Will the delay lead to more pressure, which we think will help us work better? Some people want the adrenaline rush, others are perfectionists who use the time crunch as an excuse for not doing perfect work.
2. This section of the book is called "Replace Black-and-White Thinking with Shades of Gray." The author explains, "Learning to think in shades of gray takes the pressure off - it stops you from procrastinating and frees you to move forward."
 3. She suggests the following strategies for beating procrastination:
 - a. Break it down into smaller tasks - break a large task into 30-60 minute tasks
 - b. Slip in sideways - if you are stuck at step 1, try jumping to step 2 or 3 to get started (eg, skip the intro paragraph, do the 2nd paragraph first)
 - c. Do a fast sloppy version - just get something going, it doesn't need to be great, and you'll feel better from making some progress
 - d. Focus on the payoff
 - e. Remember past victories
 - f. Set time limits on difficult tasks - "Setting aside either too much time or not enough time can make you procrastinate." Try giving yourself a smaller or larger amount of time to make progress on the task, and see if that helps.
 - g. Choose the best time of day, when your energy level is high.
 - h. Give in and don't do it - If none of these strategies work, give yourself permission not to do it today. "And then, just for the heck of it, and because it doesn't matter anyway, spend fifteen minutes on it. Our best, most creative work often emerges when it just doesn't matter. Release the pressure, throw your hands in the air, and do one for the Gipper!"

from Cal Poly's Study Skill's Library article on Procrastination (found at <http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/procrastination.html>):

Steps to the Cure

1. Realize you are delaying something unnecessarily.
2. Discover the real reasons for your delay. List them.
3. Dispute those real reasons and overcome them. Be vigorous.
4. Begin the task.

Some Tools That Will Help

1. Make the tasks look small and easy in your mind. ("I've written lots of excellent papers; this is just one more paper.")
2. Do only a small part of the task each time. ("I'll just check out the books tonight. Later on, I'll glance through them.")
3. Five-minute plan: Work on something for just five minutes. At the end of five minutes, switch to something else if you want. Chances are, you'll get involved enough to keep going.
4. Advertise your plans to accomplish something, and let peer pressure push you forward. ("I told everyone that I was going to finish this tonight.")
5. Use a good friend as a positive role model. If you have trouble concentrating, study in the presence of someone who doesn't.
6. Modify your environment - if you can't study at home, find a place where you can study; or, change your study situation at home.
7. Plan tomorrow and establish priorities - some students find that simply writing down reasonable starting and stopping times help them get going.
8. Expect some backsliding. Don't expect to be perfect even when you're trying to get rid of perfectionism! So occasionally, your plans will not work. Accept setbacks and start again.