

Procrastination

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From watching videos of cute pugs, scrolling through Facebook to see what others are doing, reviewing the latest news online or rearranging your desk all the while knowing that there's a deadline for completing a task that has yet to be started or completed. All these online distractions and valueless activities are symptoms of the same thing: procrastination.

Procrastination is defined as the action of delaying or postponing something (i.e., the action of inaction). "Often deferring through indecision, when early action would have been preferable," or as "deferring action, especially without good reason." ¹

As stated, procrastination is mostly about deferring an important task or activity. Sometimes it's a conscious decision which may or may not be justified while in others instances it may be a lack of self-awareness to know that you're actually procrastinating. There are a lot of theories on why procrastination happens; low-self esteem to acute perfectionism to fear of failure. Here's an exhaustive list:

- Abstract goals
- Rewards that are far in the future
- A disconnect from the future-self
- A focus on future options
- Optimism about the future
- Indecisiveness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anxiety
- Task aversion
- Perfectionism
- Fear of evaluation or negative feedback
- Fear of failure
- Self-handicapping
- Self-sabotage
- Low self-efficacy
- A perceived lack of control
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Depression
- Lack of motivation
- Lack of energy
- Laziness
- Prioritization of short-term mood

- Low capacity for self-control
- Lack of perseverance
- Impulsivity
- Distractibility
- Sensation seeking
- Rebellion

Understanding why people procrastinate can help discover or uncover the motives behind your own procrastination and it can help you begin to put a plan in place to solve the problem. ⁶

Future Self and Performance

The prevailing understanding of procrastination can be summed up as a 'self-regulation' issue (i.e., control your impulses or attention and delay gratification), not a time-management issue (e.g., tasks and prioritization).

Your 'future self' feels the effects of procrastination at a later date. The failure to regulate your emotions and delay gratification in the present sheds light on how procrastination works. "Choosing to voluntarily delay in spite of our intention reflects a basic breakdown in our self-regulation. This breakdown occurs most often when we are faced with a task that is viewed as aversive (i.e., boring, frustrating, lacking meaning and/or structure), and therefore leads to unpleasant feelings or negative mood." ⁷

Delaying work with no logical reason can lead to worse performance. In a study by MIT's Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, three groups were given a proofreading assignment to complete with three different deadlines:

- Group 1 had a single deadline 3 weeks out
- Group 2 had interim deadlines every week, and
- Group 3 was told to establish their own interim deadlines within the 3-week period

The results?

Group 2, with interim deadlines, did the best by completing their assignment 0.5 days late and finding an average of 136 errors. Group 1 turned in the worst performance by completing their assignment 12 days late, and finding only an average of 70 errors. Group 3 fell somewhere in the middle with their assignment being 6.5 days late, and finding an average of 104 errors.

Groups	Days Late	Corrections
#1: 3 Week Deadline	12	70
#2: Fixed Interim Deadlines	.5	136
#3: Self-Directed Interim Deadlines	6.5	104

We can observe from this study that when we are given a large task with a single long-term deadline, our chances of completing it on time will fail more often than a large task with intermediate deadlines or milestones. You can also conclude that large tasks with interim deadlines can also have an effect on the quality of work (e.g., the number of errors in this proofreading study). ²

The tangible consequences of procrastination can be felt in more than low quality of work. Stress, anxiety and depression are all positively correlated with higher levels of procrastination ³.

Procrastination and Creativity

There are plenty of anecdotes that frame procrastination as a way to encourage creativity and performance. One that is often cited is the feat completed by Mozart who on the evening of October 28th, 1787 was reminded that he had not composed the overture for “Don Giovanni’s” premiere the following night. Around midnight that same evening, Mozart goes home and begins to compose. He completes the overture in about three hours assisted by his wife Constanze who kept him awake with tea and by reading stories aloud.



For some, like Mozart, a deadline can help them focus intensely on getting a specific job done. For others, it could spell disaster. Not all of us are Mozarts.

The upside of procrastination is in giving the mind more time to think and reflect. For creative or conceptual tasks, sometimes allowing your mind extra time to think of a unique solution will help your performance or find a solution instead of just rushing to get it done.

Evidence of this can be found in something called *The Zeigarnik Effect* which states that tasks left undone are more memorable and more easily recalled. This means that your mind will naturally wander or revolve around the task you purposefully left undone, instead of half heartedly completing it for the sake of productivity. ⁵

Adam Grants, professor at the Wharton Business School in Pennsylvania and Author of the book *Originals* says, "When you procrastinate, you're more likely to let your mind wander. That gives you a better chance of stumbling onto the unusual and spotting unexpected patterns." ⁴ This kind of intentional, strategic, delay is not True Procrastination - and knowing the difference can save you a lot of anxiety and wasted time ⁵.

Primal Procrastination

In terms of what is happening with our neurobiology when we procrastinate, the most descriptive theory lies deep in our brain structures. The two main players are: the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala is the automatic fear (fight, flight, freeze) generator. The prefrontal cortex is associated with logical decision-making and rational thought.

When we are contemplating doing something we don't want to do, our amygdala springs into action and we have a spike in stress. The amygdala's job is to ensure we have an appropriate emotional response to threats to keep us alive. The automatic response is to avoid unpleasant stimuli (e.g., making a marketing call and getting rejected, preparing for an important presentation, calling an unhappy client, etc.) because our brains have evolved to avoid unpleasant things.

Those with trouble in the action control department are more likely to have larger amygdalae and different neural connections with other parts of the brain. This is known as ‘amygdala hijack’.⁸ Because the amygdala takes over, the prefrontal cortex, is slower to react and, easily exhausted, “rendering us stupefied by distractions”.¹¹ People who are chronic

procrastinators actually have more volume in their amygdala, and less in their prefrontal cortex. [9](#)

Our brains have the capacity to encode how we reacted in past events and that encoding will be used in future events when a similar situation arises. So when you put off a stressful task (threat), in the past, in favor of something your brain perceives as non-threatening (e.g., watching cute cat videos) you're also training it to react in a similar way in the future.

The famous saying by psychologist Donald Hebb, "Neurons that fire together, wire together" [10](#) states that the brain pathways can change how they react to stimuli, and how these reactions can become patterns and habits. So if you encounter a stressful situation like a big presentation and your first impulse to put it off, your brain will recall how you reacted in the past and you'll be more likely to automatically react similarly in the future.

Change Your Brain

Luckily, we don't have to be entirely at the mercy of our deep brain. We can retrain to some extent how we react to difficult tasks. Neuroplasticity is our brain's ability to change how it fires and reacts to situations - essentially its ability to learn new habits.

One way to change the patterns of behavior and thought that might be detrimental to you is through the practice of Mindfulness. Mindfulness as a practice cultivates the ability to maintain focus on the present moment. This present-moment awareness provides sensitivity to sensory cues—like that negative emotional "pang" we might feel when facing an aversive task." [11](#) This present-moment awareness helps us transition our brain activity from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex, where you can actually reconsider what you're doing in the present moment and why.

By practicing mindfulness, a person can acknowledge their anxiety or negative emotions, and use them as a jumping off point to decide how they can actively reduce those feelings.

For example, you start to put off preparing for a presentation, but you realize you're procrastinating. You take stock of your mental (internal) state, "I don't like thinking about this because I am nervous I am going to lose this deal anyway." By explicitly asking yourself what your internal state is, you'll be

able to **label** and **adjust** your behavior much more easily. By labeling the emotional state you're currently in, you're moving yourself out of the emotional center (amygdala's fight or flight mode) and into the prefrontal cortex (rational and logical) where you can 'think it through' and avoid being emotionally inert.

Incorporating mindfulness into your daily life can be difficult at first but here is how you can get started:

Step 1: Identify tasks that are prone to procrastination.

Step 2: Identify what you usually do when you procrastinate

Step 3: Ask yourself, "Why?" five times to get to the root of the problem.

Step 4: Once the root excuse has been exposed, apply logic to debunk your excuse.

For example, let's say that when it comes to preparing for a big presentation you often procrastinate. How? You usually put off preparing until the day before. Mindful of this lax in preparation, you ask yourself the five whys and begin the internal dialogue that will shift the conversation from the fear center to the logical center:

"Why am I avoiding this?"

Because I don't want to do it.

Why don't I want to do it?"

Because it's time-consuming.

Why don't I want to do something because it's time-consuming?"

Because it will end up being a waste of time.

Why do I think it will be a waste of time?"

Because the work I do won't be good enough to get the deal.

Why do I think that?"

Because last time I didn't get the deal."

The root excuse for putting off preparing is that you lost the last deal after preparing so what's the point. That's what your brain encoded and that's what it's telling you.

The final step is to debunk the excuse. You can deploy a few strategies:

- 1) Remind yourself of deals you DID win in the past.
- 2) Remind yourself that this deal is different and so are the players.
- 3) Remind yourself how awful you'll feel if you lose both personally and professionally by not giving 100%.

By first understanding what tasks are victims of your procrastination and then identifying the habits you deploy (i.e., avoidance, delay, etc.) you move the habit from the emotional center (amygdala) to the logical center (prefrontal cortex) where you can then deploy the 5-Why strategy to get to the root excuse of your procrastination. Once the root excuse has been identified, you can use past experience or future outcomes to debunk the excuse.

The consequence of mindfulness is replacing the old code with a new code. Research from the University of Pittsburgh⁹ has shown that eight weeks of mindfulness meditation can shrink the size of your amygdala and how your brain connects with other regions. Not only that, but the prefrontal cortex becomes denser, and more connected with the rest of the brain.

Trick Your Brain

If you're dreading beginning a task, or working on a huge project, one quick way to jumpstart your motivation is to use the '10 Minute Rule'. Tell yourself that you'll do whatever it is you've been putting off for just 10 minutes and then you can stop. For example, if you need to work on an important presentation, tell yourself, "Just do 10 minutes." If you need to read a paper or book just tell yourself to read for 10 minutes.

This simple but effective strategy (1) gets you past the starting point and (2) gives you a very small, very achievable goal. You'll find that more often than not, you will continue to work on the task past the 10-minute mark because it wasn't as bad as you thought.

¹³

The brain is a machine you constantly have to train and retrain to achieve the results or the productivity you want in life. By understanding the innermost

workings of your least desirable behaviors, and through the effects of neuroplasticity you can begin to train your brain to become better at getting tasks done, less stressed about not getting things done, and more in line with your long-term goals.

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