

Procrastination

“Work fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.” Jerome K. Jerome

Procrastination is not being lazy or a time management problem, it's an emotion management problem. In order to avoid a negative feeling about a task at hand, we put it off. It's short term relief with long term consequences. After watching 30 minutes of cat videos on YouTube, we feel even more guilty, compounding the problem. Chronic procrastinators have a larger amygdala, the brain's flight or fight center, and less connectivity between the amygdala and the decision-making center of their cortex.ⁱ Procrastinators avoid taking action in the present and leave it for a “future self.” Neural imaging shows that we perceive our “**future self**” separate from our “**present self**” but in the same area of our brain as “**someone else**.”ⁱⁱ It's as if we were expecting **someone else** to finish the unpleasant task for us.ⁱⁱⁱ That's why it's so hard for us to follow through on changes we know we want. (Think new year's resolutions.) Change requires going outside our comfort zone. When we try something new, we make mistakes, encounter setbacks, get frustrated and experience anxiety. It's part of the process, but it makes us uncomfortable, so we procrastinate or lose motivation. But going outside our comfort zone can also bring deep learning, peak experiences and growth.

So how do we stop procrastinating?

- 1) Visualize your future self, write out your goals and **develop a plan** to transform your **present self** into **your future self**.
- 2) Tell people your plans. This increases social commitment.
- 3) When you experience a setback, don't beat yourself up. Self-compassion decreases guilt and stress which is a primary culprit for procrastination.^{iv} Contrary to popular belief, self-forgiveness leads to **more productivity**, not less.^v
- 4) Ask yourself **why, where and how** you procrastinate. Knowing your triggers will help you mitigate them.
- 5) **Remove distractions**. Turn off your phone and hide the Gameboy. It's called choice architecture- redesigning your environment to facilitate a new habit.^{vi}
- 6) **Reward yourself** when needed, but keep the reward aligned with your goal. After a long walk (with a weight loss goal) don't treat yourself to a brownie.
- 7) **Start small**. For die hard procrastinators, a new habit should take less than two minutes to start.^{vii} Clean the house becomes put the dirty dishes next to the sink into the dishwasher.
- 8) **Set concrete deadlines**. Later becomes tomorrow by 12:00 noon.
- 9) When you have the urge to procrastinate, **stop and count to 20**.

10) **Mark a calendar** with your progress. Missing one day is no big deal. Don't miss 2 days in a row.

11) **Trash perfectionism.** Just do it. Perfectionism promotes procrastination.^{viii}

12) **Do your most important project first.** Start the day with it. To learn more read *Atomic Habits* by James Clear or visit <https://solvingprocrastination.com>.

“I love deadlines. I love the whoosing sound they make.” Douglas Adams

ⁱ C. Schluter et al. “The structural and functional signature of action control.” *Psychological Science* (2018) August Issue 10, Volume 29, pgs. 1620-1630.

ⁱⁱ H. Hershfield, “Future self-continuity: how conceptions of the future self-transform intertemporal choice.” *Annals of the New York academy of sciences*. (2011) October 1325 (1) pgs. 30-43.

ⁱⁱⁱ F Sirios and T. Pschyl, “Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: consequences for future self.” *Social and personality psychology compass*, (2013) Volume 7, Issue 2, Feb pgs. 115-127

^{iv}A. MacBeth, “Exploring compassion: A meta-analysis of the association between self-compassion and psychopathology.” *Clinical psychology review*.” (2012) Vol. 32 Issue 6, pgs. 545-552

^v M. Wohl et al. “I forgive myself, now I can study: How self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination.” *Personality and Individual differences*, (2010) Issue 48 pgs. 803-808

^{vi} R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, “Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness.” Penguin, (2009) pg. 83

^{vii} J. Clear, *Atomic Habits*, Penguin Random House (2018) pg.162

^{viii} G. Flett, “Dimensions of perfectionism and procrastination.” *Procrastination and task avoidance*, (1995) The Springer series in social clinical psychology, pgs. 113-`36