

## PROCRASTINATION: A NASTY HABIT

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

The word “procrastination” sounds like a dirty word to some people. But, who amongst us hasn’t done it on occasion? That’s understandable---we’ve all put off doing some things we should be doing. Yet, there are some people who are habitual procrastinators who’ve suffered from numerous missed opportunities in their lives, such as failing to graduate from college or being overlooked for a career advancement. Procrastination leads to major life disappointments, so why do some people become chronic procrastinators? Let’s consider why people do it and how they can overcome this negative habit. Come to think of it, if you’re a procrastinator, you can always read this article at a later time!

Procrastination is simply defined as a habitual tendency to postpone some action or task that you need to do or should accomplish. Most people who identify themselves as chronic procrastinators have a habit of avoiding difficult situations. Let’s examine some of the reasons that cause people to procrastinate.

### **Reasons for Procrastination**

**Fear and Anxiety:** Procrastination is often triggered by the fear and anxiety that you anticipate if you don’t accomplish a particular task. Yet, when you procrastinate, you actually spend more time and energy worrying about the dreaded negative outcome than it would actually take to accomplish your task.

**Fear of Failure:** Avoidance is triggered by an internal fear such as, “What if I can’t handle the task?” or “What if I fail at it?” Somehow, procrastinators believe that it is better to avoid than to try and face the possibility of failing. Of course, the only real failure in life is the failure to try.

**The task is boring:** None of us enjoy being bored, but the procrastinator behaves as if boredom were a feeling worse than death! Some times boredom comes from not wanting to deal with the routine “details” that must be done to complete a complex task. This is a common problem for people who suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

**Unsure how/where to start:** When a task or project is so big and overwhelming, procrastination can function as a way to avoid making “the wrong decision.” These people are chronic “worriers,” who are always wondering, “what if...” This form of worrying can lead to paralysis.

**Perfectionism:** Some people believe procrastinators are simply lazy. Yet, many times, they are afraid that they won’t be able to do something perfect. This drive for perfection is what causes them to simply avoid and “not do the task at all.”

**Negative Beliefs:** Negative thoughts such as, “I can’t do this,” are oftentimes behind the procrastinator’s refusal to start a task or project. Negative self-beliefs create negative feelings of fear and anxiety that inhibit one’s motivation to take action. When self-confidence is low, we are less likely to push ourselves to attack a difficult project.

**Defiant personality style:** Some people’s procrastination is fueled by their difficulty with authority figures. These people resent and resist doing tasks that they’re expected or suppose to do.

**Need for a Crisis:** These procrastinators love living on the edge. They engage in the classic brinkmanship style of only getting motivated at the absolute last minute. These are adrenaline junkies who believe they function best under pressure.

**Over doers** are the type of procrastinator who has too much on their plate, doesn’t prioritize well, and thus, has difficulty getting it all done.

### Simple Solutions

- 1. Divide and conquer:** Break the task or project down into small, concrete, specific steps. Complete one step at a time. Success will build upon success, no matter how small.
- 2. Make Lists:** Mark off each task you've completed. You'll feel a sense of accomplishment each time you cross off something that is completed.
- 3. Acknowledge your fear:** Take 10 minutes each morning to actually acknowledge and experience your paralyzing fear of not beginning or completing a project. Journal about your fear, or talk with a trusted friend about it. Then imagine placing your fear in a safe place and launch into the first step of completing the dreaded task.
- 4. Develop a personal reward system:** Permit yourself to do something you really enjoy ONLY after you've completed a manageable portion of a task/project. Example: I will write this paper, and then I will go to a restaurant for lunch. The pull of an instant gratification will help push you towards a successful completion of the task/project.
- 5. Evaluate if the task is crucial:** Ask yourself, "Must this task/ project be done?" as well as, "what if I don't do this project? What is the likely outcome?"
- 6. Assess your options:** For instance, if you don't like the task you're suppose to do, determine if you can swap the task with a co-worker, spouse, friend, etc. We don't have to like everything that we do, but sometimes, what we personally dislike, someone else might prefer.

In addition to the above suggestions, I believe Nike has offered the best advice, yet: "Just Do It!" As many procrastinators know, the worse agony comes from knowing that you are not addressing a crucial task. Once you've convinced yourself to go ahead and tackle the task, you'll probably notice that the bulk of your anxiety diminishes.

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