

Procrastination

Student Counselling Service

20 Laurie Grove
T 020 7919 7472
mcs01cs@gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross London SE14 6NW

T 020 7919 7774 F 020 7919 7773
www.goldsmiths.ac.uk

Understanding Procrastination

Procrastination is when you delay doing something you need to do. The common procrastination phrase is “putting it off until tomorrow”. Procrastination can mean the avoidance of any task, but areas arise frequently within a university context.

Procrastination often includes delays around:

- meeting deadlines
- completing course work
- dealing with financial or job matters
- addressing important health issues
- dealing with serious emotional issues
- avoidance of relationships problems.

There are many other possible examples of procrastination. This booklet seeks to help you identify possible explanations of why you procrastinate and practical ways to be able to complete tasks.

Procrastination commonly involves:

1. Missed deadlines

From time to time, we all find that we miss deadlines. But if you are regularly late with completing work, or have to make excuses or request extensions, consider this a procrastination problem. Other signs of procrastination might include regularly being late for appointments or finding it difficult to arrive at lectures.

2. Time wasting

Working ineffectively is another sign of procrastination. This involves when you sit down intending to work or read, but do not achieve what you intended, or do so little that the time would have been better spent doing something else. We all know the feeling of time passing and still staring at a blank page when we should have written or even completed an assignment. But this can become a problem if it is a regular occurrence.

Understanding Procrastination

(Continued)

3. Not starting

Procrastinators often delay commencing a task. This can be for a range of different reasons, but the first step in tackling the problem is being able to understand how we may deceive ourselves in believing our avoidance tactics.

Examples of how we fail to get started can include:

- waiting for inspiration
- not being 'in the mood' to work
- waiting for the 'right time' to start
- waiting for the 'right conditions' to begin a task.

These and other avoidance tactics are the types of wrong thinking procrastinators need to be aware of in order to begin to make changes in order to begin tasks.

4. Creating diversions

We can often be more creative than usual when it comes to setting up a diversion that helps us to delay an unattractive task. This can include making telephone calls, doing housework or other chores that we suddenly make a new priority. Often in hindsight, when the time has past, we regret these impromptu diversions as we have lost an opportunity to make progress in the work we are avoiding.

5. Scrambling at the last minute

After employing several delaying tactics, the deadline has arrived. Often with less than 24 hours, we do the dreaded 'all nighter' to complete the task. We stay up into the early morning hours in order to complete the task and feel physically worse for it. If this pattern sounds familiar and is regularly occurring, it is time to take your procrastination problem seriously.

6. Guilt and frustration

Once the task has been completed (probably late) or not at all, we feel bad about ourselves. If we have completed the task, then we may feel we have done it poorly and it doesn't reflect our true potential as we rushed it through at the last minute. If we have failed to complete the task, then we reproach ourselves as being a failure. We may also feel shame and anger that can lead to self-destructive behaviours, such as excessive eating, drinking, smoking or more serious, self-harming behaviours.

If more than two of the above points are regular patterns, then you probably have a problem with deferring in areas that are important. This booklet can help you to change these habits and help yourself to become successful in achieving your goals.

Causes of procrastination

Understanding your own thoughts and feelings that cause you to procrastinate are a powerful resource in the first step in changing these avoidance habits. Below are some of the most common.

Fear of failure

Linking the task to our self-worth is often the crucial mistake that leads to deferring a task. We can often go to self-defeating lengths to prevent feeling judged. Yet, when we judge ourselves as failures, we fulfil this expectation by either not completing the task, finishing the task late, or completing the task in a substandard way. But if we wrongly believe that our self worth is based on our talent and our performance, then procrastination becomes the way that we block either of these aspects from being on display.

In other words, no one can have an opinion on either our abilities or our performance of a task if there is no completed task available to judge.

Fear of success

There are many reasons why potential success can be threatening. For some, there is the fear that success can be too difficult to maintain, for others, cultural pressures may bring deep shame on those who fail, while others simply fear competition and not winning.

Some procrastinators avoid success because on some irrational level, they expect to be negatively labelled for their desire to win, For example, they may fear being thought of as 'selfish', 'arrogant', if they are successful. Additionally, if you are a winner, then someone else becomes the loser. This is also a reason many avoid 'being in the game', and simply adopt the defence mechanism of 'I can't be bothered'. This is another form of avoidance and procrastination.

For others the fear of success is based on low self-esteem issues,

feeling that they are not worthy or deserving of success. They may feel that they are bad or have done bad things, so good things should not happen to them. Guilty feelings often predominate making it difficult for this type of procrastinator to distinguish between actual bad behaviour and imagined bad behaviour.

Similarly, some people procrastinate because of another low self-esteem issue: fatalism. This is the feeling that they are unlucky or never successful. They will never achieve success so they avoid trying or try half-heartedly.

Fear of success can also result from people who feel that they will lose love or be hated by others if they succeed. They cannot conceive of having both success and good relations with others. They feel this could lead to becoming a cold-hearted overachiever, who will be shunned by all good, fun-loving people. They feel their potential success will alienate others.

If you fear success for any reason, the important thing to remember is to focus on understanding and combating your anxieties that lead you to procrastinate. In this way you will make gradual progress towards your goals. This is an ongoing struggle as the successes you experience as you progress may become threatening. But through understanding your fears and unhelpful (and often inaccurate) beliefs, you gradually begin to move ahead.

Procrastination in relationships: Fear of intimacy and fear of separation

Procrastination affects not only work-related matters, but also relationships. What is being deferred here is friendship and love. Procrastination in relationships can take two forms - fear of intimacy or fear of separation

Intimacy: People who fear intimacy are more comfortable keeping others at a distance. If you are uncomfortable with closeness, the

Causes of procrastination

(Continued)

thought of being in an intimate friendship or loving relationship may make you feel drained, claustrophobic or smothered. You may even view such relationships with suspicion or cynicism – out of fear. These fears can create a ‘half-in / half-out’ approach to the relationship, where commitment becomes a challenge – frustrating the loving, non-procrastinating partners who may be ready for a deeper friendship or long-term relationship. The procrastinator may feel that they must partially or fully withdraw for fear of losing their identity, being over-protective of their own interests or being drained by the demands of their partner. For many the fear is so great that they delay ever risking a relationship, despite having to adapt to a life of loneliness.

Separation: The fear of separation is the opposite of fear of intimacy. People who fear separation have a very narrow ‘comfort zone’ range and can easily feel panicky with unfamiliar changes to those people they are close to. Procrastination becomes a method to ensure that their relationships are tightly controlled so that they feel secure.

A common example is someone who feels their ideas are not valid and they require another person to tell them what to think. This is common with students who may do the preparation or extensive research, but cannot complete their written assignments or theses. When they try to do so, they feel they blank out or criticise their own thinking, often deferring to the ideas of others. This makes them feel that they may need someone else to help them.

A variation on the above are students who delay finishing dissertations because they don’t want to leave the university, their colleagues, mentors or tutors.

Another example is someone who becomes ‘helpless’ when they feel they are being asked to be more independent within a relationship. They will create a problem through delaying important decisions or tasks that require them to be rescued. This lessens their fear of abandonment.

There are many causes to procrastination. Below are some of the most common ones found within a university setting.

Perfectionism

Unknowingly, people who procrastinate are often perfectionists. As a way of showing how talented we are, we can often set ourselves up to fail. This is often done by over-estimating how quickly we can complete a task. Researchers have identified two types of perfectionists:

- Adaptive – adaptive perfectionists have high standards and believe their performance lives up to these. This is closely identified with self-esteem and sense of identity. This group wants perfection often before they have worked for it, as they cannot accept the time it takes to achieve a task of the (often impossibly) high standards they set.
- Maladaptive - maladaptive perfectionists are over-concerned about making mistakes. This group are high achievers, but are flexible enough to know that they will sometimes fail and will need to improve on their efforts.

Lack of Self-Confidence

People who suffer from procrastination tend to have lower self esteem and be less confident than others. If you do not feel good about yourself, you may feel that others are cleverer and that you can’t bear to show your perceived inferior work. It is important to be aware of how you criticise yourself and how this can cause you to freeze when work is due in order to avoid being judged. Counselling is helpful in assisting people to develop a stronger sense of confidence.

Causes of procrastination

(Continued)

Poor Study Skills

Learn to develop good study skill to avoid feeling overwhelmed. There are resources within the University that can provide you with help. Learning to read and write regularly and methodically is essential.

Failure to understand how to produce work quickly can lead to feeling overwhelmed and cause procrastination.

Anger

It is not unusual to find university life frustrating and disappointing at times. However, procrastination can occur when your angry feelings get the better of you. Examples are when you may feel let down by friends or even possibly your tutors. An angry response to this can be an avoidance of social or academic responsibilities.

It is not unusual to express our disappointment or frustration in self-defeating ways, such as not completing our work or doing it badly. But this type of behaviour is counter-productive and masks our upset feelings. It is better to seek counselling or at least talk to an understanding friend about your upset emotions.

Lifestyle

It is important to balance work and pleasure, and to ensure that you are sleeping and eating well and living as healthy a lifestyle as possible. Alcohol and drugs will impair the immune system and can make it more difficult for you to work effectively and to cope.

University life requires you to establish a structure, in terms of regular studying habits and ongoing exams and dissertation preparations. Failure to establish a structure early on can lead to delays in meeting your tasks.

Emotional and mental health problems

If you become overwhelmed, you will feel unable to complete tasks or cope with your personal relationships. This can potentially exacerbate emotional problems, making task completion difficult.

If you begin to feel fragile emotionally, you have several potential options, depending on what you feel is most appropriate. These can include:

- visiting your GP
- talking about your problem with a supportive family member or friend
- seeking counselling at the Student Counselling Service

If you experience emotional problems during the night or weekends:

- telephone help lines like the Samaritans can help
- going to a local hospital Accident and Emergency Department in an emergency, especially if you are experiencing extreme feelings, such as self-harm thoughts.

Causes of procrastination

(Continued)

Understanding procrastination patterns

Another cause of procrastination is anxiety. In fact, procrastination and anxiety are closely linked. The following is a common, five-stage process describing how many people procrastinate:

1. You equate the task with your self-worth
2. You use perfectionism to make the task seem even more difficult
3. Anxiety completely blocks you from working
4. Procrastination rescues you from anxiety
5. You introduce a threat to complete your task (deadlines may help us to overcome our delays, as can the potential fear of failing your course and having to leave Goldsmiths.)

By understanding where you are within this cycle of delaying your goals, you can begin to change your behaviours and unhelpful thoughts to do something different that will help you to problem solve and become more productive.

What can you do about procrastination?

You can actually improve your ability to complete tasks. A key part of this involves thinking about how you can strategically achieve your goals by setting up a regular work routine. Below are some specific examples of practical things to do to overcome delaying habits.

Three things you can do to help yourself:

1. Set realistic goals, using the 'SMART goals' method

Setting realistic goals can be a bit of an art form. One effective way to set objectives is to use the SMART-goal. SMART becomes an acronym for:

- S = Specific
- M = Measurable
- A = Attainable
- R = Realistic
- T = Timely

Specific

Goals should be clear and state what you want to happen. You should avoid goals with negative wording that describe the problem (e.g. NOT: "I want to stop procrastinating".) Specific, constructively-worded goals can help you to focus your efforts and facilitate achieving your objectives. (e.g., PREFERABLE: "I will work an uninterrupted 45 minutes on actual writing of my thesis four days a week until I've completed it.")

Measurable

Measurable goals provide a useful gauge of your progress. Use a series of short-term goals that you can measure to work up to the overall goal.

What can you do about procrastination?

(Continued)

Attainable

Don't set yourself up to fail. Make your goals something you can actually do. The whole point of goal setting is to achieve success. Therefore, you want to make sure that you don't frustrate you from accomplishing their objectives.

Realistic

Realistic, means achievable, not 'easy'. Realistic goals are also goals that are relevant and results-oriented. They should directly address the task.

Timely

Try setting not just an overall deadline, but a timescale for interim steps that will lead to the overall goal. For example, what do you want to achieve in the next 48 hours, the next week, the next month, etc.?

Try also to be strict with keeping to these goals. If you fall behind, increase your input to keep on track. Make some sacrifices, like missing your favourite TV programme or the coffee date with your friend. Remember to protect your regularly scheduled work time and learn to say 'no' to unnecessary distractions.

So, given the above SMART goal principles, below is an example of an ineffective and effective goal.

- Not: 'I want to finish my 100- page thesis (which I haven't yet started) as soon as possible.'
- Instead: 'I want to write two pages per hour working two uninterrupted hours each day, with Sundays as a rest day. I'll plan to write a minimum of 12 pages a week and have 48 pages done in the next month.'

2. Expect obstacles and setbacks

Be prepared to occasionally get stuck and when you do, to find a different way to problem solve so that you can continue the work as soon as possible. This may mean working in a different way or another related area that keeps you on track for your goals.

3. Use the next 15 minutes

Right now ask yourself what you can achieve in the next 15 minutes that will help you to achieve something that will move you closer to your goal. This will help you to have easy wins and also teach you the value of using even the smallest time units productively. This can also help you to be vigilant of your excuses and diversions as this time period must be used in an uninterrupted manner, so excuses like hunger and tiredness may rise, but given the small time frame, can be easily overcome.

4. Reward your progress along the way

When you achieve an interim goal, reward yourself. This can be encouraging and mark the effort you have applied. Focusing on healthy rewards (preferably not alcohol or unhealthy eating), such as gentle exercise, or meeting with a friend can lead you to develop a lifestyle where you can have guilt-free pleasure.

5. Learn to understand the emotional causes of your procrastination

Consider your procrastination as a pointer to difficult feelings. If you can do this in a way where you explore the feeling (instead of criticising yourself) you may find a way to solve the problem and develop more constructive patterns. This is an area where counselling can be very helpful as often these feelings may be ingrained or even unconscious.

How Counselling can help

Counselling can help you understand the emotional and cognitive roots of your own procrastination. This can then enable you to break your delaying habits. By discussing your issues with a counsellor you can improve your self-esteem issues and overcome low feelings resulting from problems with procrastination and under-achievement.

Counselling can also be useful in helping to reduce anxiety and become more productive and creative. Counselling clients frequently are able to increase their confidence and their ability to complete tasks.

Counselling is additionally helpful if you feel that you are having serious emotional or mental health problems, even if these have existed for a while. Even if you feel that you have issues that are intractable, you may be pleasantly surprised at how more effectively you are able to work and manage relationships after having discussed these matters with a counsellor.

Getting additional help

Procrastination can be a serious problem with health implications for some, so you should feel that it is all right to seek help to resolve it.

If you are feeling distraught and feel your emotional and physical health are at stake, you should make an appointment with your GP to discuss what help you can receive.

Serious emotional, physical or mental health problems may have medical causes and these should certainly be explored as a matter of priority with your doctor.

Medical and emotional problems can at times co-exist and it may be helpful to explore seek help simultaneously in both areas to achieve overcome serious problems.

Procrastination is an issue that you can overcome if you take action to do something about it. It can be empowering to face a problem and overcome it, and this is something that is achievable if you take action.

Books

Procrastination: Why you do it. What to do About it Now
- Jane Burka, PhD.

Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and
Enjoying Guilt-free Play - Neil A. Fiore

Self-Hypnosis For Dummies - Mike Bryant

Isn't it About Time?: How to Overcome Procrastination and Get on
with Your Life - Andrea Perry and Joel Mischon

Eat That Frog!: Get More of the Important Things Done, Today!
- Brian Tracy

Notes...

Notes...

Notes...

Notes...

