

WELLNESS TIPS

CHALLENGING PROCRASTINATION

We all experience procrastination, putting off doing something. Sometimes it's even for a good reason! For some of us it's an occasional occurrence. For others, it's a pattern that is distressing because it interferes with planned routines and goals, and results in feeling stressed, anxious, and worried. Some people believe that performance improves under time constraint pressures created from procrastinating, but this belief isn't supported by research. It's a myth.

James Clear discusses the dilemma that occurs between the present and the future, with a tendency to choose in favor of the present because there is an immediate reward. This occurs with procrastination - immediate relief and decrease in anxiety. And because decisions to procrastinate recur frequently ("I'll do it in the morning", "I'm going to work on this other assignment first", "I'll do it after lunch"), decreased tension is reinforced more often than the satisfaction derived from completing the task. The goal of challenging the tendency to procrastinate is to make future rewards matter now. And the more often you tackle a task in a timely manner, the feelings of satisfaction of completing the task are reinforced.

Steps you can take to challenge a tendency to procrastinate:

1. Decide to start – jump in. Remember, figuring out how to do a task or project is part of the process. This might include consulting with others or talking over your plan with someone. This will help create momentum.
2. Create manageable pieces. Break both the project and your time into small pieces to feel less overwhelmed. Small successes in completing each section are reinforcing and contribute to feeling productive (bringing that future goal into the present).
3. Make space for your work. Is your physical environment conducive to working? How about your mental space? Have you minimized distractions?
4. Set alarms and reminders to start and to help you stay on track. When is your most productive time to work? Fit the project in here.
5. Build in accountability. Sharing your plan with others increases the odds that you will follow through. Plan to meet someone to exercise together. Make an appointment to review progress with someone.
6. Reward yourself. Figure out what rewards work for you. Beware of rewards that are distracting or suck up too much time.
7. Decrease on-line activities (including shopping). They might be effective as judicious rewards or during breaks but use cautiously. (see #6)
8. Hook your rewards to the activity. Connect the thing you really like to the activity you are avoiding, such as listening to a favorite podcast while exercising. Or a favorite treat once you have completed the introduction to your paper.

9. Make consequences more immediate. Volunteer to present first to the group. Commit to completing material by scheduling a review time with your friend. Commit to asking two questions during group tutor sessions.
10. Plan for future actions. For example, if you are putting off beginning a healthier diet, buy snacks in individual packets to limit calories. Put fruit on the counter to make it more accessible for a quick snack. Make sure you have your resources available when you plan to begin studying for an exam or writing a paper.
11. Use visual cues/reminders. If you would like to begin exercising, lay out or pack your exercise clothes the night before. Place books on the table where you plan to study. Display your progress – such as a checklist or a calendar.
12. Pay attention to your self-talk. Thoughts often associated with procrastinating:
 - “this is going to be a pain...”
 - “I might not do a good job”
 - “I’m not sure what to do”
 - “I’m not sure how to do it”
 - “I don’t want to . . . ”
 - “It’s too late now. I’ll do it tomorrow”
 - “I have plenty of time”
 - “I do this myself and not ask for input”

These thoughts are often based on assumptions that aren’t accurate. Try to become aware of them and began to challenge them. Identify exceptions that don’t support that thought. Ask yourself how that thought is helping you. Ask yourself how someone whose judgment you trust would reply to that thought.

The Ivy Lee Method can be helpful in challenging procrastination:

At the end of the day identify six (or another number but keep it manageable) things to do tomorrow. Prioritize the items on your list.

The next day: Concentrate on the highest priority task. (Remember, this doesn’t have to be the entire project). At the end of the day, move any unfinished items to the next day’s list.

This method is simple. It commits you to getting started; supports focusing on only one thing at a time; and the feeling of accomplishment motivates you to move on to the next items.

Notice how you feel when making progress on your project and especially, when it is completed. It’s great if anxiety and tension are decreased. If they aren’t, think about what may be playing a role and if this something you need assistance with. For example, perfectionism can make it difficult to get started and talking with a counselor may be beneficial.

Psychology Today. “Why It’s Easy to Procrastinate – and 7 Ways to Break the Habit.” December 12, 2016. Seth J. Gillihan.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-act-be/201612/why-its-easy-procrastinate-and-7-ways-break-the-habit>

Psychology Today. “12 Ways to Beat Procrastination.” November 12, 2016. Susan Krauss Whitbourne.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201611/12-ways-beat-procrastination>

“Procrastination: A scientific Guide on How to Stop Procrastinating.” James Clear.

<https://jamesclear.com/procrastination>

Psychology Today. “How Negative Thoughts Relate to Procrastination.” March 8, 2018. Timothy A. Pychyl.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dont-delay/201803/how-negative-thoughts-relate-procrastination>

If you would like to talk with a counselor about tendency to procrastinate or other questions or concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC.

Stay well and stay healthy!

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If you would like to review previous Wellness Tips, check the CCOM Medical Student Counseling Center Website:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>