Procrastination

Related guides: ‘Perfectionism’

Procrastination, or putting things off, is a common habit in all walks of life and it is particularly common among students. Procrastination can seriously threaten academic achievement or course completion and can become a serious problem affecting many areas of a person’s life. The aim of this leaflet is to explain some of the signs, causes and ways of dealing with procrastination.

For some people it works well to allow the pressure to build before starting on a piece of work but if you find this tendency getting out of hand, and you start to fall increasingly behind with your work, then you might need to address the issue of procrastination.

Signs of procrastination

The following are common signs of procrastination:

- **Difficulty starting a piece of work or revision**
  Are you often waiting for the “right” moment to start and consequently continually preparing for a piece of work rather than doing it?

- **Craving and creating diversions**
  Are you constantly flitting between tasks and being busy but never getting down to work? Suddenly, the vacuuming or washing up can become much more attractive when there is something more important or difficult to do.

- **Last minute rushing and missed deadlines**
  Do you often hand in assignments late or work into the night for a few days before each deadline? Do you have difficulty getting to classes or miss classes because you are behind on an assignment?

- **Guilt and inability to enjoy recreational activities**
  You might be easily distracted by friends and social opportunities but these times might be spoilt by a nagging guilt that you should be working or you might feel guilty at not achieving the grade you wanted on a piece of work.
• **Disappointment and self-reproach**
  If you are carrying guilt about putting things off, you might also be feeling quite bad about yourself in other ways. You might feel frustrated and angry with yourself while continually putting things off until tomorrow.

• **Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities**
  Putting things off can have the effect of creating a bottleneck of things to do so that you feel overwhelmed and unable to pay attention to anything as a result.

• **Daydreaming and wishing instead of doing**
  These might seem like harmless activities but for someone who is prone to procrastination, dreaming about and making plans for the future can take the place of actually getting things done.

• **Talking without acting**
  Sometimes it is useful to share ideas with other people or to talk things through before making a big decision but if your plans never get further than the discussion phase, you might want to find a way of taking action.

**Where does it come from?**

• **Over-Aversion to Discomfort**
  Some tasks in life are truly unpleasant and it is natural to want to avoid the discomfort of completing them. However, other tasks, such as completing a degree are difficult and challenging for good reasons. (That is why the completion of a degree is usually seen as an important accomplishment.) It is natural to find the challenge of academic work uncomfortable and if you can face up to this discomfort you can expect to get to grips with it quite quickly. If you continually put off uncomfortable things you never break through the “pain barrier” to the comfort and sense of achievement beyond.

• **Lack of Self-Confidence**
  If you are quick to blame yourself when you find things difficult, you might be using self-defeating talk that makes problems seem insurmountable and puts you off trying altogether.

• **Fear of Success**
  Sometimes, getting started and completing a task can mean moving on and changing. Success can be linked to increased responsibility and for some people this means increased anxiety and worry.
• **Getting Overwhelmed**
  Putting things off can cause a build up of things to do and a sense of being swamped by responsibilities. With academic work, you might find yourself overwhelmed by piles of notes or books, making it difficult to know where or how to start.

• **Under-Developed Study Skills**
  Study skills help you to work efficiently and effectively. If you haven’t addressed how you work or looked at how to improve your skills, you might be wasting precious time and energy. If you are working hard for little or no return you are more likely to become demoralised and tired.

• **Unrealistic Expectations**
  Some people set unrealistically high goals thus increasing the pressure on themselves to perform. Rather than settling for producing work that is a true reflection of their abilities, they end up producing rushed or incomplete work. Procrastination allows them to keep alive the belief that they could get a first, if only they’d got started sooner!

• **Resentment and passive-aggressive behaviour**
  One possible underlying factor to procrastination is the experience of having authoritarian parents. Procrastination provides a non-direct way of resisting the demands of parents while providing the person with a sense of autonomy. Therefore, if you have reason to feel resentful about your situation at University, you might use procrastination to express these kinds of feelings. As one writer put it procrastination is a “sophisticated form of sulking.”

• **Lifestyle**
  Procrastination can become a habit and can affect every aspect of a person’s life. Your lifestyle can reinforce procrastination especially if you have erratic sleeping patterns or use drink and drugs to distract you.

• **Depression**
  An inability to concentrate or a lack of motivation can also be symptoms of depression. If you are aware of other symptoms such as changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or a persistent low mood you might want to seek further help.

**Remember!**
Procrastination is reinforcing. Every time you delay, it reinforces your negative attitude towards that task. Every time you put off a task you:

1. strengthen the habit of not doing;
2. practice avoidance instead of participation;
3. avoid acquiring training and skills, and
4. indoctrinate yourself with fear.
What can you do about it?

- **Do something now!**
  Do not wait for the right moment to start. Procrastination often involves preparing, preparing and preparing. Often it really is a good idea to start doing something before you feel ready. You might be surprised by how much you know already!

- **Take a task-oriented, not a time-oriented approach.**
  Be specific about what you need to do. Don’t say “I’ll read for three hours,” say “I’ll read 10 pages.” Framing a task in terms of the task itself and not the time it should take, frees you up to focus on getting the task done and you are likely to be more efficient with your time.

- **Don’t stop because something is difficult.**
  If you come up against a problem, ask for help. If you put everything on hold when you meet a problem, it will never get resolved.

- **Use Premack’s principle.**
  David Premack is an American psychologist who has studied the nature of behaviour. His research shows that by putting unpleasant tasks or “work” before pleasant tasks or “play”, the probability of performing the difficult or unpleasant task will go up and the probability of performing the less onerous task will go down. That is, you are more likely to get something unappealing done if you put it before something more appealing e.g. going to the bar!

- **Be realistic.**
  Set realistic and incremental goals for your work. Use Premack’s principle (above) to include time off and relaxation after an effective work session. Don’t expect to be able to work for hours on end without a break. Similarly, work out what standard you can realistically achieve and start working towards it. You might be able to revise your standard upwards after you have gained motivation and started working more effectively.

- **Consider your lifestyle.**
  Consider how your lifestyle supports your procrastination. In particular, try to establish a regular sleep pattern and if necessary seek help for problems with alcohol or drugs.

- **Take action on things you really cannot stand.**
  If you feel your de-motivation is related to external issues such as your choice of course then it might be better to act now rather than let things drift towards failure.
Recommended Reading

Andrea Perry’s “The Little Book of Procrastination” is full of useful hints and tips for overcoming procrastination and is small enough to carry in your bag or pocket for a bit of instant inspiration.

Student Counselling in UK Universities has links to online resources from universities across the country.

This leaflet is based on material from the following:

Academic Services, Study Skills Library, California Polytechnic State University
Royal Holloway Student Counselling Service

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a Learning Enhancement Tutor in the Student Support Service, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

Call: 01603 592761
Ask: ask.let@uea.ac.uk
Click: https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our website.

Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.