

## Overcoming Procrastination

One would think that the solution to procrastination (not doing it) is its exact opposite: doing it! That the cure is doing the very thing it is that is being avoided.

Well it is, and then some. Since procrastination is the cause of not doing (rather than merely the lack of action), simply doing that which is being procrastinated may not be psychologically possible while the mental obstacle or technical problem causing the procrastination is in place. Also, as explained above, procrastination can be a powerful psychological force in its own right. Therefore, the procrastinator needs to get over, go around, or somehow plod through these mental barriers in order to get on with it. This is dependent upon the very nature of procrastination itself...

In essence, procrastination is a form of incompetence. To cure it is to eliminate it. Since incompetence is the opposite or lack of competence, the only way to eliminate it is to replace it with competence.

Personal competence comprises five elements: emotional strength, well directed thought, time-management skills, control over habits, and task completion abilities. Therefore, most strategies for overcoming procrastination are based on improving these five skill areas, and involve: improving emotional control and adjusting one's underlying attitude, focusing attention and thinking rationally, learning executive (self-management) procedures like planning and scheduling, learning habit-changing methods, and acquiring better task completion and problem solving skills.

To the extent that procrastination is an emotional problem, acquiring control over emotions brings the problem under control. Emotions are invoked by perception, which in turn is dependent on attitude, stress tolerance, and moods (which are simply sustained emotions that become trends). Therefore, by rebuilding or improving these foundations, emotional strength can be increased to handle the problems and opportunities encountered everyday, emotional or otherwise. There are both psychological and physiological methods of doing this.

### Attitude adjustment

Personal attitude is the foundation of an individual's emotions. If a person believes that the world is out to get him and that he has been dealt a losing hand in life, he's likely to walk around with a frown on his face feeling sorry for himself or being mad at everyone else, saying things like "why try anything at all, it won't matter anyways". But, on the other hand, if he believes he has a great many things to be thankful for, that the world is a great place, and opportunity abounds, then he is more likely to work hard and greet everyone with a smile just because he feels good about himself and them too.

Attitude isn't a static set of personal beliefs that a person is stuck with for the rest of his life. Attitude is an approach: at anytime, anyone can decide to look on the bright side of things, or not. The former engenders hope, enthusiasm, and joy, while the latter invites fear, loathing and misery. The choice on how to perceive the world is up to each person. Below are some of the perceptions of which a positive attitude may be comprised...

- A positive mental attitude inspires ongoing action, especially when it includes a strong work ethic. Adopting an uplifting personal philosophy can provide the basis for such an attitude, especially when it emphasizes the importance of virtues. This usually entails pondering the meaning of life to determine what is important in life, and what approach to take. A positive outlook on life engenders positive emotion in life, which in turn inspires action.
- Dream envisioning is daring to imagine the desired future. The stronger it is (through repetition) and the more detailed its outcome is, the more compelling the dream becomes as a road map for action. Making dreams come true is what success is all about, and a well-envisioned dream which remains "in view" at all times is one of the most powerful motivators there is. That's why visionaries are called visionaries. To live a life's dream is to think about it all the time, to continually think about everything in terms of that dream.
- Maintaining a positive mental voice means refraining from self-criticism, keeping critiques directed upon actions and strategies rather than one's person, and replacing self-putdowns with uplifting self-encouragement. The main character in the children's tale *The Little Engine that could* provides a perfect example of this approach. While everyone else told him that he would never make it up the mountain track, the Little Engine kept telling himself "I think I can, I think I can", even in the face of overwhelming odds, until his belief in himself carried him through. Then, on his way down the other side of the mountain he shouted in victory "I knew I could, I knew I could, I knew I could!" Now that's attitude in motion!
- Rebounding after a defeat, like getting back in the saddle after falling off the horse, is usually better than giving up and not trying anything that big again. Volitional depression, a fancy term for discouragement, is where a person, after a big failure (like losing a fortune on the stock market, a divorce, going bankrupt, or a failed start-up company) retreats into himself or into an addiction (like drugs, becoming obsessed with the internet, collecting things, or engaging in sex as often as possible) instead of taking on another big project to go after success yet again. The resilience to get back up after a failure and go for "it" again is much more conducive to success, and as a character trait is diametrically opposed to procrastination. The average successful entrepreneur fails six times before making it big. Keeping this in mind makes getting started again a lot easier, because it is a reminder that interim failure is temporary and is just part of the learning process of achievement -- winners keep going.

- Counting blessings - One aspect of 'looking on the bright side' is inventorying opportunities, skills, and strengths, rather than bemoaning problems, inadequacies, and weaknesses. Seeing a situation as a 'glass half full' rather than a 'glass half empty' is the more inspiring approach. It is easy to take ever-present things for granted, while complaining about things that are missing. Remember the saying "I felt really bad that I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet!" Appreciating those things that are usually taken for granted makes for a much better starting point than feeling sorry for oneself, plus it increases awareness of what resources there are to work with.
- Building on strengths - Make a list of all the things you already master. Ask yourself how you got to be an expert in doing these things - and then, try to explain the differences between your "can't-dos" and "can-dos". To what feelings and circumstances are they attached? You may be able to apply the same approaches you used on acquiring your current skills to attain the new skills you need.
- Building self-confidence - The only one source of self-confidence is enjoying success. But, the problem is that often you can only succeed against other people, e.g. by having equal or better marks than others. The problem is that you did procrastinate for such a long time that you are like a child which is learning to walk - but having put off the walking courses, it can only succeed when compared against a much younger baby. Stop comparing yourself with others - set your own goals! Get to know other people who find themselves in a like situation; you can learn from them that they did not fare better by comparing themselves with successful people.
- Being progressive helps to put down your old feelings and habits. Remove old things from your room or apartment - they are associated with your old personality. If you possess something that vigorously reminds you of a sad, unlucky era - then get rid of it.

Another way to beat procrastination is by leading a healthy lifestyle. An unhealthy lifestyle makes a person much more susceptible to stress, which leads to feelings of being overwhelmed, which can lead to procrastination. By making a few adjustments to his lifestyle, like how much he exercises, a person can greatly increase how much stress they can handle...

### **Increasing stress tolerance**

Some people are more susceptible to stress than others. In other words, those others are more tolerable to stress than those susceptible. The greater your tolerance, the more stress it takes to get you down. Stress falling below one's tolerance threshold is "no big deal", and is easy to deal with. What many don't realize is that this tolerance level is adjustable -- it can be strengthened...

Vigorous cardiovascular exercise increases resistance to stress, boosts the immune system, and improves oxygen supply to the brain and general

mental performance (including intellectual performance, ability to focus, memory, etc.). Such exercise includes walking, speed walking, running, swimming, biking, hiking, and aerobics.

Good nutrition, including nutrient supplementation, improves cognitive performance, boosts the immune system, and provides the brain with the precursors necessary for it to make the stress-coping neurotransmitters it needs. Abstaining from poor nutrition, such as by cutting down on sweets and sugar drinks, reduces hyperactivity, difficulty focusing, and obesity (which hampers the immune system, general performance, and proclivity to exercise).

Relaxation methods such as fractional relaxation, progressive relaxation, trance induction, and meditation reduce the effects of stress: tension and anxiety. The ability to remain calm and worry-free in the face of stressful situational factors is called self-composure. The ability to stay tension-free during a stressful situation, including using only as much energy and muscle tension required to complete motions, is called relaxed poise. Combined together, these skills are called grace under pressure.

### **Enhancing mood control**

Emotions, including moods, drive behaviour. But our moods are our responsibility, and concerning each of them we can choose to feel that way or not. We can feel like throwing a tantrum and putting things off, or we can feel like doing something useful...

- Being alert to one's own moods is preferable to not paying attention to what one is feeling (and consequentially to what one is doing because of these moods). The first step to changing a mood is to be aware of it. Here is a simple ABC of bad moods to keep a look out for: angry, bored, cranky, dreadful, frustrated, grumpy, hurt, ill-tempered, justified, kicked, lazy, mean, nosy, obsolete, feeling like putting it off until later, feeling like quitting, robbed, selfish, tired, used, vexed, whipped, feeling like yelling at someone, zeroed in on (or zeroed out). When you spot one, you can catch yourself, and change your emotional approach: your mood.
- Positive filter is to retain the positive thoughts and actions and ignore or keep out the negative ones. Negative thoughts tend to build up and often become pervasive in one's life. When we continuously encourage positive thoughts and suppress negative ones, we develop a better outlook towards life and ourselves.
- Adjusting taste is changing how you feel about something, like learning to love what you hate. This is accomplished by changing how you think about it: dwelling on the benefits and good traits of an activity may lead to actually liking it. Finding fun ways to do it, like turning it into a game, may also make it more enjoyable.

- Managing fear - One way to overcome fear is to face it. Usually, the more exposure one has to a stressful stimulus, the more used to it he gets. This is called desensitisation.

### **Improving thinking**

If you've ever wondered, "What was I thinking?" after doing something really stupid (like putting off a very important project to the last minute, or playing when you should have been studying), maybe you weren't thinking at all. Or maybe your reasons weren't very good, because you didn't put enough thought into them. These problems are the result of a lack of concentration. The solution to distractions and opportunities competing for attention involves improving concentration and how one concentrate: acquiring better focusing and decision-making abilities.

### **Thinking rationally**

Thinking it through -- this is reasoning through an intended course of action, going over why each step needs to be done, and predicting what benefits will likely result if they are completed. Also, making a mental list of the consequences that will be suffered if the tasks are not completed is part of this exercise. The virtual carrot and the stick. The goal here is to work out one's reservations and talk oneself into doing what needs to be done, taking care not to get stuck in transition (such as setting a time limit).

### **Improving problem solving skills**

#### **Acquiring self-management skills**

Since the tendency to procrastinate on a project is roughly proportional to the difficulty of the project, and since its difficulty is relative to our skill in handling such projects, it follows that improving our self-management and organizing skills (e.g. by breaking the project down into small parts) decreases relative difficulty of the project and therefore also reduces its likelihood of intimidating us into procrastinating it. Simply put, simple jobs aren't scary. The more skilled you are at handling projects, the easier such jobs become.

Self-management systems provide simple procedures to help focus efforts and may assist you in mastering your projects and your situation. Nobody plans to fail, but many people fail to plan. Self-management systems help to keep plans in clear focus. Following are some components of a typical self-management system...

#### **Goal vision**

This is a form of goal setting, but more involved. It entails choosing the goal and writing down the goal statement as usual. Then the goal is mentally envisioned as vividly as possible, in as much detail as possible, as often as free time allows, and in every spare moment that becomes available. The

more the goal is thought about and the actions for achieving it mentally rehearsed, the more likely the goal will become a driving force of the person's behaviour. This method is best suited for important projects and life goals.

## Planning

- Goal setting - write down your goal statement. Be as detailed as you can.
- Setting selection criteria - what features must your plan have to be successful? These are the plan's selection criteria.
- Generating strategies - figure out as many ways as you can that the goal could be achieved. Research it if needed. These are the action plans to choose from.
- Selecting a course of action - based on your selection criteria, pick a strategy, your plan of action.
- Develop the chosen plan in more detail - detail the plan down to the task level.
- Putting the plan into action - see below.

## Capturing tasks on a general to-do list

A general to-do list is a place to store tasks until you are ready to schedule them. It is typically a note pad that you keep handy (or a computer file that you keep open) for recording tasks as you think of them, to get them down in a central list where they won't be forgotten and can be easily referred to later. Tasks are regularly chosen from the general to-do list for inclusion in a more specific daily task list (see below).

## Prioritising tasks

Each task has a relative importance (cutting the grass is less important than studying for an exam). Tasks also have an expected duration (cutting the grass takes less time than studying for an exam). Most tasks are also time-sensitive (cutting the grass is flexible whereas studying must be complete before a fixed time). Prioritising is the skill of reconciling these often conflicting attributes to determine which task ought to be performed first.

In an environment where more than one task is undertaken at once, and completion of some tasks is a prerequisite for starting other tasks, and then a Critical path is formed of tasks, which have the highest priority.

## Making and using a daily task list

At the end of the day, before you go to bed, or at the very beginning of the day, just after you wake up, prepare a to-do list for the day. List all the tasks you need or plan to get done that day. Place the tasks in order of priority, or grade their priority in the left-hand column with numbers.

Throughout the day, focus on executing each task on the list, one task at a time, highest priority tasks first. When you accomplish one of the items on the list, you check it off or cross it off.

The traditional method is to write these on a piece of paper with a pen or pencil, usually on a note pad or clipboard. Loose hole-punched paper is often used to allow such lists to be inserted into loose-leaf binders for record keeping. However, numerous software equivalents are now available, and many popular e-mail clients include task list applications, as do most PDAs.

### **Changing habits**

In one sense, procrastination is the habit of not getting started. It is not an action, so much as the lack of an action. It is not a habit, so much as the lack of a habit: the habit of getting started. If one acquires the habit of getting started, then not getting started is no longer an issue. Another word for "get started" is initiate. It is the exact opposite of procrastinate, as long as it is applied to the right task, and not an evasion.

At the same time, an ongoing problem of procrastination is a complex of bad habits. Luckily, old bad ways can be replaced by new good ways. Acquiring new good habits through self-training is key to eliminating the bad habits of evasion and putting things off.

### **Completing tasks**

The above strategies are aimed at preventing procrastination, or replacing it while on "down-time". But no defence is infallible, and because the opportunities, temptations, and tendencies to put things off may occur at any time and place, due to myriad factors, this calls for a collection of front-line coping and problem-solving methods to deal with these factors head-on. Like a "tackle" box for tackling tasks and situations, right here, right now...

### **Maintaining perspective**

Thinking about your dreams in terms of what you are willing to do right now, rather than what you'll do or be someday is a call to action. Transformation is an active process. You are on a journey this very moment. The question is, are you on the right journey? If you aren't going anywhere, or you are heading in the wrong direction (towards failure because you are putting things off), simply adjust course, and live the life you want to live. And if that means making a sacrifice, then go for it! Put in the time and effort required, using all the methods you've learned about above, all the while keeping in mind what it is you are working towards. Always look to the horizon: focus on your dreams, how to make them come true, and actually make them come true one moment and one task at a time.

### **Maintaining grace under pressure**

The most effective way to overcome fear is to face it. Veterans are generally more stable under combat conditions simply because they've been through it before. One method for overcoming fear of heights is practicing climbing ladders, for instance. Stepping up to the first rung, repeated over and over, then two, repeated, and so on, proceeding to the next level only after mastering the one before.

Thrill activities may be good training in this regard. Roller-coaster rides, river rafting, and skydiving can all lower sensitivity to perceived threats. Once you've jumped out of an airplane a few times, asking a girl out on a date may not seem that intimidating anymore. Perhaps an easier way of getting over fear of talking to girls is talking to them every chance you get.

### **Tending the task list at all times**

The task list doesn't do any good if it is not referred to, or if it is not updated frequently. Once using a task list and completing the items on it have become habit, placing a task on the list practically ensures it getting done. Relying continuously on this key tool is a core management skill and executive process. It is a standard method of operation in business for getting things done, and is a central component of competence. Frequently forgetting to do something may be a consequence of not writing it down (and keeping track of it) in the first place.

### **Focusing on one task at-a-time**

- Find the highest priority task, and then concentrate yourself on that one task and forget all the others. Only when you have finished the first, move on to the next item on the list.
- Do something, but plan your time: Do not just "do something", but do something in a defined time frame. Wash the dishes for exactly 15 minutes, and write a letter for 30 minutes. Control your time with a timer (most modern cell phones have one); and fulfilling a (dreaded) task is a lot easier if you know how much time you'll spend.

### **Removing uncertainty**

Often, a person will hesitate on or avoid a task because he or she just doesn't know where to begin. How to complete the task isn't obvious, therefore making the task undoable in its present form. The key here is task selection. Switch to the task's prerequisites: whatever other tasks need to be accomplished before this one can be started.

If you don't know what to do or how to do it, then your default task is to figure it out. If you don't know enough to solve a problem, then finding and learning the required information are the default tasks.



## Dividing and conquering

- Breaking a project down into its component pieces and sub pieces will eventually reach a level of detail where the specific actions that need to be taken can be seen. Once action has started on a specific task, flow may take over and the project may seem like it takes on a life of its own and actually becomes fun. And time flies when you're having fun.
- Take bite-sized morsels -- rather than sit down to "write your book", write one page. Writing one page is easy. When you are done with that page, then you can set about writing the next page. In general, try to plan your work in such a fashion that you've accomplished something in a 30 or 60 minute's time, not only a little bit of something. Or, said in a better example: Instead of just learning hours and hours of chemistry, you specialize on a subject - like "I have problems understanding pH values, so I'll read the relevant chapter about it. Then I make a pause." In this approach, you know that your ordeal has become manageable.

## Easing into the task

You're faced with a task that will take you 20 hours, and you just aren't relishing it. Seen as one big step, the chore is rather ominous. Instead of approaching it like this, try committing to 5 minutes. Now the pressure is off. Five minutes is easy. During those five minutes you will likely see that your evasion was pointless, and that the activity isn't as bad as you thought it was. Once you begin a task and work on it for a while, the initial stress goes away, and you are very likely to feel like continuing.

## Stopping at the point of diminishing returns

- Avoiding perfectionism saves a lot of time. Try to do sufficient works, not perfect ones - a start is a start. Perfectionists aren't any more likely to put things off than other procrastinators, but they are likely to spend much more time putting the finishing touches on a task than they need to. By avoiding perfectionism and by striving for "good" or at least "sufficient" work, you lower the bar of your expectations. The lower the bar, the greater the chance that you succeed - and having success is the only thing in the world that can give you a better self-esteem.
- Check off tasks as they are completed -- in the left-hand margin of your task list, use check-marks to keep track of which tasks you have completed. This provides a visual indicator of progress.

## Scheduling breaks

Most people will, under normal circumstances; work at their best if they take a 10-minute break from their work each hour. Also make limits on your total daily work - when you're learning for an exam, you can't learn more than 6 to 8 hours a day. Being a good student or co-worker does not force you to suffer from overworking or sleeplessness. If you can't adhere to a maximal working time per day, then you should learn to begin earlier instead of trying to work faster.

A great lot of scientific work has shown that good learning - be it practical work that needs fine motoric of your hands or learning for a college exam - requires sleep, as the brain seems to fine-tune and rearrange what you've learned the day before. Try it out: Learn to juggle balls or other objects; and when you begin the next learning period the day after, you magically appear to have less trouble in spite of the fact that you did "not" practise during the night.

### Self-rewards

Another method of self-motivation is self-administered rewards - a method that reminds of reinforcement in psychology. In this approach, even the smallest accomplishment deserves an appropriate reward, due after a task is completed, not before. There are several approaches:

\* Applying a reward structure for spending given amounts of time working on a chore. For five hours of doing something you otherwise detest, make yourself a fine meal. For twenty hours, you go out for a movie, etc. You can even display your rewards symbolically: Take a post-it note, write down your reward, and with checkboxes define how many hours you want to work to achieve that reward. And remind yourself not to do the rewarding thing until you've filled all the checkboxes.

You should make a clear difference between the rewards and all the other things you receive (e.g. your meals at the cantina or watching the TV news). A good reward is something you enjoy and something you don't get every day. If the borderline blurs, a reward is no reward anymore; and so you tend to procrastinate even more because you get the "reward" anyway.

If you exercise a reward system strictly without cheating, there is a high chance that you'll be conquering your procrastination - this is because you get more and more accustomed to working and because you are needing less and smaller rewards over the time.