

WHY WE PROCRASTINATE

ACTION DIVERSIONS

When we procrastinate, we substitute a lower priority task for an important one. This is called an action diversion. It is easier to justify neglecting something important if you are getting something else done, after all.

Tips for dealing with action diversions

- To deal effectively with these diversions, you need to know what triggers them. When you can anticipate which tasks you are going to try and avoid, you can plan ahead to short-circuit your usual procrastination pattern. eg, if you usually end up taking a nap “before” (instead of) exercising, go to the gym **before** you get home. Remove the temptation (in this case by avoiding your bed until after you’ve worked out)
- We all have lots of different responsibilities, and we are constantly shifting from one priority to another. Monitoring yourself as you make these shifts is an important part of curbing procrastination behaviour. Ask yourself: is this more important than what I was about to do?
- Use constructive substitutions: if you are diverting yourself, at least make it something you need to do anyway. The danger here is that this makes it easier to justify your procrastination.
- “Set-go” technique. Once you recognize that you have already started an action diversion, give yourself a time-limit and stay with the diversion for the amount of time you’ve given yourself. Once your time’s up, use the momentum from your diversion and carry it straight to your task.
- A big part of breaking the action-diversion pattern involves bearing the discomfort that can make you want to retreat. Convince yourself to stick with it; repeating this kind of behaviour will increase your frustration tolerance.
- Procrastination at its most extreme: if it isn’t fun, it doesn’t get done. 1. Live through the discomfort, 2. Press yourself into purposeful action. Even when the activity isn’t fun, it is usually better to get it done.

MENTAL DIVERSIONS

Action diversions are usually how the procrastination process starts, but a diversion can only keep you distracted for so long. At some point you are going to start making justifications for your delay, and these are what can keep you from getting started. Most of these mental diversions fall into four main categories.

I’ll do it tomorrow... You put it off because tomorrow will be a better time to get it done. You think that “later is the opposite of now” because if things don’t get done now they will later.

I'll do it tomorrow if... You put it off until you have finished another, possibly related, activity. "I can't write my essay until I've done some research". But then you put off that activity too.

I give up! Strangely enough, this can bring resolution through helplessness. Giving up means that you do not have to struggle, which can be a relief. It also leaves you the opportunity to comfort yourself with the thought that "if I did try, it would have been good".

I can't change, so why try? You think about negative events from the past and see yourself as a victim. You believe you can't move forward without resolution. Beliefs aren't facts; they are *apparent* truths that can often be self-fulfilling prophecies. If you tell yourself you are fated to repeat the same mistakes, then you'll probably end up proving yourself right.

Tips for dealing with mental diversions

- The most important thing is to recognize when you are using a mental diversion to keep from getting something done it to admit it to yourself. Mental diversions have telltale thoughts associated with them that you can use to identify them. "I'll do it later", "I'll do it when I'm ready", "I can't do it". Once you are alert to these justifications, you can challenge these reasons.
- Listen to your mental-diversion voice and take a contrary position. Try telling yourself the opposite thing. Tell yourself that if you wait until tomorrow, the task is just going to be more difficult. The task isn't too hard, and you can do it. Remember, you are trying to stop procrastinating for a good reason.

Try visualizing a character for the voice of your procrastination. Picture someone you don't respect. This person is trying to tempt you from what you need to do, but you don't have to listen to them. They give bad advice. This can add a negative meaning to a normally "seductive" fiction.

EMOTIONAL DIVERSIONS

Often people who are putting something off think they need to be in a certain mood or state of mind before they can act. They are waiting for a "moment of inspiration" when they will be able to easily finish what they need to do. The truth is, you don't need to feel inspired to get unpleasant tasks done. People will also avoid unpleasant or uncomfortable situations because they don't want to interfere with a good mood or because they try to start they feel anxious.

Tips for dealing with emotional diversions

- Imagine changing a source of frustration into a challenge. People like to compete, and motivating yourself with this kind of mentality can be helpful. Try for a personal best, or time yourself.

ACADEMIC

- Find the physical source of your tension (shoulders, neck, stomach, etc.) and concentrate on it. Acknowledging and exploring an uncomfortable feeling can sometimes make it more tolerable. Do a quick stretch and try relaxing your muscles. This can help to relax your anxiety as well.
- Face your procrastination-related anxiety right now. Deal with anxious thoughts as they arise. To help break these thought cycles, first identify them. Tell yourself “this is a belief, not a fact”. Ask yourself “what are the exceptions to this belief?” Honest answers to this question can help you towards a new perspective that is free of the negative circular thinking that is behind most procrastination behaviour.

Diversions can lull you into a sense of security and build a wall of inertia where it seems like you just can't get started. Just recognizing these diversions won't be enough to reverse these patterns, but it is the start. When you deflate the excuses behind your procrastination, the value of timely action becomes clear. Getting started is the hardest part!

HOW TO GET STARTED

- Break your task up into manageable pieces. Remember, you don't need to figure out how to do everything, you just need to figure out how to start.
- Try just doing five minutes: if you can commit to focus for five straight minutes, there is a good chance you'll be down to keep going. If you aren't, try doing five minutes of another task that needs doing.
- Advertise your plans (your peers will help hold you accountable to them).
- Use a friend as a study buddy: study with a friend who won't distract you.
- Modify your environment: find a place that works for you to get work done. If you can't work at home, go out. If you can't work in a crowded environment, go home.
- Figure out your priorities and make a plan: try budgeting out your time, how many hours would it be reasonable to spend on your assignment tomorrow? When should you start/stop?
- Expect that not everything will go according to your plan (it almost never does). Accept setbacks and start again.

MOVING PAST PROCRASTINATION

- Know what your pattern is
- Be aware of your actions, realize you are delaying unnecessarily
- Plan ahead to disrupt your pattern
- Think about the excuses you are making
- Reason past the excuses
- Bear the discomfort of getting started

ACADEMIC

Now that you know how procrastination works, you have the tools you need to stop it from controlling your life. If you can stop procrastinating you can spend your time deliberately; you'll have more freedom and greater peace of mind.

Keep working on it. We all backslide, but you should be able to fix things more quickly. Doing this will boost your confidence. When you do succeed, take the time to savour the victory. Remember that feeling when you need some encouragement.

REFERENCES

California Polytechnic State University. (n.d.) Procrastination. Retrieved From
<http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl.html>

Knaus, W. (2002). *The procrastination workbook: Your personalized program for breaking free of the patterns that hold you back*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger