



Overcoming Procrastination

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Introduction

Remember the time you waited to start that assignment or essay because a new season of your favorite Netflix show was just released? Maybe you purposely kept yourself busy scrolling through social media or cleaning your room instead of completing tasks on your growing to-do list? If this sounds familiar, you are likely not alone. Whether it's delaying or avoiding starting a project, writing an essay, completing an assignment or other work-related task, we have all procrastinated at some point in our lives. Simply put, procrastination is the act of postponing tasks unnecessarily. (1) In the age of social media and digital technologies, procrastination appears to be increasingly common. Some studies report that up to 95% of college students engaged in procrastination. (2) However, procrastination is not an isolated phenomenon among students and can affect other demographics as well. (2)

Notably, procrastination can be due to a complex array of factors - contrary to a belief that it is simply a sign of laziness. This behaviour involves psychological processes such as changes in self-regulation which dictates our response to stressful or difficult situations. (2)

Causes

So, what are some reasons to procrastinate? Well, there may be several other reasons and they can vary from person-to-person. (1, 3, 4)

a. Perfectionism

Setting unrealistically high expectations, can lead to feeling that a task is too difficult to achieve which can lead to procrastination before starting or during a task.

However, perfectionism does not always lead to procrastination and this trait can even motivate someone to complete tasks efficiently.

b. Feelings of inadequacy

If someone does not feel equipped to do a certain task, is clouded with self-doubt, or a fear of failure, this can also prevent someone from starting or completing a task. This may serve as a coping mechanism to avoid potential failure or feelings of inadequacy.

c. Aversion to the task

Negative interpersonal relationships with individuals involved with the task or feeling the task is mundane, not important, or challenging, for example, may result in procrastination.



d. Resentment

Resentment is a form of task aversion and can be due to factors such as personal, or academic circumstances. Procrastinating on a task may be a form of rebellion against an individual or organization.

e. Emotional States that Disrupt Functioning

If someone has high degrees of negative emotions or is living with mental illness such as depression, or anxiety and it becomes unmanageable it may interfere with daily life.

f. Lifestyle

A desire to seek short term fulfilment through various means can undermine the long-term fulfillment that is achieved through other tasks, assignments, or projects. For example, seeking out instant gratification through the compulsive use of social media, playing video games, attending social events, or use of substances even when it consistently interferes with the ability to complete tasks.

Delaying projects for some time can provide some much-needed mental relief before the next task ahead. Although, there can be times where this behaviour becomes detrimental if it is a constant occurrence or interferes with school or work.

For many of us, applying to medical school is an academically demanding process and can be stressful in many ways which can lead to behaviours such as procrastination. As we progress in our careers and face new challenges this behaviour can continue to occur. A study published by Lane et al. suggests that emotional, physical, and cognitive stressors continue to be present during medical training. Furthermore, this behaviour can continue into practice which may result in procrastination during that time as well. (5) Therefore, identifying ways to manage this behaviour early can be useful.



Coping Strategies

Depending on the root cause of the behaviour, there are various coping strategies that can be used to overcome procrastination.

Universities such as the U of A, and UBC have online resources about managing procrastination. (3, 4) Some strategies to overcome procrastination include:

- Recognize that consistent, purposeful efforts can help achieve success, rather than simply an intrinsic ability to complete a task.
- We all make mistakes - acknowledge the value of what you can and have accomplished!
- Identify potential lifestyle behaviours that may interfere with completing tasks. Then, reinforce the long-term fulfillment that completing a task can provide (such as getting a good grade on an essay or receiving recognition for a lengthy project at work).
- Seek help from family/friends or seek professional support and counselling services if needed.
- Speak with the individuals or institutions that may be causing resentment, and/or seek support to address your concerns.
- Set personal goals and prioritize those goals. The SMART framework may be used (SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely goals).
- Break a large task into small components. Commit to starting a task, even if just for 15 minutes at a time.
- Reward yourself when you achieve a goal, even a seemingly small goal, to help reinforce positive habits!
- Be mindful of your working environment and identify when and where you can work productively.

Summary

As we continue to adjust to online learning and work environments throughout the pandemic, it can be especially helpful to reflect on potentially negative behaviours to stay engaged and motivated with our tasks. Given there are several reasons why we may procrastinate, taking a moment to reflect on and acknowledge our personal challenges is the first step towards overcoming the potentially disruptive and negative behaviours associated with procrastination. While we all can have setbacks in our progress or experience periods of feeling overwhelmed, it can be helpful to regularly remind ourselves of our personal motivations and recognize accomplishments along the way to fuel long term goals.



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