

PROCRASTINATION: TEN WAYS TO “DO IT NOW”

We've all been plagued by procrastination at one time or another. For some, it's a chronic problem. Others find that it hits only some areas of their lives. The net results, though, are usually the same - wasted time, missed opportunities, poor performance, self-deprecation, or increased stress.

Procrastination is letting the low-priority tasks get in the way of high-priority ones. It's socializing with colleagues when you know that important work project is due soon, watching TV instead of doing your household chores, or talking about superficial things with your partner rather than discussing your relationship concerns.

We all seem to do fine with things we want to do or enjoy doing for fun. But, when we perceive tasks as difficult, inconvenient, or scary, we may shift into our procrastination mode. We have very clever ways of fooling ourselves. See how many of the following excuses hit home for you:

- I'll wait until I'm in the mood to do it.
- It's OK to celebrate ... besides, I'll start my diet (sobriety) tomorrow.
- My health problem isn't that bad. Time will heal this pain.
- There's plenty of time to get it done.
- Why does the boss give us so much to do? It's not fair.
- It's too hard to talk about. I don't know where to begin.
- I work better under pressure so I don't need to do it right now.
- I've got too many other things to do first.

Once exposed, these self-defeating statements don't sound so convincing. But, when we privately tell ourselves these excuses, they seem quite believable. Don't be fooled by how innocent they sound. They get us to postpone important tasks and duties.

CAUSES

Procrastination is a bad habit. Like other habits, there are two general causes. The first is the “crooked thinking” we employ to justify our behavior. The second source is our behavioral patterns.

A closer look at our crooked thinking reveals three major issues in delaying tactics - perfectionism, inadequacy, and discomfort. Those who believe they must turn in the most exemplary report may wait until all available resources have been reviewed or endlessly rewrite draft after draft. Worry over producing the perfect project prevents them from finishing on time. Feelings of inadequacy can also cause delays. Those who “know for a fact” that they are incompetent often believe they will fail and will avoid the unpleasantness of having their skills put to the test. Fear of discomfort is another way of putting a stop to what needs to be done. Yet, the more we delay, the worse the discomforting problem (like a toothache) becomes.

Our behavioral patterns are the second cause. Getting started on an unpleasant or difficult task may seem impossible. Procrastination is likened to the physics concept of inertia - a mass at rest tends to stay at rest. Greater forces are required to start change than to sustain change. Another way of viewing it is that avoiding tasks reinforces procrastination which makes it harder to get things going. A person may be stuck, too, not by the lack of desire, but by not knowing what to do. Here are some things to break the habit. Remember, don't just read them, do them!

REMEDIES

1. Rational Self-Talk. Those old excuses really don't hold up to rational inspection. The "two-column technique" will help. Write down all your excuses on one side of a piece of paper. Start challenging the faulty reasoning behind each of the excuses. Write down your realistic thoughts on the opposite side of each excuse. Here are two examples of excuses and realistic thoughts.

EXCUSE: I'm not in the mood right now. REALISTIC THOUGHT: Mood doesn't do my work, actions do. If I wait for the right mood, I may never get it done. EXCUSE: I'm just lazy. REALISTIC THOUGHT: Labeling myself as lazy only brings me down. My work is really separate from who I am as a person. Getting started is the key to finishing.

2. Positive Self-Statements. Incorporate a list of self-motivating statements into your repertoire of thoughts. Consider ...

- "There's no time like the present."
- "The sooner I get done, the sooner I can play."
- "There's no such thing as perfectionism. It's an illusion that keeps me from doing what I have to do right now."
- "It's cheaper and less painful if I do it now rather than wait until it gets worse."

3. Don't Catastrophe. Jumping to the conclusion that you will fail or that you are no good at something will only create a wall of fear that will stop you cold. Recognize that your negative predictions are not facts. Focus on the present and what positive steps you can take toward reaching your goals.
4. Design Clear Goals. Think about what you want and what needs to be done. Be specific. If it's getting that work project completed by the deadline, figure out a time table with realistic goals at each step. Keep your sights within reason. Having goals too big can scare you away from starting.
5. Set Priorities. Write down all the things that need to be done in order of their importance. The greater the importance or urgency, the higher their priority. Put "messing around" (distractions) in its proper place - last! Start at the top of the list and work your way down.
6. Partialize the Tasks. Big projects feel overwhelming. Break them down into the smallest and most manageable subparts. You'll get more done if you can do it piece by piece. For example, make an outline for a written report before you start composing or do a small portion of the chores rather than all at once. Partializing works especially well with the unpleasant jobs. Most of us can handle duties we dislike as long as they're for a short time and in small increments.
7. Get Organized. Have all your materials ready before you begin a task. Use a daily schedule and have it with you all the time. List the tasks of the day or week realistically. Check off the tasks when you have completed them.
8. Take a Stand. Commit yourself to doing the task. Write yourself a "contract" and sign it. Better still, tell a friend, partner, or supervisor about your plans.
9. Use Prompts. Write reminders to yourself and put them in conspicuous places like on the TV, refrigerator, bathroom mirror, front door, and car dashboard. The more we remember, the greater the likelihood we'll follow through with our plans.
10. Reward Yourself. Self-reinforcement has a powerful effect on developing a "do it now" attitude. Celebrate, pat yourself on the back, smile, and let yourself enjoy the completion of even the smallest of tasks. Don't minimize your accomplishments. Remember, you're already that much closer to finishing those things that need to be done. Go ahead, get started ... NOW!