



TIP SHEET FOR PROCRASTINATION

Introduction

Most students can recall times when they've put off their studies. At least 20% of people are chronic procrastinators and as a uni student this habit is much more common. If you procrastinate you're not alone. At the same time, you probably don't want procrastination to rule your life and get in the way of achieving your goals.

What is procrastination?

Procrastination involves making a decision (sometimes in the blink of an eye) to delay a task or not finish it even though there could be negative consequences for you. Instead you choose to do something that is less of a priority. Often procrastination is a way of moving away from some feelings of discomfort. Understanding what triggers discomfort can help to overcome the procrastination habit.

If you're curious you might like to track for a week those tasks or activities you're most likely to put off. You might procrastinate about study, work, health matters, chores, relationships or decision making to name some areas of your life. What area would you choose to work on first? You can move from procrastination to action if you are willing to put some time and effort into change.

Diversions

What tend to be your favourite diversions? Some common ones include pleasurable activities (eg watching movies, shopping); socialising (eg sending texts to friends); distractions (eg sleeping, eating); daydreaming (eg about what you'd rather do); lower priority tasks (eg cleaning, checking emails). You can probably think of many other diversions such as surfing the net or playing computer games.

Excuses

It's possible to come up with some great excuses in order to feel less uncomfortable or guilty about avoiding commitments you've made. Some typical excuses that justify putting things off include "I'm too tired now"; "I'm not in the right mood"; "I've got to clean up first." What excuses do you use most often? You can critically evaluate these.

Rules and assumptions

Unhelpful rules or assumptions can drive the procrastination habit. Typical assumptions include:

- wanting to do things perfectly
- fear of failure
- doubting your abilities

- believing you only work well under pressure, for example, by doing things at the last minute.
- feeling low in energy and assuming, for example, “If I do things when I’m feeling low then I’ll do a rotten job.”
- thinking you’re better off doing nothing
- fear of success and change
- valuing pleasure above other things
- the need to be in charge rather than doing what another person requests

You might already be aware of some assumptions that drive procrastination for you. One way to explore these “drivers” is to consider what you expect from yourself eg I must... I should... Another way is to think about the consequences of doing the task at hand (eg “If I start writing my essay tonight ... then....”).

Consequences

Procrastination has both positive and negative consequences. For example, you might feel less stressed in the short term, you could enjoy the distractions you pursue and you don’t have to change or challenge old rules or assumptions. You might be able to think of other payoffs.

Some negative consequences could be feelings of guilt or anxiety, self criticism can take hold, a back log of tasks could pile up or you might, for example, receive lower marks for an assessment or poor feedback on a job. Sometimes there can be a snowball effect whereby it’s harder to persist in the face of setbacks. What are some of the consequences for you? How do these consequences contribute to your procrastination habit?

Once you can notice how the procrastination cycle works for you then you can challenge it if you wish.

Some suggestions for challenging excuses

You might like to challenge favourite excuses For example, “**The truth is** I’m tired”.

“**My old unhelpful conclusion** is that I’m better off doing my assignment later”.

“**I can dispute** this. I am tired but if I delay this assignment it will worry me all night and I probably won’t sleep well”.

My new helpful conclusion is that I’ll make a start tonight, just for ten minutes. I’ll be relieved and probably sleep better.”

Some experiments to try

You can also conduct experiments to test your old conclusions. For example,

Expt 1: Rate your fatigue, mood or motivation first from 1-10 then do your task for 5-10 minutes. Re-rate your fatigue, mood or motivation and also review what you’re achieved in that time.

Expt 2: Time how long would it take for you to feel less tired, in a better mood or more motivated?

Expt 3: Which approach works best for you in regard to resources? Having all the resources you need before beginning a task or doing what you can with what you have at the time?

Expt 4: Which approach works best for you in regard to being motivated by stress? Doing things at the last moment or ahead of time? (That is, at least two days before).

Some suggestion for challenging self criticism

Focus on what you can do next rather than on what you haven't done in the past. Be aware of **critical self talk** eg "I should have finished this report by now. I'm so stupid!!"

Try to use **motivating/supportive self talk** eg "I'd prefer to have finished already. I've made a good start tonight and I'll work on this part for the next half an hour." "I can do this now if I keep going."

"I'm calm, competent and in control."

Consider "What would I say to a friend if they were in my shoes?"

Some suggestions for tolerating discomfort

Be aware of your experience and notice any distress as you approach a task. Observe your discomfort in a non-judgmental way until it passes. You can learn to ride waves of discomfort or emotion so they don't draw you away from what you want to achieve.

Some suggestions for taking action

- Consider whether the task accords with your goals. What are the benefits for you?
- Chose a time in the day you're likely to be productive. For example, you might be a night person.
- Chose a comfortable place to work, for instance, find a quiet spot in the library to read a chapter.
- Imagine your self doing the job easily and enjoying the experience.
- Do some warm up tasks eg brainstorm some ideas.
- Use a semester planner to note when assessments are due. Set up a weekly schedule that includes time for study, work, friends and family etc.
- Set short term goals and priorities.
- Break tasks into smaller chunks. What's your first step?
- Write a "to do" list. When you do things cross them off. It feels good!
- Allocate time to tasks. Do you tend to underestimate or overestimate the time required?
- You can tackle a task by doing the worst or hardest part first, or the one you like best to gain momentum.
- Set a specific amount of time and see what you get done.
- Get started just for five minutes and then decide whether to continue.
- Weigh the pros and cons of beginning or continuing with the task.
- Make holes in a task that appears overwhelming. Do anything related to the task. (The Swiss cheese approach).
- If you find yourself distracted, go to a different place where your distractions aren't present.
- If you're tempted to give up, check in with yourself first. Can you work for five more minutes to get past a stuck spot? What are you trying to achieve by procrastinating? Can you problem solve the issue? Can you review your progress thus far and set another target?
- Arrange to work alongside someone who works well.
- Think about what you like about the task. Find ways to make it more enjoyable.

- Remind yourself of your larger goal. Eg “I’m finishing this report because I want my degree so I can work overseas in the future.”
- Focus your mind if you find yourself becoming distracted. You might be interested in learning more about mindfulness. Check out the University Counselling Service webpage.
- Slow breathing techniques are also useful to calm your body and mind.
- Write up inspirational statements eg “I’m intelligent and capable. I can do this one step at a time.”
- Take short, regular breaks when studying.
- Use your assertive communication skills to say no to distractions. See the assertiveness tip sheet.
- Plan rewards, for example, “When I finish this report I’ll go to the movies with my friend.”
- Self monitor by checking in with your self regularly. You might like to record your progress.
- Organise a cheer squad. Tell them what you aim to achieve and keep them updated.

You can develop a plan of action to deal with procrastination next time it occurs and note the gradual gains you make.

What other resources are available?

Websites:

The Australian National University (2010). *Procrastination stoppers*. Retrieved April 12, 2010 from http://counselling.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/procrastination_stoppers.pdf

Centre for Clinical Interventions (2008). *Put Off Procrastinating!* Retrieved December 21, 2009 from http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=26

University of Adelaide (2010). *The perfect procrastinator*. Retrieved April 14, 2010 from http://www.adelaide.edu.au/counselling_centre/brochures/procrastination.html.

University of New England (2010). *Staying on track: escaping the procrastination trap and stay motivated*. Retrieved April 14, 2010 from <http://www.une.edu.au/counselling/Staying%20on%20track.pdf>

RMIT University (2010). *Overcoming procrastination*. Retrieved April 11, 2010 from <http://prodmams.rmit.edu.au/cx90yoxqayl1.pdf>

Books:

Burka, J.B . Lenoara, M.Y (1983). *Procrastination: Why do you do, what to do it*. Cambridge:Da Capo Press.

Roberts, S.M. (1995). *Living without procrastination: How to stop postponing your life*. Oakland: New Harbinger.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to University Counselling Services in Australia and overseas whose resources have been used to help compile this Tip Sheet.

Adapted from Centre for Clinical Interventions (2008). *Put Off Procrastinating!* Retrieved December 21, 2009 from http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=26

Produced by the Counselling Service, The University of Newcastle, April 2010