

Why We Procrastinate

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Let's take a quick look at what makes us procrastinate. There are several reasons, which are related in various ways:

1. We want instant gratification. Resting on the couch is thought of as nicer, right now, than going on a run. Reading blogs is easier, right now, than reading a classic novel. Checking email or Facebook is easier, now, than doing that project you've been putting off. Eating chocolate cake is tastier, right now, than eating veggies.

2. We fear/dread something. We might not write that chapter in our book because there are problems with the writing that we haven't figured out (often because we haven't thought it through). Or we might be afraid we're going to fail, or look ignorant or stupid. We're most often afraid of the unknown, which has more power because we don't examine this fear — it just lurks in the back of our minds. Dreading or fearing something makes us want to put it off, to postpone even thinking about it, and to do something easy and safe instead.

3. It's easy – no negative consequences right now. When we were in school and had a teacher looking over our shoulders and scolding us if we didn't do our work, we tended to do the work (until some of us learned that we could tune out the scolding, that is). But when we got home, sometimes no one would be looking over our shoulders ... so there wasn't any immediate negative consequence to watching TV or playing games instead. Sure, we'd get a bad grade tomorrow, but that's not right now. The same is true of using the Internet or doing other kinds of procrastination tasks — we'll pay for it later, but right now, no one is getting mad at us.

4. We overestimate our future self. We often have a long list of things we plan to do, because we think we can do a lot in the future. The reality is usually a little worse than we expected, but that doesn't stop us from thinking the future will be different yet again. For the same reason, we think it's OK to procrastinate, because we're going to do it later, for sure. Our future self will be incredibly productive and focused! Except, our future self is also lazy, and doesn't do it either. Damn future self.

Four Powerful Solutions

Now that we know the problems, the solutions aren't that hard to figure out. Just don't put them off, OK?

1. Stop and think. When we allow the above thoughts to go on without really being conscious of them, we procrastinate. When we actually pause and think about those thoughts, we can rationally see that they're wrong. Instant gratification in the form of goofing off or eating junk food can lead to problems later. Fears are overblown and shouldn't stand in our way. Not having negative consequences now doesn't mean there won't be consequences later. Our future self isn't as bad-ass as we like to think. So think about what you're doing, and start to do the more rational thing. Use the strategies below as well, but thinking is the start.

2. Enjoy the process. When we dread something, we put it off — but instead, if we can learn to enjoy it, it won't be as hard or dreadful. Put yourself in the moment, and enjoy every action. For example, if you want to go out to run, don't think about the hard run ahead, but about putting on your shoes — enjoy the simplicity of that action. Then focus on getting out the door — that's not hard. Then focus on warming up with a fast walk or light jog — that can be nice and enjoyable. Then feel your legs warm up as you start running a little faster, and enjoy the beautiful outdoors. This process can be done with anything, from washing dishes to reading to writing. Enjoy yourself in the moment, without thinking of future things you dread, and the activity can be very pleasant and even fun. And if it is, you won't put it off.

3. Set up accountability. If no one is looking over our shoulder, we tend to let ourselves slack off. So set up a procrastination-proof environment — find people to hold you accountable. I joined an online fitness challenge this month, for example, so that I'd report my workouts to the forum. I've done the same thing for running, quitting smoking, writing a novel. You can even just use your friends and family on Facebook or email.

4. Block your future self. Your future self is just as likely to put things off. So block that sucker. Use a program like Freedom to block your Internet access for a predetermined amount of time, so your future self has to actually focus instead of reading blogs. Turn off your cable TV, get rid of the junk food in your house, cut up your credit cards ... do whatever it takes to make it really hard for your future self to procrastinate or give in to temptation, or at least force your future self to pause and think before he does anything dumb.