

Procrastinating Again?

Need to finish a project and leave it to the last minute? Do you have homework for your college course and you wait to the day before it's due because you "work better under pressure?" Do you wait to the last day to complete your Christmas and birthday shopping?

Research into the mind is continuing at a breathtaking pace, and there is actually research into procrastination. A recent issue of *Scientific American Mind* (November 08) had a useful article about the topic.

Some researchers believe that there are two key elements in the urge to let projects slide:

1. an uneasy feeling about an activity and
2. the desire to avoid that discomfort.

A procrastinator says, 'I feel lousy about a task', and thus walks away to feel better. Psychologist Joseph Ferrari of DePaul University has coined the term "avoidance procrastinator" to describe a person for whom avoidance is the prime motivator.

Another psychological driver is indecision. An "indecisive procrastinator" cannot make up her mind about executing a task. Say a woman intends to visit her mother in the hospital. Rather than simply grabbing the keys and heading out, the indecisive procrastinator starts debating whether to drive or to take the bus. *The bus is a hassle, but parking is expensive and I'll have to drive back at rush hour. But then again, the bus will be packed, too.* The internal debate continues until enough time passes that visiting hours are over.

Some researchers believe that procrastination, when managed, is actually a useful tool to avoid psychological pain – the experience of engaging in unpleasant, boring or unrewarding activities. If managed, procrastination will lead to the task being done and prolonged exposure to the unpleasant task is avoided. Some use the belief *I need the pressure of a last-minute deadline* to justify dragging their feet, which they do for other reasons, such as circumventing unpleasantness.

For many people, procrastinating leads to putting less energy into a task and completing it less well. This can start of cycle of self-blame and lower performance. The lower performance can actually lead to self re-enforcing cycle: "See, I can't do it; therefore there's no need to even try."

So, what should one do about procrastinating?

Setting specific prescriptions does appear to inhibit the tendency to procrastinate. In 2008 psychologist Shane Owens and his colleagues at Hofstra University demonstrated that procrastinators who formed implementation intentions were nearly eight times as likely to follow through on a commitment than were those who did not create them. "You have to make a

specific commitment to a time and place at which to act beforehand,” Owens says. “That will make you more likely to follow through.”

Smart scheduling can also thwart procrastination. In an experiment published in 2002, Duke University behavioral economist Dan Ariely, then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and marketing professor Klaus Wertenbroch of INSEAD, a business school with campuses in France and Singapore, asked students in an executive-education class to set their own deadlines for the three papers due that semester. Ariely and Wertenbroch set penalties for papers turned in after the self-imposed deadlines. Despite the penalties, 70 percent of the students chose deadlines spaced out over the semester, rather than clustering them all at the end. What is more, those who set the early deadlines scored better, on average, than did students in a comparable class in which Ariely set one due date for all three papers at the end of the semester. Such planning can buck any inclination to put off the work. “The deadlines made them better performers,” Ariely says.

Overcome Procrastination:

- **Make a firm commitment**
- **Include a time and place at which to act**
- **Alternate interesting and less challenging activities**
- **Just get started: the anticipation is often**

More simply, researchers advise procrastinators to “just get started.” The anticipation of the task often is far worse than the task turns out to be. To demonstrate this fact, a researcher, in work that appeared in 2000, gave 45 students pagers and checked in with the volunteers 40 times over five days to query them about their moods and how often they were putting off a task that had a deadline. “We found that when students actually do the task they are avoiding, their perceptions of the task change significantly. Many times, they actually enjoyed it.”