I’ll Get Around To It...

How to Recognize and Combat Procrastination

The procrastinator is often remarkably optimistic about his ability to complete a task on a tight deadline; this is usually accompanied by expressions of reassurance that everything is under control. (Therefore, there is no need to start.) For example, he may estimate that a paper will take only five days to write; he has fifteen days; there is plenty of time; no need to start. Lulled by a false sense of security, time passes. At some point, he crosses over an imaginary starting time and suddenly realizes, "Oh no! - I am not in control! There isn't enough time!"

At this point, considerable effort is directed towards completing the task, and work progresses. This sudden spurt of energy is the source of the erroneous feeling that "I only work well under pressure." Actually, at this point you are making progress only because you haven't any choice. Your back is against the wall and there are no alternatives. Progress is being made, but you have lost your freedom.

Barely completed in time, the paper may actually earn a fairly good grade; whereupon the student experiences mixed feelings: pride of accomplishment (sort-of), scorn for the professor who cannot recognize substandard work, and guilt for getting an undeserved grade. But the net result is reinforcement: the procrastinator is rewarded positively for his poor behavior. ("Look what a decent grade I got after all!") As a result, the counterproductive behavior is repeated over and over again. Negative reinforcement (a poor grade) has its own consequences.

Benefits of Overcoming Procrastination

What are the benefits of overcoming procrastination? Peace of mind, a feeling of strength and purpose, and healthy feeling of being in charge of your life. While procrastination makes you feel weak, useless, and helpless, taking charge of your life will make you feel strong, competent, and capable. You will experience increased personal freedom!

Four Simple Reasons for Procrastination

1. **Difficult** - the task seems hard to do; we naturally tend to avoid difficult things in favor of those which seem easy to us.
2. **Time-consuming** - the task will take large blocks of time, and large blocks of time are unavailable until the weekend.
3. **Lack of knowledge or skills** - no one wants to make mistakes, so wait until you learn how before you start.
4. **Fears** - if you do the assignment and fail, everyone will know how you screwed up

An Insight

Procrastination is reinforcing - every time you delay, it reinforces your negative attitude toward that task. Every time you put off something you dislike, you:

1. strengthen the habit of not doing;
2. practice avoidance instead of participation;
3. avoid acquiring training and skills, and
4. indoctrinate yourself with fears.

Adapted from “Procrastination is the Thief of Time,” California Polytechnic University, http://sas/calpoly.edu/asc/ssl.html.
Common Impediments to Overcoming Procrastination
Procrastination is relatively hard to overcome since you can delude yourself about it so easily. The following is a list of things we often tell ourselves:

1. Mañana - "I'll do it tomorrow."
2. Contingent mañana - "I'll do it tomorrow, if ...
3. Grasshopperism - "I need to have some well-earned fun first." (In Aesop's fable, the grasshopper fiddled and played all summer while the ants stored up winter supplies. When winter came, the grasshopper suffered.)
4. Escapism - "I've got to get out for a while to clear my mind."
5. Impulsiveness - "My problem will be solved if I change my major, or attend a different college, or "
6. Music and reading - "I'll relax a while and then get started."
7. Cavalry to the Rescue - "The professor will get sick and cancel finals!"

Steps to the Cure
1. Realize you are delaying something unnecessarily.
2. Discover the real reasons for your delay. List them.
3. Dispute those real reasons and overcome them. Be vigorous.
4. Begin the task.

Some Tools That Will Help
- Make the tasks look small and easy in your mind. ("I've written lots of excellent papers; this is just one more paper.")
- Split the task into small, manageable chunks. ("I'll check out the books tonight. Later on, I'll glance through them.")
- Ten-minute plan: Work on something for just ten minutes. At the end of ten minutes, switch to something else if you want. Chances are, you'll get involved enough to keep going.
- Advertise your plans to accomplish something, and let peer pressure push you forward. ("I told everyone that I was going to finish this tonight.") Use a good friend as a positive role model. If you have trouble concentrating, study in the presence of someone who doesn't.
- If you put off assignments because you do not know where to start or are not sure how to do the work, find out what you need to know. Make an appointment with your instructor. Explain the difficulty you are having and ask for advice. If you have started the assignment, show your instructor where you are having trouble or talk to someone in the class. If you missed a lecture or have gaps in your notes, your friend might be able to fill you in on what was covered.
- Modify your environment - if you can't study at home, find a place where you can study; or, change your study situation at home.
- Plan tomorrow and establish priorities - some students find that simply writing down reasonable starting and stopping times helps them get going. Scheduling an appropriate amount of time for assignments is key.
- Expect some backsliding. Don't expect to be perfect even when you're trying to get rid of perfectionism! So occasionally, your plans will not work. Accept setbacks and start again.

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