

Published on *Quality ADHD/ADD information provided by Attention Deficit Disorder Resources* (<http://w3.addresources.org>)

The Problem with Procrastination

By *admin*

Created 08/07/2009 - 04:24

The Problem of Procrastination

Timothy Quek, Ph.D. Ontario, Canada

Terms of Use: This educational material is made available courtesy of the author and Attention Deficit Disorder Resources. You may reprint this article for personal use only.

There is a poster that depicts a huge polar bear lying prone on a flue of ice. The caption under it reads, "When I get the feeling to do something, I lie down until the feeling goes away". Such is the sigh of the resigned procrastinator: broken by frustration, unable to catch up, chained by depression and sustained by the simple apathetic response, "I don't care anymore".

Yet most people who procrastinate have not contentedly handed in their resignations. In fact, we struggle incessantly to shake off procrastination. We plan and schedule; we write down and underscore; we promise and make resolutions; we organize and reorganize. Generally, we accomplish a short lived refreshment from procrastination, and then crash soundly back into it. The reason? The problem of procrastination is one that often goes beyond self-discipline and whipping oneself from stasis to stress. It is usually the symptom of a multifaceted set of problems that defy a single solution.

Procrastination: Why Does It Persist?

An ancient proverb states: "*It is not the size of the tree but the depth of its roots that make it strong.*" Procrastination usually has very deep roots.

Procrastination is integrally linked to disorganization. Yet it is wrong to assume that all disorganization/procrastination problems are the same cause. In fact, there are four primary ways procrastination-oriented disorganization occurs.

A Poor Distinction Between Urgency and Priority

In the beginning of the urgency-priority cycle, procrastinators tend to attend to "comfort" tasks which are most convenient, interesting, or within reach. Priority is sacrificed for convenience. As these tasks are being attend to, however, other tasks begin to pile up, and

soon a backlog of tasks cry out for attention. A jumble of new and old tasks become marked as urgent, and the procrastinator is forced to drop current tasks to attend to the urgent ones.

In a sense, what is urgent has become priority. This confusion continues as tasks split into three categories which cry out for attention and which are increasingly difficult to distinguish, namely, priority/urgent; priority/non-urgent; non-priority/urgent. Meanwhile, the attractiveness of the non-urgent, non-priority comfort tasks still lure the procrastinator to do them. The result is that the procrastinator becomes subject to the tyranny of the urgent, is unable to establish proper priorities, and constantly seeks reprieve from these stresses by attending to tasks that are neither urgent nor priority!

Distractibility

Closely related to the tendency of procrastinators to attend to comfort tasks is the problem of distractibility. It is not surprising to find procrastinators explaining that a task is left unattended to because "something else came up". Setting better emotional boundaries (e.g., saying "No" to yourself) in order to stay on task usually helps to limit attention to the multitude of off-task behaviours (distractions).

Forgetfulness

Unfortunately, no amount of prioritizing or boundary drawing can prevail over disorganized forgetfulness. Typically, procrastinators assume they have an excellent memory and they often insist that they remember even though they appear to have forgotten ("Of course, I remember. I was just about to do it"). Multiple slips of "reminder" paper adorn their pockets and purses, and they seem to use more than one appointment book or none at all (both practices have the same effect). A step in the right direction is to acknowledge a problem with forgetfulness, although it must never be used as an excuse for inaction.

Lumping

Finally, a major part of procrastination-oriented disorganization comes in the form of "lumping" or "chunking", that is, the errant perception that most tasks come as an inseparable whole (a "lump") that cannot be subdivided and dealt with systematically. The harried teenager who thinks of "cleaning my room" as a massive single-lump task would likely procrastinate over cleaning his room.

Fear

Fear motivated procrastination usually expresses itself as avoidance and the intense desire to either delay performing a task or wait for its expiration so that it no longer has to be dealt with. Often, one task is related to another, and the cluster of avoided tasks increases over time. As outstanding tasks mount, the procrastinator becomes resigned, depressed and inactive. The internal struggles of fear-motivated procrastination are usually of two types: the rational versus the irrational ("I know that I should, so why can't I just do it") and discipline vs discomfort ("I planned to do it, but when the time came, I just didn't feel like it."). Attempts at resolving these

conflicts must start at the level of dealing with the fear rather than with logic or greater discipline.

Perfectionism

Most procrastinators do not think of themselves as perfectionists. "If I'm a perfectionist, I would get things done," they say. Not necessarily. In fact, perfectionism can lead to "starts and spurts" performance, meaning that an individual goes on a cleaning spree, or attacks a task with great energy and then slumps back in exhaustion after having exasperated, irritated, or alienated everyone around. Perfectionism has also been found to be strongly related to depression and an extremely critical spirit (either self or other critical).

What is perfectionism, then?

Perfectionism is a form of rigidity or inflexibility that is marked by three major characteristics:

1. The intense desire to jump in and do things yourself because others just can't do it right.
2. The insistent attitude that you wouldn't even start on something if you can't do it well.
3. The profound need for closure, indicated by agitation or discomfort should something be left "hanging".

Each of these characteristics "drives" the perfectionist to procrastinate. For perfectionistic procrastinators, the first step in dealing with procrastination is acknowledging and disliking these three basic tendencies. Then practical solutions can be applied systematically.

Procrastination as an Indicator

Procrastination may also be an indicator of a more serious physical or psychological problem that would respond positively to treatment. Often, such procrastination is not observed by the one procrastinating, but by others close to that person. Extreme anxiety, severe clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity, and illnesses that are related to memory loss are examples of such dysfunctions that may lead to procrastination.

Overcome Your Fears

What am I afraid of? In fear-motivated procrastination, it is necessary to identify the fear to begin with. For example, a person trying to find a job over an extended period of time may have developed a fear of being rejected-yet again. A high school student drags her feet in completing her class project because of a fear of obtaining another failing grade. The accounts analyst finds it a chore to complete even one assignment towards his CPA certification because of his fear of the material itself.

This last example may in fact have to do with his lack of aptitude in his chosen field! In a nutshell, both the fear and the sources of that fear must be confronted before the behaviours expressed by procrastination can be addressed. Often, a trained counsellor would be able to help in

identifying the sources of fear and their effects on self-esteem, then provide some direction in dealing with these problems.

Beginning Steps

1. Get yourself an appointment book. And please-don't go overboard with this idea. Procrastinators often start ambitiously. (Remember the problem of "lumping"?) They run out and buy the most expensive bells-and-whistles appointment book, invest in an elaborate electronic daytimer, or photocopy reams of get-your-life-together organizers readily available on the market. You hear the reasoning, "Hey, if it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done right!" (Do you hear the perfectionist?) Eventually, the massive effort comes to an anticlimactic halt when they "run out of steam", and discouragement sets them three steps back after having dashed two steps forward. It is far wiser to purchase a simple appointment book, preferably one that is about the size of a small paperback that has a one week spread when the book is opened. Appointment books help to address the problems of disorganization and even poor memory.

Learn to use it every day. Write down things you are going to do or that you have already done. Look ahead into the next week, if you like, but don't plan your life for the next year. To help you use the book more, write in important telephone numbers and addresses as you acquire them. Carry it around with you all day. Make its presence with you a habit.

2. Learn how to plan ahead realistically. Break down tasks into tangible stage goals, and provide these goals with appropriate deadlines. Then write these deadlines into your appointment book.

3. Provide yourself with daily "to do" lists that you write into your book. Even small, easy-to-do or habitual items could be added to the list. Check the items off as you go along. The point is to register accomplishment tangibly as you move through the day.

4. Use "dechunking." Breaking a task down into manageable chunks ("dechunking") usually removes the threat of having to do a large task all at once. Sometimes, a task may be underestimated as costing very little energy and time when it really takes up a good chunk of your energies. Learn to break tasks down to 15 minute chunks to begin with. As you get more practised at it, increase the size of your chunks. It would be very helpful to use your appointment book to plan your dechunking.

Breaking Free

Procrastination has a way of ruling our lives if we do not bring it under control. Many resigned procrastinators simply confess, "I'm just lazy" and hope that the explanation suffices. Not by a long shot. Laziness is procrastination out of control. It takes a great deal of wisdom and effort to break the clutches of procrastination, but the results are worth it.

Timoth Quek received his Ph.D. in Psychology at York University, Toronto, Ontario, and has extensive experience in consultation and counselling, along with qualitative and quantitative assessment techniques. Visit [his website](#) [1] or [email him](#) [2].

Source URL: <http://w3.addresources.org/?q=node/257>

Links:

[1] <http://webhome.idirect.com/~readon/>

[2] <mailto:drquek@lifechange.ca>