Procrastination and Motivation

Procrastination is letting the low-priority tasks get in the way of high-priority ones. It's socializing with colleagues when you know that important work project is due soon, watching TV instead of doing your household chores, or talking about superficial things with your partner rather than discussing your relationship concerns.

**Causes:** fear of success or failure (e.g., worrying about producing a perfect product that they wait until every drop of research has been done or every avenue explored), overestimating the time left to complete a task, underestimating the time required to complete tasks, believing that they must be in the mood to do a task.

**What is motivation?**

- An internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behavior

Gaining some motivation can help to prevent or act on procrastination.

**How do you get motivated?**

**Change Your Thinking**

- **Figure out why it’s important to get this done.** See the big picture behind what you’re doing and think about the long-term impact of your actions. How does this step/project/exam connect to your goals and values? Write down the reasons you need to get this done.
- **Develop intrinsic motivation.** Are you excited to learn? Fascinated or curious about something? Want a new challenge? Strive to master something? What will you gain from doing this work?
- **Identify the issue or roadblock.** What’s keeping you from working on what you need to? Can you isolate the issue, or remove/remedy the problem?
- **Recognize your own patterns.** Identify your stall tactics, internal dialogues (“I'll start my paper once I beat this level”), and procrastination techniques so you can call yourself on them. If you’re up for it, invite friends or family members to call you on it when they see them.
- **Rational Self-Talk.** Those old excuses really don’t hold up to rational inspection. The “two column technique” will help. Write down all your excuses on one side of a piece of paper. Start challenging the faulty reasoning behind each of the excuses. Write down your realistic thoughts on the opposite side of each excuse. Here are two examples of excuses and realistic thoughts.
  - **EXCUSE:** I’m not in the mood right now. **REALISTIC THOUGHT:** Mood doesn’t do my work, actions do. If I wait for the right mood, I may never get it done.
  - **EXCUSE:** I’m just lazy. **REALISTIC THOUGHT:** Labeling myself as lazy only brings me down. My work is really separate from who I am as a person. Getting started is the key to finishing.
Positive Self-Statements. Incorporate a list of self-motivating statements into your repertoire of thoughts. Consider ...

- “There’s no time like the present.”
- “The sooner I get done, the sooner I can play.”
- “There’s no such thing as perfectionism. It’s an illusion that keeps me from doing what I have to do right now.”
- “It’s cheaper and less painful if I do it now rather than wait until it gets worse.”

Eliminate negative thoughts; replace with positive thoughts. Recognize when you are engaging in negative self-talk. Replace, “This is too hard!” with “I can do this if I start now!” It really works.

Think about the benefits, not the difficulties. Think about what you will get out of accomplishing your goal. Focus on how good you will feel when it is done, the benefits of something can re-energize you!

Develop a mantra. Find a statement, picture, poster or saying that motivates you. Find creative ways to remind yourself of it! Increase your positive self-talk/messages and stop any negative self-talk. Henry Ford said “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t--you’re right.”

Design Clear Goals. Think about what you want and what needs to be done. Be specific. If it’s getting that work project completed by the deadline, figure out a time table with realistic goals at each step. Keep your sights within reason. Having goals too big can scare you away from starting.

Set Priorities. Write down all the things that need to be done in order of their importance. The greater the importance or urgency, the higher their priority. Put “messing around” (distractions) in its proper place - last! Start at the top of the list and work your way down.

Partialize the Tasks. Big projects feel overwhelming. Break them down into the smallest and most manageable subparts. You’ll get more done if you can do it piece by piece. For example, make an outline for a written report before you start composing, or do a small portion of the chores rather than all at once. Partializing works especially well with the unpleasant jobs. Most of us can handle duties we dislike as long as they’re for a short time and in small increments.

See the successes you’ve already accomplished. Add a few items to your to-do list just to cross them off. Build up some momentum – even if it feels a bit phony. Research says we’re more likely to take advantage of coupon #2, even though they’re mathematically identical! (Heath & Heath, 2010).

Don’t Plan to Procrastinate! Saying things to yourself such as “I can't do (insert activity) that night; I'm going to be up all night writing a paper” shows that you are actually able to plan out both your academic and social responsibilities. But, we know that staying up late the night before an assignment is due typically ends in poor quality assignments (and therefore
lower grades) as well as makes us exhausted and unmotivated to do any work the next day. Plan instead to do your assignments when you need to, rather than when you have to. Plan to be productive and have balance in your life!

**Make Things Easier for Yourself**

- **Plan out the steps that get your project done.** It’s easier to see the project as a series of small steps and knowing the first step makes it easier to get started. A GPS only tells you about one turn at a time for a reason. Make the steps small and attainable.

- **Plan a time to get started on it.** If you schedule a time to do it, you’re more likely to actually get started, rather than waiting until you feel like it. When do you feel like doing something you don’t want to do? It also helps to think ahead about where you will make time to get things done.

- **Plan time for fun breaks.** It’s not realistic to study for 5 hours, so you might as well plan when you’ll take a break, what you’ll do, and for how long so you maintain control of your schedule. An impromptu 6 hour marathon of Grey’s Anatomy will work against your productivity.

- **Minimize distractions and other things you have to say ‘no’ to.** Our ability to resist temptation diminishes each time we’re faced with another temptation. It’s easier to not eat ice cream if you don’t buy it in the first place. Set up your surroundings and schedule so you make good decisions. One student had a friend change her Facebook password for her until after finals week was over.

- **Point yourself downhill.** At the end of the day or the end of the study session, make notes about what you have left to do and what you need to do next so it’s easy to start up again. By “pointing your skis downhill” you’re set up in the right direction next time you begin.

- **Set Earlier Deadlines for Yourself.** Set your own deadlines a couple of days before the assignment is due. And don’t just try to get the assignment done by then – actually get it done! This allows you time to review the final project, seek feedback from instructors/TAs, the Writing & Media Center, as well as deal with last minute stressors (e.g. roommate drama) that would otherwise prevent you to meet a deadline and turn in a quality project.

**Just Get Started**

- **Start small. Very small.** If something feels overwhelming, you may be thinking too big picture. Break your goal into mini-steps and designate a deadline to have the first step completed.

- **Set one goal.** It can be overwhelming to think about everything you have to accomplish. Write down one single thing you can work on now to re-focus.

- **“The Pomodoro Technique.”** Set a timer time a specific amount of time (20, 25, 30 mins), and work on an activity (reading, worksheet, etc.) until the timers goes off. This allows you to a) estimate how long you need to complete tasks; and b) work for small chunks of time and then reward yourself with small breaks (such as checking your phone, social media, email). Just getting started is the hard part. Chances are you’ll keep going once you’ve started, but if you don’t, you’ve still done more work than you would have.

- **Don’t take it all on at once.** Set a timer for yourself. It’s easier to commit to something if you know you’re only going to have to do it for a limited amount of time. Set a goal to read for 30 minutes. Even if it’s only a fraction of what needs to get done, it feels more do-able.
Do it first. Do it right away. If you want to go the library, go first thing in the morning or right after class – it’s much easier than deciding to go back out after you’ve gotten home, or started a movie. Decrease the number of times you have to decide to study. Instead, make it a natural part of your schedule.

Start Easy or Start Hard? Starting with the small easy tasks will help you gain momentum and feel accomplished which can lead to further productivity. On the other hand, getting the biggest, hardest task out of the way early will make the rest of your tasks seem easier. Which would work for you?

Play pretend. Think about someone who gets done what needs to get done. Now act like they would – pretend you’re productive. Chuck Norris doesn’t say he isn’t in the mood to get things done. This is your chance to live out the mantra you created (see above).

Create Rewards & Generate Accountability

Get support. Recognize that you have individuals around you that can help. Communicate your fears, anxieties, and challenges with friends or family members. Chances are they have once struggled with similar experiences.

Find a partner. Find someone who is working towards the same goal that will motivate you. Letting yourself off the hook is one thing, letting down a friend is something you’re less likely to do. Surrounding yourself with motivated, energetic and positive people will get you started too.

Create a support system. Having a family member, friend, or even someone on campus to help keep you accountable can help you to stick to your anti-procrastination goals. Ask a family member to call/text you to see if you’ve gotten an assignment done. Ask professors/TAs if you can set up due dates for rough drafts in addition to the final version due at the end of the semester

Establish a rewards system. Self-reinforcement has a powerful effect on developing a “do it now” attitude. Celebrate, pat yourself on the back, smile, and let yourself enjoy the completion of even the smallest of tasks. Don’t minimize your accomplishments. Remember, you’re already that much closer to finishing those things that need to be done. Select a reward that will get you motivated to get something done. Don’t finish the task? You don’t get the reward. Find realistic rewards and be creative.

Create competition. For many people, creating light competition (with yourself or others) and a desire to “win” may get you started when nothing else will.

Measure your progress. Find a way to track what you’ve accomplished so you can see your progress and results. Checking things off of your list can help motivate you to get more done. Celebrating your accomplishments will increase your motivation to do more in the future.

Finally...

Be Patient with Yourself. Changing your current procrastination habits is learning a new habit in and of itself. It will take time to build the willpower to put away your phone while studying, or to ask your friends to postpone meeting for an hour so that you can finish your assignment. The endeavor will be difficult and you will inevitably not be able to quit “cold-turkey.” And that’s okay. You don’t have to lose faith in your ability to overcome procrastination just because you postponed reading a chapter to run an errand in town.