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COVER STORY

## Why Wait? The Science Behind Procrastination

ERIC JAFFE

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Believe it or not, the Internet did not give rise to procrastination. People have struggled with habitual hesitation going back to ancient civilizations. The Greek poet Hesiod, writing around 800 B.C., cautioned not to “put your work off till tomorrow and the day after.” The Roman consul Cicero called procrastination “hateful” in the conduct of affairs. (He was looking at you, Marcus Antonius.) And those are just examples from recorded history. For all we know, the dinosaurs saw the meteorite coming and went back to their game of Angry Pterodactyls.

What’s become quite clear since the days of Cicero is that procrastination isn’t just hateful, it’s downright harmful. In research settings, people who procrastinate have higher levels of stress and lower well-being. In the real world, undesired delay is often associated with inadequate retirement savings and missed medical visits. Considering the season, it would be remiss not to mention past surveys by H&R Block, which found that people cost themselves hundreds of dollars by rushing to prepare income taxes near the April 15 deadline.

In the past 20 years, the peculiar behavior of procrastination has received a burst of empirical interest. With apologies to Hesiod, psychological researchers now recognize that there’s far more to it than simply putting something off until tomorrow. True procrastination is a complicated failure of self-regulation: experts define it as the voluntary delay of some important task that we intend to do, despite knowing that we’ll suffer as a result. A poor concept of time may exacerbate the problem, but an inability to manage emotions seems to be its very foundation.

“What I’ve found is that while everybody may procrastinate, not everyone is a procrastinator,” says APS Fellow Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University. He is a pioneer of modern research on the subject, and his work has found that as many as 20 percent of people may be chronic procrastinators.

“It really has nothing to do with time-management,” he says. “As I tell people, to tell the chronic procrastinator to *just do it* would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, *cheer up*.”

### **Suffering More, Performing Worse**

A major misperception about procrastination is that it’s an innocuous habit at worst, and maybe even a helpful one at best. Sympathizers of procrastination often say it doesn’t matter when a task gets done, so long as it’s eventually finished. Some even believe they work best under pressure. Stanford philosopher John Perry, author of the book *The Art of Procrastination*, has argued that people can dawdle to their advantage by restructuring their to-do lists so that they’re always accomplishing *something* of value. Psychological scientists have a serious problem with this view. They argue that it conflates beneficial, proactive behaviors like pondering (which attempts to solve a problem) or prioritizing (which organizes a series of problems) with the detrimental, self-defeating habit of genuine procrastination. If progress on a task can take many forms, procrastination is the absence of progress.

“If I have a dozen things to do, obviously #10, #11, and #12 have to wait,” says Ferrari. “The real procrastinator has those 12 things, maybe does one or two of them, then rewrites the list, then shuffles it around, then makes an extra copy of it. That’s procrastinating. That’s different.”

One of the first studies to document the pernicious nature of procrastination was published in *Psychological Science* back in 1997. APS Fellow Dianne Tice and APS William James Fellow Roy Baumeister, then at Case Western Reserve University, rated college students on an established scale of procrastination, then tracked their academic performance, stress, and general health throughout the semester. Initially there seemed to be a benefit to procrastination, as these students had lower levels of stress compared to others, presumably as a result of putting off their work to pursue more pleasurable activities. In the end, however, the costs of procrastination far outweighed the temporary benefits. Procrastinators earned lower grades than other students and reported higher cumulative amounts of stress and illness. True procrastinators didn't just finish their work later — the quality of it suffered, as did their own well-being.

“Thus, despite its apologists and its short-term benefits, procrastination cannot be regarded as either adaptive or innocuous,” concluded Tice and Baumeister (now both at Florida State University). “Procrastinators end up suffering more and performing worse than other people.”

A little later, Tice and Ferrari teamed up to do a study that put the ill effects of procrastination into context. They brought students into a lab and told them at the end of the session they'd be engaging in a math puzzle. Some were told the task was a meaningful test of their cognitive abilities, while others were told that it was designed to be meaningless and fun. Before doing the puzzle, the students had an interim period during which they could prepare for the task or mess around with games like Tetris. As it happened, chronic procrastinators only delayed practice on the puzzle when it was described as a cognitive evaluation. When it was described as fun, they behaved no differently from non-procrastinators. In an issue of the *Journal of Research in Personality* from 2000, Tice and Ferrari concluded that procrastination is really a self-defeating behavior — with procrastinators trying to undermine their own best efforts.

“The chronic procrastinator, the person who does this as a lifestyle, would rather have other people think that they lack effort than lacking ability,” says Ferrari. “It's a maladaptive lifestyle.”

### **A Gap Between Intention and Action**

There's no single type of procrastinator, but several general impressions have emerged over years of research. Chronic procrastinators have perpetual problems finishing tasks, while situational ones delay based on the task itself. A perfect storm of procrastination occurs when an unpleasant task meets a person who's high in impulsivity and low in self-discipline. (The behavior is strongly linked with the Big Five personality trait of conscientiousness.) Most delayers betray a tendency for self-defeat, but they can arrive at this point from either a negative state (fear of failure, for instance, or perfectionism) or a positive one (the joy of temptation). All told, these qualities have led researchers to call procrastination the “quintessential” breakdown of self-control.

“I think the basic notion of procrastination as self-regulation failure is pretty clear,” says Timothy Pychyl of Carleton University, in Canada. “You know what you ought to do and you're not able to bring yourself to do it. It's that gap between intention and action.”

Social scientists debate whether the existence of this gap can be better explained by the inability

to manage time or the inability to regulate moods and emotions. Generally speaking, economists tend to favor the former theory. Many espouse a formula for procrastination put forth in a paper published by the business scholar Piers Steel, a professor at the University of Calgary, in a 2007 issue of *Psychological Bulletin*. The idea is that procrastinators calculate the fluctuating utility of certain activities: pleasurable ones have more value early on, and tough tasks become more important as a deadline approaches.

Psychologists like Ferrari and Pychyl, on the other hand, see flaws in such a strictly temporal view of procrastination. For one thing, if delay were really as rational as this utility equation suggests, there would be no need to call the behavior *procrastination*—on the contrary, *time-management* would fit better. Beyond that, studies have found that procrastinators carry accompanying feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety with their decision to delay. This emotional element suggests there's much more to the story than time-management alone. Pychyl noticed the role of mood and emotions on procrastination with his very first work on the subject, back in the mid-1990s, and solidified that concept with a study published in the *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* in 2000. His research team gave 45 students a pager and tracked them for five days leading up to a school deadline. Eight times a day, when beeped, the test participants reported their level of procrastination as well as their emotional state. As the preparatory tasks became more difficult and stressful, the students put them off for more pleasant activities. When they did so, however, they reported high levels of guilt—a sign that beneath the veneer of relief there was a lingering dread about the work set aside. The result made Pychyl realize that procrastinators recognize the temporal harm in what they're doing, but can't overcome the emotional urge toward a diversion.

A subsequent study, led by Tice, reinforced the dominant role played by mood in procrastination. In a 2001 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Tice and colleagues reported that students didn't procrastinate before an intelligence test when primed to believe their mood was fixed. In contrast, when they thought their mood could change (and particularly when they were in a bad mood), they delayed practice until about the final minute. The findings suggested that self-control only succumbs to temptation when present emotions can be improved as a result.

“Emotional regulation, to me, is the real story around procrastination, because to the extent that I can deal with my emotions, I can stay on task,” says Pychyl. “When you say *task-aversiveness*, that's another word for lack of enjoyment. Those are feeling states—those aren't states of which [task] has more utility.”

### **Frustrating the Future Self**

In general, people learn from their mistakes and reassess their approach to certain problems. For chronic procrastinators, that feedback loop seems continually out of service. The damage suffered as a result of delay doesn't teach them to start earlier the next time around. An explanation for this behavioral paradox seems to lie in the emotional component of procrastination. Ironically, the very quest to relieve stress in the moment might prevent procrastinators from figuring out how to relieve it in the long run.

“I think the mood regulation piece is a huge part of procrastination,” says Fuschia Sirois of Bishop's University, in Canada. “If you're focused just on trying to get yourself to feel good now,

there's a lot you can miss out on in terms of learning how to correct behavior and avoiding similar problems in the future."

A few years ago, Sirois recruited about 80 students and assessed them for procrastination. The participants then read descriptions of stressful events, with some of the anxiety caused by unnecessary delay. In one scenario, a person returned from a sunny vacation to notice a suspicious mole, but put off going to the doctor for a long time, creating a worrisome situation.

Afterward, Sirois asked the test participants what they thought about the scenario. She found that procrastinators tended to say things like, "At least I went to the doctor before it really got worse." This response, known as a *downward counterfactual*, reflects a desire to improve mood in the short term. At the same time, the procrastinators rarely made statements like, "If only I had gone to the doctor sooner." That type of response, known as an *upward counterfactual*, embraces the tension of the moment in an attempt to learn something for the future. Simply put, procrastinators focused on how to make themselves feel better at the expense of drawing insight from what made them feel bad.

Recently, Sirois and Pychyl tried to unify the emotional side of procrastination with the temporal side that isn't so satisfying on its own. In the February issue of *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, they propose a two-part theory on procrastination that braids short-term, mood-related improvements with long-term, time-related damage. The idea is that procrastinators comfort themselves in the present with the false belief that they'll be more emotionally equipped to handle a task in the future.

"The future self becomes the beast of burden for procrastination," says Sirois. "We're trying to regulate our current mood and thinking our future self will be in a better state. They'll be better able to handle feelings of insecurity or frustration with the task. That somehow we'll develop these miraculous coping skills to deal with these emotions that we just can't deal with right now."

## **The Neuropsychology of Procrastination**

Recently the behavioral research into procrastination has ventured beyond cognition, emotion, and personality, into the realm of neuropsychology. The frontal systems of the brain are known to be involved in a number of processes that overlap with self-regulation. These behaviors — problem-solving, planning, self-control, and the like — fall under the domain of *executive functioning*. Oddly enough, no one had ever examined a connection between this part of the brain and procrastination, says Laura Rabin of Brooklyn College.

"Given the role of executive functioning in the initiation and completion of complex behaviors, it was surprising to me that previous research had not systematically examined the relationship between aspects of executive functioning and academic procrastination — a behavior I see regularly in students but have yet to fully understand, and by extension help remediate," says Rabin.

To address this gap in the literature, Rabin and colleagues gathered a sample of 212 students and assessed them first for procrastination, then on the nine clinical subscales of executive

functioning: impulsivity, self-monitoring, planning and organization, activity shifting, task initiation, task monitoring, emotional control, working memory, and general orderliness. The researchers expected to find a link between procrastination and a few of the subscales (namely, the first four in the list above). As it happened, procrastinators showed significant associations with *all nine*, Rabin's team reported in a 2011 issue of the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology*.

Rabin stresses the limitations of the work. For one thing, the findings were correlative, meaning it's not quite clear those elements of executive functioning caused procrastination directly. The assessments also relied on self-reports; in the future, functional imaging might be used to confirm or expand the brain's delay centers in real time. Still, says Rabin, the study suggests that procrastination might be an "expression of subtle executive dysfunction" in people who are otherwise neuropsychologically healthy.

"This has direct implications for how we understand the behavior and possibly intervene," she says.

## **Possible Interventions**

As the basic understanding of procrastination advances, many researchers hope to see a payoff in better interventions. Rabin's work on executive functioning suggests a number of remedies for unwanted delay. Procrastinators might chop up tasks into smaller pieces so they can work through a more manageable series of assignments. Counseling might help them recognize that they're compromising long-term aims for quick bursts of pleasure. The idea of setting personal deadlines harmonizes with previous work done by behavioral researchers Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch on "precommitment." In a 2002 issue of *Psychological Science*, Ariely and Wertenbroch reported that procrastinators were willing to set meaningful deadlines for themselves, and that the deadlines did in fact improve their ability to complete a task. These self-imposed deadlines aren't as effective as external ones, but they're better than nothing.

The emotional aspects of procrastination pose a tougher problem. Direct strategies to counter temptation include blocking access to desirable distraction, but to a large extent that effort requires the type of self-regulation procrastinators lack in the first place. Sirois believes the best way to eliminate the need for short-term mood fixes is to find something positive or worthwhile about the task itself. "You've got to dig a little deeper and find some personal meaning in that task," she says. "That's what our data is suggesting."

Ferrari, who offers a number of interventions in his 2010 book *Still Procrastinating? The No Regrets Guide to Getting It Done*, would like to see a general cultural shift from punishing lateness to rewarding the early bird. He's proposed, among other things, that the federal government incentivize early tax filing by giving people a small break if they file by, say, February or March 15. He also suggests we stop enabling procrastination in our personal relationships.

"Let the dishes pile up, let the fridge go empty, let the car stall out," says Ferrari. "Don't bail them out." (Recent work suggests he's onto something. In a 2011 paper in *Psychological Science*, Gráinne Fitzsimons and Eli Finkel report that people who think their relationship partner will help

them with a task are more likely to procrastinate on it.)

But while the tough love approach might work for couples, the best personal remedy for procrastination might actually be self-forgiveness. A couple years ago, Pychyl joined two Carleton University colleagues and surveyed 119 students on procrastination before their midterm exams. The research team, led by Michael Wohl, reported in a 2010 issue of *Personality and Individual Differences* that students who forgave themselves after procrastinating on the first exam were less likely to delay studying for the second one.

Pychyl says he likes to close talks and chapters with that hopeful prospect of forgiveness. He sees the study as a reminder that procrastination is really a self-inflicted wound that gradually chips away at the most valuable resource in the world: time.

“It’s an existentially relevant problem, because it’s not getting on with life itself,” he says. “You only get a certain number of years. What are you doing?”

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**PIERS STEEL** | March 29, 2013

Being a fellow APS member, it would have been nice to have been interviewed and able to contribute to these points. For the most part, the field has converged and we are all in agreement. Procrastination biggest cause is impulsiveness, which comes from a limbic heavy decision making (i.e., system 1 vs system 2).

Of note, don’t mistake the map for the land. All models are approximations (famously so), and seeking to provide a concise model that explains a lot with a little is a good thing (unless people actually think you are saying that the model is reality – which is a bit bizarre).

Reply



**DAVID HICKEL** | April 1, 2013

Look at the research by Russell Barkley & Thomas Brown regarding executive functioning.

Reply



**LAKESHA BAMBURY** | April 9, 2013

As a student at Carleton University I am proud to know that the scholars of my school are conducting such meaningful research. I am personally dealing with this and it has opened my eyes to some of the reasons why I might procrastinate. Also, it has opened my eye to why Carleton has specific programs available to its students to relieve this chronic problem some may inflict on themselves. I am not a psychology student but I found this very informative. It was well written to capture a general audience. I desire to look into this further just for personal reasons.

Reply



**TUCKER** | June 25, 2013

This is a great article, thanks for sharing. I love this ““What I’ve found is that while everybody may procrastinate, not everyone is a procrastinator,”. It’s so true! I’ve had difficulty focusing and getting my work done recently, even though I normally am very productive and focused.

Eric, what do you think about the power of your subconscious mind and its effect on procrastination? There’s an interesting article here <http://inspiyr.com/how-to-turn-procrastination-into-action/> that describes two ways to stop procrastinating by using the power of your subconscious. Do you think this works? This seems kind of like the law of attraction but I don’t know if there’s science behind it.

Now, I must get back to my job and stop putting it off!!!

Reply



**CHRIS** | August 21, 2013

I am a constant procrastinator! Been like that my whole life.

My mother is an extreme narcissist, and she believes the world owes her everything. She broke up our family, and today I have, at the age of 45, severe psychological problems and traits from narcissism, procrastination and borderline personality disorder. Suffer from severe depression.

I hate myself for procrastinating, but “repeatedly” find myself procrastinating, not wanting to do simple but important tasks like completing tax returns.

I find myself a lot of times having very good intentions, but lack the action to start.

Other times I start a task vigorously, just to lose interest after a while, leaving the specific task uncompleted. Anyway, I am still searching for the right way or motivation to stop this procrastination that is ruling my life.

Reply





**ROBERT B. NOGALSKI** | November 11, 2013

I too have been plagued by this action and being from a single parent(mother)while in foster care from Mon-Fri. until I was five with no discipline allowed me to start a pattern of least resistance. The article has me looking into other avenues to consider also. Thanks

Reply



**ABHINAY BULAKH** | December 8, 2013

Very informative. Great knowledge that will help many in the long run.

Reply



**GUY** | December 18, 2013

Very impressive article; the feelings of guilt, lack of self-regulation and poor executive functioning are definitely intertwined for the chronic procrastinator. It becomes a vicious cycle when each missed deadline contributes to the procrastinator taking on more than he/she can handle in order to compensate for the short-comings of the last cycle/failed to-do list. Self-forgiveness will

break the cycle and reduce the anxiety that leads to a near catatonic state thus enabling the person to set achievable deadlines and build momentum from each consecutive success.

Reply



**DAVID** | December 19, 2013

I have battled with procrastination since I was a child. My parents went through a terrible and violent divorce when I was around four. Living with my mother meant little to no discipline—she was just too busy working. When I am in the clutches of procrastination, the action part of my brain seems to shut down and I can't do anything but sit there like a lump on a log. Panic and anxiety usually follows that

period of procrastination. The same shutdown action happened after I witnessed my parents fighting and physically hitting each other. It's terribly debilitating, leading to problems at work, shame, anger, and depression. My sympathy goes out to anyone that has to battle this monster.

Reply



**JACKIE** | March 9, 2014

This is a powerful article and I am happy I happened onto it. I am task oriented and tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. In the past I have had to learn to really dampen all emotions just to get long papers done, complete boring reading, or appear interested in dry material. I would have this keen desire to put things off, or feel this unsettling feeling in my stomach. I learned to be almost stoic and to

just drive myself to get the job done. No fun, it felt as if I was going out of my mind with some kind of anxiety. this article captures a lot of the things I had no voice for. Thanks for the post. I will be

telling very many persons about it if you don't mind...JW

Reply



**DALBY** | March 11, 2014

This is a great review. I've read a lot about this problem, looking for solutions for myself. I was taken in many senseless directions. This all makes sense, including the comments, to which I relate.

The practical solutions are usually not adapted. I will look into EMDR and such now.

Thanks for your help.

Reply



**SAM** | April 18, 2014

Thanks for this article. As I kept reading I started to co-relate many of the issues I'm battling especially, that I know I've task but, I'm always diverted & always have guilty feeling of not completed my task (it goes on from days to weeks).

As one gentleman has mentioned about the emotional turbulent relationships effect on the increasing procrastination should be studied in detail as I believe

that has effected me a lot. As I've dealt rough time due to my spouse's OCD (which is being treated), the ensuing attacks to keep off the argument or stonewalling has made me indecisive and procrastinate. I was once highly efficient personally & professionally but, it has faded substantially. I want to get out of this mess.

I would really appreciate if there are more links & resources which can be added to help people to win over this battle. Thanks you so much.

Reply



**ANMOL JOGANI** | May 8, 2014

This is what I anticipated at thia time ..its something really fruitful.

the researches have covered everything that goes along wih procrastination and its not malfunction managing time,its far more beyond that...

RHANKS A LOT

Reply



**LEO MICHEL ABRAMI** | September 8, 2014

The golden rule of the procrastinator is the following :

Don't put off until tomorrow what you can avoid doing until the day after tomorrow!

Reply



**ION** | November 21, 2014  
i'll just read it later

[Reply](#)



**CAROL** | November 30, 2014

We know we are capable but somehow the energy that feeds the intention (to do something) seems to disappear. It's like entering a type of trance state, especially when you are under pressure to get that particular thing that needs done, completed. The simplest of things becomes a chore. We get side-tracked very easily, so much so, that we creatively avoid doing things for hours, days, weeks, years. Some of us, i am sure would call ourselves functioning procrastinators; in that we are not totally catatonic, but we allow a sense of powerlessness to take over. It creates such a sense of internal tension. Wouldn't you think that we would make the most of this time on planet earth to do and be the best we can and stop faffing around?

[Reply](#)



**JAN WOOTEN** | December 12, 2014

I have a question. The article states: "Social scientists debate whether the existence of this gap [between intention and action] can be better explained by the inability to manage time or the inability to regulate moods and emotions."

Why are these two perspectives regarded (ostensibly) as independent issues?

While either trait may be true for some individuals, for others they could be inextricably linked. Emotional dysfunction can certainly lead to time mismanagement, and conversely. To this non-professional, it appears to be a chicken and egg proposition. Moreover, the solution for any individual might be from either angle.

[Reply](#)



**GABRIEL** | January 14, 2015

Cool article, but I was supposed to be doing my work instead of reading it...

[Reply](#)



**CAROL MORRISON STRAFOROINI** | January 29, 2015

Thanks Gabriel,  
Your comment made me laugh out loud.

[Reply](#)



**ANNA** | March 8, 2015

I am a chronic procrastinator and when I started my business a year ago I began to realize how very deleterious this “condition” is. I began reading about what causes me to procrastinate and I found useful information but none that I would consider ‘nail hitting’. I realized the problem was with what I was searching for so I started to search “the science behind procrastination” and found this article.

This is the best and most comprehensive I have read. It has certainly helped me to define, contextualize and quantify my “condition”. I am now empowered to take steps in “treating” it now that I understand the science. I don’t agree that procrastination is a time management issue. Based on my personal experience, procrastination is the inability to self regulate moods.

## Reply



**BELGIAN UNI STUDENT** | March 20, 2015

I’m one of the world’s biggest procrastinators.

If there is a task I can avoid, I would do it. Whether it is as easy as baking an egg for lunch, giving back money, staying fit, or even putting my dirty clothes in the laundry, whatever the case, I will do my utmost best to avoid it.

This makes me one of them right?

Those lazy people.

Those irresponsible people

One of those who put their future on the line for a sparkle of present happiness or joy.

You could say I live in the present, but not that what Buddha teaches, but its evil twin. I live in the present, fear the future, and what it will make of me. And use the past to talk good about my actions in the present. “I had a hard life, I worked before in the past, more than you ever did. I used to be a good person, I used to do that with other people (I don’t understand why I’m neglecting it now), I’m really not like this” etc.

I live so much in the present, that I want time to stand still. No expectations, no fears, no anticipations. Covering up flaws, and telling the Me that wants to become a good perfect someone, that that day will come. Somewhere In the future.

Not now, not this moment, not this perfect moment of peace. Is it peace? No it is not. I live in the present, caught in a web of expectations of the future, watching time relentlessly ticking by.

I will become someone

Someone nice, someone people look up to. A celebrity perhaps, a beauty, or even a mastermind. And I am that person! It’s hidden in me, waiting to come out. But it’s not coming out... I need more time. Shall I wait for it? Yes, let’s wait a bit more.

Oh I’m convinced I am a great person, somewhere inside of me. But, in this present day, no one has that expectation of me, not even myself. Its safe, no stress, I can just wait it out...

But I’m 25 years old this year. My bachelors is taking 7 years. And I’m staring at the blank title page of my thesis. It’s not coming. The paper is not writing itself. I’m waiting for my perfect smart self to come out and write it for me in on a moment’s notice.

Yes, she will come. My fit perfect bikini body will come too. The money I need to become a sexy woman with nice clothes, shoes, make up will show up too.

Wait.. There’s no way it will show up is there? I know it’s impossible. But the intent was there was there not? I will die a fruitless person with nothing to her name, living in the past, telling myself stories of this perfect Me who did make the right decisions. Who took the first step in the 1000 mile journey of her Self. Who in the end accomplished so many things, and made her family proud.

Her spirit proud, who could die with no regrets, having seen the world, tasted the world, felt the world. Felt alive!

No, this person of the “present” will instead, write it down, and turn it into a story; so that her perfect Self inside of her can live on. But will she? The first words to writing her thoughts on paper, will also be criticized. Even more, the guilt will show up, it will eat away the precious time I would have left on this earth. It will become the laughingstock of the person I eventually became. So no, it won't be written down. It will stay a shadow in the corner of my mind. This perfect self I wanted to become, will die with the prison it made of itself. The dreams and ambitions will shatter like bones in the wind, and manifest itself in another destiny.

Yes, I'm sure that destiny will be great!

Carmen

Reply



**MARINA** | March 27, 2015

Comment by Belgian Uni student CARMEN on March 20, 2015 @ 8:13 am ..  
... I LOVE your story .... Please Keep writing!!! ... you can publish it “sometime in the future”, hehehe

Reply



**CLAY TAYLOR** | August 3, 2015

Carmen/Belgian Uni student, you described my life (except I'm a man) very closely. I feel your pain. I'm proud of you for getting as far as you have with your Bachelors degree. Forgive yourself and strain towards what is ahead. A proverb I'm focusing on lately is Proverbs 4:25-27 – Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

Reply



**LOVELY LIBRA** | January 15, 2017

That is the scariest thing I have ever read in my life.  
I was looking into a “mirror” the entire time. I had so much potential. I was destined to do great things. Some day I'd learn to control myself; my thoughts, my daydreaming, get to work on time, stop making people feel disrespected by my tardiness... just be a great person... so many goals and dreams down the drain. Thinking someday, somebody would know my name. Unable to escape the grips of my failed religious failures. Stuck in the past, unable to move on from past loves, past mistakes, and too scared to take on today. I'm 33 and what do I have to show for it? A bachelor's degree?? Eh. Doesn't matter when I have a low paying job I hate, seemingly insurmountable debt – that I'll pay off someday.

Reply



**AHMAD Q** | August 17, 2015

I fully believe I am a procrastinator too, but procrastination not necessarily makes you a complete loser, for some and for me it may prevent them from being better. I am an engineer finished with a pass grade because I always studied just the day before exams, now I am finishing my master degree while being full time employee and a father of three, I always delay things to last

minute even though I know I will regret it, yes most of the time I finish these tasks but at the cost of either my health by staying all night or not be available for my family, I am stuck with a dreadful job even though my wife keeps telling me I am smart and I can find a better one. I always give myself a reason why I am delaying saying that I worked long hours and I need to enjoy some of my time today before I go to sleep, sometimes I don't sleep at all watching movies and I regret it the next day when I miss work. I believe procrastination is increasing due the increased speed of life we are living in, working hours are increasing, wages are decreasing, and we all want to provide what is better for us and our family, this builds up pressure, which leads to a rebel mood that is self destructive, knowing surely delaying completing my master degree dissertation will backfire on me by not sleeping today and many nights to come. Now it is reaching the middle of the night and instead of completing my task I am finding the time to write this.... Amazing irony

Reply



**STACEY M** | September 1, 2015

This article describes me to a T! I dilly-dallied @ reading it...lol...

I would love to see if there is research linking procrastination and addiction, and or ACA issues (especially perfectionism!). I think that those connections are VERY likely!

impulsivity  
self-sabotage  
shame, guilt, remorse  
perfectionism (not starting b/c "it" won't be good enough)  
YUP! Classic!

The solutions seem to work too. I am breaking tasks down, giving myself positive affirmations @ completing these small bits, and forgiving myself more readily.

Thanks

Reply



**STACEY M** | September 1, 2015

...oh...and i have a mole that MUST be a professionally inspected!...oy vey!

Reply



**JEREMY** | September 4, 2015

All of you reading this probably have something really important to do....

Reply



**T** | September 7, 2015

Wow!! All I can say is Wow!! The article was very enlightening. I actually had two deadlines for class that were due today (assigned August 24th) and guess when they were submitted?? TODAY!! Procrastination has been something that I have dealt with for as long as I can remember. Each time that I rush to do something, I always think about future tasks and commit to finishing them on time. It is also

true that I take on more just to prove to others that I can actually be SUPERWOMAN, when I know that in the end I will only hurt myself..be filled with anxiety and think what a failure I am. You see I am in a job that is no longer fulfilling, and I have returned to school for what seems to be the millionth time to finish my bachelor's degree. I am really hoping that I can take this article, break down tasks, forgive myself, and go on to be that person that makes myself proud!!

Reply



**SEBASTIAN** | September 8, 2015

Failure breeds procrastination ... success breeds action-taking.

I recently had this realization, while working at my job as an electrical engineer. I was running experiments the first few of which were going better than expected.

As a result I got more brazen, neglecting the double-checks of setup and starting conditions. After a while I mistakenly switched the input-terminals, resulting in a blowup of the circuit. I immediately went: "Woah, maybe I should think before hit start." For the remainder of the experiments I could literally feel the hesitation everytime I wanted to start the next run.

I realized procrastination and action-taking (you could also say timidity and boldness) are not black and white. So you are not either one way or the other. You are more like on a spectrum between the two.

You have one overall-spectrum for your life and sub-spectra for all the different parts of it. Where you are on that spectrum is created by your life's experience. This also means that it is not permanent.

You can change it to a more healthy level. Usually this is done by adding up small successes overtime .

The only problem is when you've had a severe trauma in one or more areas and you are literally paralyzed there. This is what happened to me by the way. In that case you'll have to work around it, even if it might take a while.



Start with areas where you feel comfortable in and built it from there. This will then radiate in other areas.

<http://gritgrowthgratification.com>

Reply



**KAREN** | October 1, 2015

I should be in class... turning in my two assignments that were due today. I started working on them earlier today however I could not find the right words to even manage a sentence. I had over a week to complete these two tasks and I procrastinated once again. This level of procrastination manifests on to basically anything. I am also late almost anywhere. It seems as though I expect that the “future me” will be more thorough at completing tasks than the present me. I underestimate time, I prefer pleasure first, work later, or who knows. Honestly, I have managed to do that my whole life and sometimes it does work pretty well. I have written papers at the last minute that were outstanding! BUT... imagine how much more outstanding I can be if I were only NOT a procrastinator? That luck is running out, i’m finding it more difficult to come up with papers at the last minute. And this (today) is probably my latest failing attempt. I literally had the whole morning to myself... the whole day! And yet I avoid the tasks I NEED to do like I’m Neo from the Matrix dodging those bullets. Except that is only an illusion because in reality I am getting shot multiple times over and over and over again and I remain oblivious at the fact that I AM THE ONE doing it to myself. \*sigh\* Self-forgiveness is tough when you are spiraling out of control. I hope more research is done because it helped me feel at ease knowing that this is actually a legit condition. I’ve heard “lazy” and “irresponsible” plenty of times.

Reply



**CHICO** | October 7, 2015

I also thank you for this article. I have a coworker that I had come to believe was passive aggressive, and that’s why assignments all came in at the last minute. I am going to approach them differently after reading this article.

Reply



**ELIZABETH** | October 24, 2015

Great article except for two points. 1) You’re describing ADHD here mostly but never name it. 2) your advice to “let the dished pile up” goes against everything else recommended in the article. As the article even says, procrastinators become de-sensitized/numb to the bad consequences of their actions and do them again. This is partly b/c of a negative affect or negative feelings associated with the task or some aspect of the task. Making a person to feel more shame for a task or “teach them a lesson” is ineffective. Instead, trying to build up positive affiliations with a task is likely the most effective thing to do. And it may take a lot of ways to make something positive before it starts to cancel out severely ingrained thoughts of negativity with a task.



Reply



**LEAH REIDY** | October 30, 2015

I second that Carol, thanks Gabriel, your comment gave me a good laugh too!

I met my good friend Claire for breakfast this morning and she brought to my attention that I am a chronic procrastinator and so I decided to see if its true.

This article is a revelation. The last sentence is gift, thank you.

So where do I go from here.....anyone?!

Reply



**ONE WHO SHALL NOT BE NAMED** | December 10, 2015

I started crying in the middle of it it was so true, I have a whole semester long project due tomorrow and I started it today, I keep promising myself that I will get my stuff together after this project but I don't know how valid my own word is anymore...

Reply



**CRIS** | December 22, 2015

Belgian Uni Student Carmen – you have a gift for words. Treasure it.

—

Torn between emotions. The article gave me hope – that procrastination is being researched, that it will be understood and possible to treat. The comments made me cry. Most were very recognisable and I can't help thinking “I'm not the only one! I'm not going crazy!”

I did note that every self-described procrastinator is negative about themselves, saying things along the line of “I know I can do better, but I don't”. The feelings of anxiety, even panic, feeling stuck... This, for me, points to three things: 1) problematic procrastination is not a voluntary decision (as hinted to in the article); 2) procrastinators do learn from the past, only they (we) lack the tools to change the future; combining to 3) procrastination may connect to, spring from, or strengthen other psychologic issues of variable severity (low self esteem, depression, continued experience of stress, trauma, etc).

This leads to the gap in the article I'm wondering about most. If procrastination is an out-of-control coping mechanism – what is it procrastinators can't cope with? Why is a self-harming way, apparently, the easiest way?

Then it follows (also from what I've read in the comment section) that there are at least two distinct

types of procrastinators: those who procrastinate and thus encounter (a range of other) problems; and those who experienced something which triggered their procrastination. Both may deal with comparable issues, but for the latter group, the question “What can’t I cope with?” should be handled alongside “How do I cope?”

---

I’d be happy to read any feedback on the above (even if you think I was rambling, which is fine, I thought so too).

---

I feel I’m in the second group. I’ve had a tendency to procrastinate, but not problematically, before my father died. Now, six years later, not only my future self is a stranger to me, but my past self as well.

I procrastinate everything, from job applications to breakfast. I did not use to be this person I am now.

Reply



**MARGARET NEELAND** | January 9, 2016

I am 58 years old and currently experiencing procrastination big time. I believe it is mainly related to anxiety (depression?) over the past few years (worries relating to 22 year old son), a very busy job and the feeling that I am the only person who cares whether my home is clean or not. I think I am somewhat perfectionist and this procrastination is actually really upsetting!

Reply



**LR** | February 12, 2016

This is the most helpful article I have ever read. Thank you researchers for all that you have done. Thank you author of the article for putting everything in an easy to understand and organized format. Everything mentioned in the article rung true. I am halfway through medical school and it wasn’t until now that I cannot put off studying up to the day before (or the same day as) tests and do as good as I want that this problem became truly apparent, but it was extremely hard because no matter how much I read on it, the theories were all over the place, and it felt as if I was battling it blindfolded.

I summed up the tips for myself in three steps since as you know we are experts in making lists.

1. Self-forgiveness, accept what I did was not right, don’t use “denial” thinking future self will be better equipped when doing the same thing in the future.
2. Mood regulation, find something enjoyable about the task (or make the task enjoyable) so that

the present mood improves instantly, making it easier to carry out.

3. Set a Personal deadline, so as not to stretch carrying out the task over the whole period of time up to the last minute.

Reply



**RICH OH** | November 23, 2016

Thank you for the action steps Future Doctor. Whether or not you wait too long to study, you're good at it and will make a great doctor.

Reply



**PHILIPPE** | February 16, 2016

I'll read this piece tomorrow.

Reply



**STEVE** | April 21, 2016

Except. There are sometimes reasons to delay fixing actions or words. For example where more learning can change the outcome. So this analysis appears to work much better for mundane or fully understood and easily directed tasks than for anything creative or innovative. As we progress our culture ever faster, the complex issues with landing on a solution and executing against it become

ever more intense.

Reply

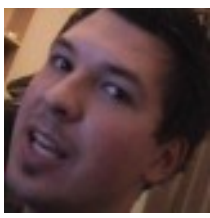


**I WANT TO STOP PROCRASTINATION** | April 22, 2016

Very well written article and I can closely relate with my situation. I also loved reading each one of the comments here in a hope to find some solution which is working for him or her. But There are many people just like me who wish to find solution and don't know what to do.

Finally, I took one step to form a slack community to win over our procrastination problem. You can get invite for your self at <https://letswinnow.herokuapp.com/> . I put in lot of time to deploy it and did it before any other task. I hope, atleast someone of you will join it and we'll together try to help ourselves to fight with this. Hope to see you on Lets win now!

Reply



**MARTIN** | April 25, 2016

I've been battling procrastination for the last 10 years when I got into more creative field and became a freelancer. With no deadlines and boss to push you, it's very easy to procrastinate. I'm still procrastinate a lot but one method that really helped me is procrastination bulldozer method here <http://procrastinationbulldozer.com>

Reply



**J. GILBERT** | April 2, 2017

The bulldozer method is a scam, I've seen almost this exact comment (15 years the "other person" has been struggling) and I'm pretty sure they're all the person who came up with it who is going around to all these articles on procrastination and telling everyone that it's the one thing that changed their life and stopped their procrastination.

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is folks.

Reply



**STUDENT X** | May 26, 2016

I find that I procrastinate in odd ways. If I'm working at home on my laptop, I can feel my mind trying to procrastinate via internet. Odd enough is, as my mind starts heading away from the task at hand, I realise that there is nothing for me to do at all on the internet, and so I head back to my task.

Then, as I start to get bored, my brain starts heading back to wandering the internet, even though I had just confirmed there was nothing there. And I end up just browsing my bookmark folders, not even clicking on an of the bookmarks, just looking at the contents. A school, it's a whole different story. All of a sudden, my mind knows exactly what it wants to do on the internet, and does it with efficiency and speed.

Reply



**KELLIE** | June 9, 2016

Wow. Just wow. I knew I couldn't be the only one.

I'm 57 now, and have suffered with lifelong Major Depression.

My father was a dry drunk, a fiery ghost who only appeared in our lives to administer his discipline. I have been a faithful co-dependent to three addict husbands (I consider alcohol to be addictive) who got all they wanted from me and then threw me aside. I've never felt supported, only judged and criticized. Now that my children are grown, I have no purpose. I used to be intelligent and creative, but now I live on the beach in Mexico (can't afford to live in the U.S.) and can't make myself leave these stupid computer solitaire games and enjoy it. I have no passion for anything.

This article will be very helpful to discuss with my doctors. Thanks for a ray of hope.

Reply



**FRUSTRATED IB-STUDENT** | July 23, 2016

I have always googled studies on procrastination that could somehow help me understand why I do what I do, although I believe I already know that... I might have some personal issues I must deal with, some of them might be linked with procrastination, some of them might not, but I don't want to blame them for my irresponsibility, you know? I feel like that thought would give me just other

excuse to keep on putting off things.

Reply



**DATTARAJ DESAI** | September 26, 2016

This article really struck a chord with me, primarily because of a point which I had thought of myself after lot of introspection. Seeing it here gave me the confirmation that i have identified the root cause of my problem. And that is, we would rather be seen as someone who failed because of lack of effort, rather than due to lack of ability. When we attribute our failure to do a task due to lack of

effort, it still gives us a scope to assure ourselves, that hey, i can always do it the next time. But if we realise that we don't have the ability, and that is why we failed, that's like a dead end, with no further scope to make amends.

Procrastination gives us this harmful lifeline, to protect our ego and blame it on lack of efforts. If we don't procrastinate, and fail, then we expose our ability.

End of the day, we need to realise that judging ourselves on potential is futile. What only matters is what he achieved in life. If it means realising that we don't have as much ability as we believe we have, so be it. At least it gives us a chance to work on it and better ourselves.

Reply



**MEHKI** | October 18, 2016

i want to ask how to sight this article in apa style 6th edition. plz help me fast

Reply



**ERJONA** | November 12, 2016

Great article

Reply



**GOBINDA** | February 9, 2017

I too fall in this trap. In the beginning (as I remember) found some healthy pressure towards the deadline which elicit some creative ideas. I became habituated thinking that my efficiency of work going up.. But in long run it created more work pressure and quality of my work dropped drastically. Consequently, I have to quit my job once.

In my case, this is not the case of time management, this is more of psychological problem that slowly delayed work and became my habit.

In my own experiment through meditation, I am able to manage to some extent.

If there are others suffering from same situation, love to read from them so that it would help me to overcome this chronic disease.

Thanks

Reply



**LISA.BORLAND** | February 23, 2017

I'm a chronic procrastinator, and for a while it seemed like nothing would help me. Out of frustration at not being able to get anything done, and because my life was being seriously adversely affected, I began to research further into my symptoms.

I've always had a problem with impulsivity – chronic over-eating, writing plays when I should have been studying at uni, only able to concentrate on things that interested me.

Recently I began to wonder if I had a mild form of adult ADD, without the hyper-activity.

So I researched further and also spoke to a friend who was using Modafinil off label, as a nootropic to boost his focus (he suffers from anxiety and depression and his anxiety meds give him brain fog).

When I looked into Modafinil and made the link between dopamine and the fact that it regulates your concentration and focus, I decided to give it a try.

The results have been astonishing. I'm suddenly able to focus most of the day and I'm actually able to motivate myself to work (I'm a freelance writer, so when I wasn't working I was losing out on money and damaging my reputation).

It amazes me that it's taken so long for scientists to even look at the neuropsychological aspect of this debilitating problem. If it's not already been done, I would strongly suggest psychologists carry out some studies on dopamine levels in chronic procrastinators and the effects of nootropics which inhibit the re-uptake of dopamine as a means of correcting the dopamine imbalance.

Reply



**JOSH REGAS** | March 30, 2017

Love this article. I too took too long to take action. It was the realisation that the actual cost of procrastitation is the lost action and results that could have been that got me moving. My new moto, Imperfect Action. Thank You

Reply

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**Eric Jaffe** is a regular Observer contributor and author of *The King's Best Highway: The Lost History of the Boston Post Road, the Route That Made America* (Scribner, 2010).

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