



Procrastination

What is procrastination?

The avoidance of doing a task which needs to be done - postponing until tomorrow what can be done today. Procrastination not only affects our work, but also commonly involves feelings such as guilt, inadequacy, stress and depression which fuel a cycle where we lose confidence in our ability to get back on track and so continue to procrastinate.

Why do people procrastinate?

- overload of tasks at a specific time
 - anxiety about the task, so time is spent worrying rather than doing
 - difficulty concentrating
 - not knowing what is required
 - feeling overwhelmed
 - concern about failing or not meeting standards
 - fear of success and its possible consequences
 - perfectionism, often associated with unrealistic standards
 - negative thoughts e.g. 'I'm stupid', 'Nothing ever goes right for me'
 - all-or-nothing thinking, where one setback is seen as a total catastrophe
 - being bored by the task
 - avoidance of things which are uncomfortable or difficult
 - too many distractions!
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How to overcome procrastination

The key to overcoming procrastination usually involves developing a clearer understanding of its personal and emotional meaning along with the implementation of a clearly structured and realistic timetable. If we keep doing the same things we do tend to get the same results so the approach is about beginning to do things differently and taking the risk of enjoying something new.

Attending to emotions

If we are experiencing painful, confusing or overwhelming emotions it becomes very difficult to work as our creativity, motivation, capacity to think and ability to focus are often impacted.

A good place to start is to spend time beginning to reflect on how you are feeling and what you are thinking about. It is often the case that we become so focused on a task or issue that it distracts us from what we are really thinking or feeling. It can also be useful to talk this through with a friend or loved one to learn about their perspective on what is happening for you.

Tools such as mindfulness can be useful in helping to develop a new way of managing our emotional experiences and so reducing the likelihood of procrastination, as can activities such as exercise, yoga or getting involved in a creative outlet like music or art.

Becoming aware of your thoughts and feelings can highlight underlying issues for which you might want to seek professional help. It's important to make contact with this help sooner rather than later as it can make a dramatic difference to your ability to work.

Boundaries, timing and tracking

- Create and sustain boundaries which protect your time and space while also giving yourself the permission to focus on work. It can be useful, for example, to let friends and family members know that you will be available at certain times in the week to talk but will otherwise be busy with work. It can also be helpful to turn off distractions such as mobile phones, social media, TV, etc. during work time and agree with yourself that you will turn them on for an hour or two each day.
 - Bring together a well thought through, clear and realistic timetable to cover work and break time. It's important that all tasks are broken down into small manageable blocks and that there is a slow move towards work. It's often useful to begin on day one by working for 20 minutes and then taking a break of 10 minutes. Repeat this cycle for an hour or two before moving up to working for 30 minutes followed by a 15 minute break. Over the next few days, and as it feels comfortable, move on to 45 minutes work/20 minute break, 1 hour work/30 minute break, etc. until it is OK to work a little longer and break a little less. If you find yourself beginning to get distracted or start procrastinating again then move back one step for a while and rebuild. Sticking to this timetable as precisely as possible is a powerful way of rebuilding trust in yourself that you can work and take breaks before resuming work again.
 - Alongside the strict timetable it is important to keep a log of the work you have done each day. Every time you complete a block of work (10 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, etc.) make a note in a log book or spreadsheet and total up your work time for each day. Reflect on the amount of time you have spent working each day and
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notice the incremental steps over the week. Sticking to this logging means keeping focused on the work you have done rather than the tendency to focus on what work hasn't been done when procrastinating. Acknowledging the work we have done helps to re-establish a sense of belief that we can work and also reinforces our self-confidence of being able to complete the task.

Where to seek more help

There is further help available. Tutors, Directors of Study and supervisors will have spoken to others before - you won't be the first (or last), and you are likely to find that they can make useful suggestions to help you back on track. But try not to leave it until the situation is overwhelming – much can be done to prevent things getting to this stage so make contact as soon as you feel you are struggling.

Counselling can help you to understand and change the personal and emotional aspects to your procrastination. Along with individual consultations the service offers workshops focused on managing procrastination throughout the academic year. You will find further information on the service website: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/groups.

Some tools that can help

You'll find information on a range of resources to help address procrastination, as well as other issues, on the University Counselling Service website:

www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp

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