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# Procrastination and/or Paralysis

At its simplest level procrastination means putting it off until tomorrow what could be done today. It is estimated that 90% of university students procrastinate and 25% of those students are chronic procrastinators. Procrastination is considered almost universal, but university students are particularly susceptible because of the large amount of work expected of them, the amount of unstructured time available to them, and the high number of more desirable distractions open to them. Procrastination is in fact a very complex psychological behavior that can have numerous causes and is not just a simple problem of poor time management. Procrastination inevitably leads to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, self-doubt, frustration, and depression.

## Coping Strategies

Despite its complex nature, procrastination can be beat. Here are some of the most common strategies to get a handle on it.

### 1. Understand Why You Procrastinate

There are many potential reasons students procrastinate and understanding these can help you overcome your procrastination. Many students assume that they are just lazy or have no selfdiscipline, but it is rarely this simple. Think about what you might have to gain by procrastinating. It would likely help to explore these reasons with a counsellor where you can develop a plan to deal with them. Some of the common causes of procrastination include:

#### **a) Perfectionism:**

Perfectionism refers to having unrealistically high standards or expectations for yourself. Fears of doing less than a perfect job can stop you from even beginning the task or cause you to agonize over every aspect of it.

*Strategy:* Realize that perfection is unobtainable and that you will feel worse if you don't complete the task at all. Praise yourself for what you have done and reassure yourself that perfection isn't necessary to be successful in university.

#### **(b) Feeling Inadequate:**

If you believe that your skills are inadequate, it can sometimes feel easier to not even put yourself to the test rather than try and fail. In this way you can blame your poor performance on lack of effort rather than your "innate skills."

*Strategy:* Realize that much of a student's success in university is about a consistent work ethic rather than their innate abilities. By putting in the effort, your marks will improve and your sense of inadequacy will ultimately fade.

#### **(c) Undeveloped Study Skills**

Students who have not developed effective study skills can be very frustrated with the process of studying because it isn't paying off and leaves them feeling bored rather than stimulated. As a result it becomes easier to procrastinate than face your study material.

*Strategy:* Developing some effective study skills can leave you feeling more satisfied with yourself and will ultimately pay off in your marks. The Academic Support Centre is available to assist you in your study skill development through both workshops and individual assistance.

#### **(d) Aversion to Discomfort**

Due to the sheer volume of information you need to assimilate as a student and the complexity of the material, it requires one to face a lot of discomfort. Some students have never been trained or have never trained themselves to face and work through this discomfort.

*Strategy:* Practice pushing yourself on uncomfortable tasks so that you can experience the sense of gratification that this brings. You will never learn to enjoy the feelings of discomfort, but a more positive habit will be reinforced by the longer-term gratification of better marks and improved self-esteem.

#### **(f) Being Overextended**

If you are overloaded with demands, you will likely feel overwhelmed which can paralyze any productive actions.

*Strategy:* Begin by evaluating your obligations and demands and prioritize these. Then determine what you can delay, delegate, or possibly even omit from your list. Finally, put all of your energy into your high priority tasks.

#### **(g) Lifestyle Issues**

If you are in the habit of sleeping in everyday, have become addicted to the internet, or party too often and too hard, then these lifestyle issues may tie back into your procrastination.

*Strategy:* First you need to identify which lifestyle issues are affecting your academic performance and then focus your energy directly on these issues. Specific strategies to deal with them will depend on the issue.

#### **(h) Fear of Success**

Some students are afraid of being too successful due to a variety of concerns including: not feeling it is "cool", not wanting to have to maintain these same high standards of success, fears that they will be rejected by their peers, or concerns others will be jealous of them.

*Strategy:* Understand that your success in university transcends your immediate connection with peers or the opinions of others around you. Being successful in university is a gift you give yourself and it impacts your long-term happiness and well-being.

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### (i) Overwhelming Negative Emotional States

High levels of anxiety, depression, or other negative emotions makes focusing on university difficult and procrastinating easy. Worrying can become your dominant coping strategy rather than taking actions to get your work completed.

*Strategy:* If you haven't been able to manage your emotions on your own or with the help of family or friends, perhaps it is time to investigate the option of counselling. Student Counselling Services staff can help you identify the sources of your negative emotions and develop strategies to better manage them.

## 2. Visualize Your Life without Procrastination

Imagine yourself without all the stress that procrastination brings, having marks you're proud of, having free time without guilt, not having to put in "all nighters" before an exam, and having your work done before the deadlines. This could be you! Visualize how you would act, think, and feel and then make it your life. Begin by acting like a non-procrastinator for an hour, a day, or a week to see what it feels like.

## 3. Accept That There Is No Magical Cure

Overcoming procrastination will take energy like all good things in life. But realize that it may be more about working smarter than about working harder. Procrastination can actually sap our energy, whereas accomplishing goals can give one back enthusiasm for university. Learning may actually become fun again!

## 4. Set Realistic Goals

Procrastinators tend not to set goals or if they do they are unrealistic and therefore unattainable. Set goals that are specific, measurable, realistic, and time limited. Be sure to write out your goals so you can refer back to them when you need to.

## 5. Prioritize Your Goals

Since as a student your time is both limited and often unstructured, you need to decide what is most important and work on these goals first. Then work your way down to the lower priority items.

## 6. Develop a Plan or Schedule

Once you have established your goals and prioritized them, you need to develop a specific plan as to how you will achieve them. This would likely take the form of a daily or weekly schedule or to-do list. A good plan can be the most effective way to overcome procrastination. Don't beat yourself up if you don't stick to the schedule rigidly. All plans require flexibility. Don't forget to schedule in time for exercise, sleep, meals, relaxation, and socializing. Fine-tune your schedule after a week or two to make sure it works for you.

## 7. Just Get Started

Don't wait until inspiration hits to begin a task. Just begin now and your chances of completing the task will go up enormously. Start with whatever task is easiest to do first so you experience some immediate success. Reading over lecture notes or reviewing a chapter you have already read may be an easier start than completing a difficult assignment. Commit yourself to the task for at least 5 or 10 minutes.

## 8. Break Down Large Projects

Since large projects can be particularly overwhelming, break them down into small manageable pieces. We can do even the most undesirable tasks for short periods of time. Start early on big tasks and work on them on a daily basis even for a few minutes. Don't think that the only way to work is in big blocks of time.

## 9. Reward Goal Attainment

The best way to develop a positive work habit is to reward yourself when you have achieved even the smallest of tasks since we are more likely to repeat those behaviours that are rewarded. Rewards can include almost anything you enjoy such as TV watching, time with friends, hobbies, talking on the phone, your favorite foods, or a weekend away. Keeping a journal of what you have accomplished can be rewarding in itself.

## 10. Develop More Rational Self-Talk

Keep a record of all of the excuses you use to avoid doing your work, and write them out on one side of a paper. Then begin to challenge the faulty reasoning behind them and write more realistic thoughts on the opposite side of the page. For example:

EXCUSES	RATIONAL SELF-TALK
"I'm not in the mood."	"I'm never in the mood. Mood doesn't get my work done."
"I'll do it tomorrow."	"If I get it done now, I can enjoy my free time rather than feel guilty."
"I'm too lazy."	"Labelling only makes me feel bad; the work still needs to be done."
"I work better under pressure."	"I'm tired of all the stress that leaving it to the end brings."
"There's lots of time to get it finished."	"The sooner I get it finished the sooner I can play."

Each time you catch yourself using an excuse to avoid your work, engage in this same process so that over time you will train yourself to recognize your excuses and think in more realistic terms.

## 11. Focus on What Has Been Accomplished

Once you begin your plan, focus on what you have done rather than what's left to do. Remember that success breeds success so focusing on your accomplishments is much more motivating. Dwell on success rather than on failure.

## 12. Choose Your Work Environment Carefully

Working at home can be more convenient, but it may also be full of distractions (e.g., TV, food, telephone, family, friends, internet, etc.). Working in the library or an empty classroom may be a better choice. Make sure you go there with everything you need to study. If you choose to work at home, make sure the environment is most conducive. Study at a desk or table, ensure that it is quiet and has enough light, and be sure the desk is neat and organized.

## 13. Choose Your Classes Carefully

If you really dislike your classes, motivating yourself to study or complete assignments will be only that more difficult. Choose classes based on your passion and procrastination will be much less of a threat to your success in university.

## 14. Don't Stop Trying Even If It Is Difficult

If you get stuck temporarily, shift to an easier task and come back to the obstacle later. If this doesn't work, talk to a classmate, friend, or instructor about the assignment or material. This input may be enough to push you through the road block. Or start on a different part of the assignment or study material. You don't have to work methodically from the beginning to the end.

## 15. Set Aside a Time for Your Worries

If during your study time you tend to focus on or worry about other issues in your life, set aside a specific time during the day to worry. If you begin to worry, remind yourself that you can hold off thinking about the issue until your "worry time." Use your worry time to decide which of your worries are about issues you can control and which are outside your control. Then accept the issues you can't control and develop a plan to overcome the issues you can control.

## 16. Develop a Study Buddy

If you have a friend or classmate who hasn't fallen prey to procrastination, see if they're willing to become your "study buddy." This will help reduce feelings of loneliness or the sense of deprivation one often feels by studying for longer periods of time alone. You would, however, likely need to establish rules around interruptions and breaks so that you don't sabotage each other's work.

## 17. Use Prompts

To remind yourself of your goals, write or design reminders that you can post in various places (e.g., car steering wheel, TV, mirror, refrigerator, on front door). The more we remind ourselves of our goals, the more likely we will follow our plans.

## 18. Determine When You Work Best

People tend to have certain times of the day when they are most productive. Some people are most productive in the morning, others at night. When you have determined your most productive time, reserve it for your most important or difficult tasks.

## 19. Let Go of Perfectionism

Trying to write the perfect essay or do the best ever assignment may seem overwhelming. Instead, expect that with most written work you will need to do one or two drafts and realize that editing is just part of the process. Write the first draft without censoring yourself.

## 20. Write a Contract

Make a contract with yourself to complete your goal, or better yet make it with someone else you feel cares about your success. Put the contract in writing and sign it to give it more weight.

## References

Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 13–39). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-012109890-2/50031-7>