

6 Reasons Why People Procrastinate

1. “I DON’T FEEL LIKE DOING IT”

Lack of motivation is a commonly shared reason for not working on an unpleasant task. Most procrastinators believe that something is wrong with them if they do not feel motivated to begin a task. This is simply not true. How many folks do you imagine feel motivated and energized by the prospect of raking leaves, or changing the oil in the car, or doing taxes? These tasks are often seen as unpleasant and less than exciting. To believe that you must feel motivated in order to begin a task has the order of events in reverse. In the *Feeling Good Handbook*, Burns (1989) writes that the “doing” must come first, then the motivation. Thus, starting a task is the real motivator, rather than motivation needing to be present before starting the task. Often, just taking the first step, regardless of how small, can generate the momentum needed to keep going.

Another strategy involves taking an attitude check. Ask yourself: “does my attitude prevent me from being motivated?” If your answer is “yes”, then it is time to figure out a way to make an attitude adjustment. This may mean giving up on the idea that “everything in life must be interesting”, or that, “I have to like all of my classes for them to be worthwhile”. It may also mean re-evaluating your goals and determining the “steps” which do, or do not, fit into the larger picture. If succeeding in the boring class seems to be a necessary “step” to achieving your larger goals, that fact alone may motivate you.

2. “BUT, I DON’T KNOW HOW”

Skill deficits are one of the most basic reasons for procrastination. If you lack the skills to complete certain tasks, it is only natural to avoid doing them. For example, you may be a slow reader. If you have several lengthy articles to read before you can write a paper, you may postpone the reading because it is difficult. You may even have trouble admitting your poor reading skills because you do not want to be seen as seeming “dumb”. In this case, procrastinating may seem better than facing your need to improve your reading skills.

The key to solving skill problems is to identify what the problems are. Often, a counselor, instructor, or another professional can help you to make this determination. When you know the problem, then you can take action to correct it.

3. “BUT, WHAT IF I CAN’T CUT IT?”

Fear of failure is another reason why people procrastinate. It goes something like this: If I really try hard and fail, that is worse than if I don’t try, and end up failing. In the former case, I gave it my best, and failed. In the latter, because I really did not try, I truly did not fail. For example, you may postpone studying for a major test and then pull an “all-nighter”. The resulting grade may be poor or mediocre, but you can say, “I could have done better if I had had more time to study”.

Similarly, you may delay researching and writing papers until the last minute, and turn in papers late, or incomplete. You can then also say, “I know I could have gotten a better grade on that paper if I had had more time”.

The payoff for procrastinating is protecting ourselves from the possibility of perceived “real” failure. As long as you do not put 100% effort into your work, you will not find out what your true capabilities are.

Another variation on this theme is that you may find yourself filling your schedule with busy-work, so that you have a “legitimate” reason for not getting around to more important tasks.

Perfectionism often underlies the fear of failure. Family expectation and standards set by parents may be so high that no one could actually live up to them. Thus, procrastination steps in to derail parental expectations and standards to prevent you from “really” failing.

Consider that the problem is actually the unrealistic standards that have been set, not your failure to meet them. The problem, and thus the “failure”, may be that you begin to believe that you are not a worthy human being. You may procrastinate to such an extent from fear of failure, that you are actually paralyzed. Thus, you do not complete the task and achieve a more realistic level of success.

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4. “HOW CAN I TOP THIS?”

“Fear of success” can be the other side of “fear of failure”. Here, you procrastinate because you are fearful of the consequences of your achievements. Maybe you fear that if you do well, then next time, even more will be expected of you. Or, perhaps, succeeding may place you in the spotlight when you prefer to be in the background.

Procrastination of this kind may indicate an internal identify conflict. If your self-worth is tied to your level of achievement, then you may constantly question yourself about how much you must do to be “good enough”. Each success only sets you up for the next bigger challenge. If your self-worth is tied to family acceptance, then how much more does it take for them to be satisfied? Each success only opens the door to greater expectations. Oftentimes, this leads to a feeling of losing your identity, and perhaps no longer being able to claim your successes as your own. Inaction or procrastination may be how you cope with the pressures you feel to constantly try to be “good enough”.

5. “THIS STUFF IS JUST PLAIN BORING”.

Lack of interest seems to play a role in procrastination. All students from time to time lack interest in a course, however, not all of these students delay in studying, or completing assignments.

If your natural interests are not stimulated by course content, one solution to procrastinating may be to “just do it” (i.e., simply continue to attend class and do the assigned work on time). This will give you more “guilt-free” time to do those things that are more interesting to you. Of course, it won’t necessarily make the class or assignment more interesting, but at least you will not cloud the “good times” with worry.

6. “YOU CAN’T MAKE ME”

Rebellion and resistance constitute the final set of issues which can underlie procrastinating behavior. Delaying tactics can be a form of rebellion against imposed schedules, standards, and expectations. The expectations are often those of a power struggle, usually not on a conscious level. As an example, your father has an accounting business and has always planned on having you become his partner after college. You are enrolled in the College of Business and like accounting, but since you started college you have been wanting to explore some other careers unrelated to business. Your father says, “No, you’ll stick to accounting and like it”. As a result, you don’t turn in work on time, “forget” to do assignments, and earn low grades, sometimes flunking a course.

Rebellion against external evaluation is another facet of this sort of procrastination. For example, if a teacher has offered or angered you in some way, you may retaliate by turning something in late or procrastinating indefinitely. Sometimes, these tactics are used on classmates in a group project setting or with parents. The thing to remember is that you ultimately lose (i.e., getting the bad grade, loss of self-respect, etc.).

Rebellion and resistance are re-actions, not actions. Thus, the control of your behavior rests with whatever or whomever you are rebelling against or resisting. If you are rebelling against your parents, then they have a great deal of power in your life—probably more than you really want. Decide what you want for your life—don’t just reach to someone else’s decisions for your life.



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