

Procrastination Tips & Strategies – a compilation

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Anti-Procrastination Strategies from “The Procrastinator’s Digest: a concise guide to solving the procrastination puzzle” by Timothy Pychyl.

The following is a précis of the above e-book, along with a few minor additions from me. It includes some direct quotes, not all of which are shown as quotes. As it is a very brief summary, some of the ideas may need further explanation. I strongly recommend you purchase this resource if you struggle with procrastination (<http://http-server.carleton.ca/~tpychyl/>). It is only US\$2.99 from the publisher Xibris. Pychyl has done extensive research on Procrastination, and his ‘Digest’ summarises this in an ‘easy to digest’ format. You will also find a raft of other resources including podcasts and the ‘Don’t Delay’ blog that Pychyl writes for ‘Psychology Today’.

1. Awareness. Notice when you procrastinate. Procrastination is the voluntary delay of an intended task. Notice when you have an intention and don’t follow it through. Notice and record what your thoughts and feelings were about the task, and the excuses (permission-giving thoughts) you have about putting the task off. Awareness is the first step towards change.
2. Identify the costs of procrastinating. List all the costs of procrastination – what it has you do and not do which are to your detriment, disadvantage; what is has you thinking and feeling about yourself, life, your future etc. Also list the benefits of acting in a timely fashion. Making change takes effort. Clearly identifying the costs of procrastination and benefits of change can help you to maintain your motivation as you make these changes.
3. Procrastination is a form of self-regulation failure. We ‘give in to feel good’. We put off doing a task that feels aversive / we don’t want to do, to avoid the negative feelings associated with that task (notice the feelings you listed in 1. above). We trade in temporary relief for longer term problems. “Don’t give in to feel good; step on up to what you should” Think: ‘**If** I feel negative emotions about the task at hand, **Then** I will stay put and not stop, put off the task or run away.’ Another helpful mantra can be “Feel the xxx (negative emotion) xxx and do it anyway”. Using a mindfulness strategy to acknowledge the emotions that have you wanting to put the task off, and then moving your attention to something that will help you feel motivated can be helpful. Pychyl suggests actively accessing another more positive resource state from your ‘inner landscape’ eg curiosity, desire to succeed etc, rather than get stuck in the negative emotion/s associated with the task.
4. Recognise that although your mind may tell you that you will feel more like doing it ‘tomorrow’ (more motivated, more energetic, more in the mood, whatever), you won’t. You don’t need to ‘really feel like it’ to get on with the task. Learn to be suspicious of your mind when it feeds you the message that you will feel more like it tomorrow. Don’t listen to this message, and instead “Just get started”. You may have to “just get started” many times a day on the same task – just take one small next step. Once you get started, you have primed the pump and will find it is a bit easier to keep going.

5. Generally speaking people who say they ‘work best under pressure’ mean that the only time they can overcome procrastination is under pressure. This does not necessarily mean they “work better under pressure”. (See no. 7 below). Be aware that although people often believe this is because they are ‘adrenalin junkies’ or ‘thrill seekers’, research shows that this is a myth for the majority of people who procrastinate.
6. Beware the ‘feel good’ of ‘good intentions’. If you give in to procrastination by saying to yourself ‘I’ll do it tomorrow’, you will experience the immediate relief of not having to do the task now, plus the positive feelings that go with creating positive goals – we imagine ourselves into tomorrow feeling great and getting on with the task effortlessly (when we are doing this kind of thinking, the picture of the future is generally ungrounded, undetailed, not taking into account the nitty gritty realities of the situation, and over-optimistic).
7. Research shows that we tend to over-estimate the difficulty and unpleasantness of tasks. Research also shows that getting started on a task changes our perception of it, and can also change our perception of ourselves (we feel more in control, more optimistic). Once we start a task it is rarely as bad as we think. And generally, if we’ve put it off to the last minute, once we start it and find it more interesting than we thought, we wish we’d started earlier so that we could have done a better job of it. So “Just get started”. Progress on our goals makes us feel happier and more satisfied with life and with ourselves. These positive emotions help us to make further progress on our goals – a positive cycle begins. So ‘just getting started’ helps to prime the pump towards us feeling more motivated and energised and ‘in the mood’.
8. Identify your own set of ‘most commonly used’ excuses and self-deceptions. Make a list of them. Get practiced at spotting them. And form a clear ‘implementation intention’ (see no. 9 below) in relation to your excuses.
9. Make use of well-formed ‘implementation intentions’. An implementation intention is what moves a ‘goal intention’ into action. An effective format for an implementation intention is “if.... Then....”. That is, we get very clear about what (very specifically) we will do when a particular situation occurs (eg an unhelpful thought, distraction etc). We make a ‘predecision’ about how we will deal with possible challenges.
Eg “**If** my mind tells me ‘I’ll feel more like doing it tomorrow’ **then** I will just get started on some small aspect of the task anyway (ie ‘just get started’).
10. Think about your goals in very concrete, specific ways. Thinking abstractly about our goals leads us to believe that they are not that urgent. The more concrete your thoughts and plans, the more easily they will lead to timely action. **Break your tasks down into smaller steps**. Make a list of the subtasks involved in a bigger task, mark order of priority. Do one step at a time.
11. Beware! The feel-good feelings when you ‘just get started’ can lull you into more easily giving in to distractions. The ‘feel-good’ can make us overly optimistic about how much work remains and how quickly we can do it, how much we have done compared to the task as a whole etc. We can also kid ourselves into believing that we need the reward of the distraction, for having got started. Arm yourself against this.

12. You need to remain vigilant to procrastination thoughts and feelings even once you have got started. It can be easy to avoid the feelings of discomfort that come with feeling stuck, finding there is something we don't understand or don't know how to do etc by giving in to a distraction. "We have to be prepared for changes in our mood related to setbacks and disappointments. We have to be prepared to deal with distractions. We have to be prepared to overcome obstacles. For each potential distraction, obstacle or setback either a) Identify how you can remove it / shut yourself off from it eg turn of your phone, shut down your email programme etc before you start work. Or B) Form an implementation intention for the distraction eg "If any friends invite me out this weekend Then I will immediately say 'thanks, but no – I'm committed to finishing my work'". Research shows that participants who formed temptation-inhibiting implementation intentions outperformed the groups who did not – and this effect was independent of the participants' motivation to achieve their goal and to ignore distractions.
13. Will power is a limited resource! The more we have already had to exercise self-regulatory strength, the less well we maintain that strength in a new task. But this effect is eliminated if it is for a task we feel highly motivated to do (ie it has a higher level of interest to us and so we feel more energised to do it).

But successful goal pursuit depends on us moving past these momentary feelings or perceptions of 'depletion'. We need to be able to transcend the feelings of the moment in order to focus on the overall goals and values.

What helps us muster or restore our willpower or self-regulatory strength? a) Willpower is like a muscle – the more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. b) Sleep and rest help – are you getting enough sleep? c) Self-regulation is harder later in the day when we are more tired so be strategic about when you do the tasks that are more difficult for you to stick to. d) A boost of positive emotion helps boost willpower. Find things you can do to replenish your strength – without being a distraction from your task! e) Use implementation intentions (If...Then) to trigger you into action, even when you don't 'feel like it'. f) Self-regulation appears to depend on available blood glucose. Avoid getting hypoglycaemic as your self-regulation will suffer. Keep a piece of fruit (complex carbohydrate) handy to restore your blood glucose level. g) Be aware that social situations may require more self-regulation effort than you think. The effort you put into behaving appropriately in social situations can deplete your self-regulatory strength and have you more likely to give in to something other than your 'task at hand'. h) Our motivation has a significant effect on our self-regulatory strength so being clear about our goals and values and finding ways to keep these very 'alive' to us can help us not to give in to 'feel good' temptations that take us away from our 'task at hand'.

14. If you are an impulsive person, the implementation intention "If an alternative intention arises such as an invitation to go out, Then I will say that I will make my decision in 10 minutes" can help. Building in a delay can have you avoid impulsive decisions or actions. It is also important to pre-plan re shutting out or making 'pre-decisions' re distractions.

15. If you are a disorganised person, deliberately structuring tasks and sub-tasks will be important. Also de-cluttering your work area may be important – but beware that you don't use 'tidying up' as yet another form of procrastination.
16. If you are a person who is prone to worry, self-consciousness, fear of failure, perfectionism etc it is important to challenge your worries and beliefs as they arise – you may want to get some help with this from a counsellor, self-help book etc.
17. If you are a person whose moods fluctuate a lot, and what you do is overly influenced by how you feel, you may want to get some help in skills related to emotion regulation and distress tolerance, either from a counsellor or a self-help book.
18. Cyberslacking on the procrastination superhighway (chapter 10). One research project 10 years ago found that 47% of the time people spend online is spent procrastinating – and it may well be more than that now.
19. Beware of 'justs' – I'll 'just' check my facebook, I'll just check my emails (and also non-cyber 'justs' eg I'll 'just' go to the café for a coffee. Beware of 'it'll only take a minute'.
20. Beware of the temptations of social networking sites (in terms of losing time when you had intended to get something else done). We are social beings, so these sites are rewarding. And the reward is immediate. *Rewarding* and *Immediate*. This is a potentially addictive combination. It also provides a ready distraction, and this can be a problem for people who are impulsive.
21. Beware of the myth of multi-tasking – research indicates that only a very small percentage of people can effectively multi-task. So don't kid yourself! Strategies for dealing with 'cyber' distractions are the same as above – shut yourself off from the temptations that you can (close your email programme, turn off your phone). And have an 'implementation goal' formulated re feelings of temptation regarding 'just' checking your email/facebook/phone eg "If I have the temptation to, or thought to 'just check', Then I will stay put and keep working on my task at hand." Do not 'give in to feel good'.
22. There are no "quick fixes". Procrastination is a habit that requires hard work to break. Ongoing conscious effort and vigilance is required. Be strategic in your change effort – pick one or two things to work on at once rather than try to change everything. Accept that it may well involve one step forward and two steps back. Be kind but firm with yourself when you have a setback. Research has shown that self-forgiveness in relation to procrastination is related to less procrastination in the future. Forgive yourself and start back into work again. Start, and re-start.

Ideas from Clarry Lay “Some Basic Elements in Counselling Procrastinators”.
From ‘Counseling the procrastinator in academic settings’ edited by Henri C. Schouwenburg et al. Washington, DC : American Psychological Association, c2004

General Thesis

“Nothing beats the timely pursuit of one’s intentions. It is the measure of success in life.”

Orientations Toward Change

1. You must spend more time working on the tasks that are most important.
2. You must spend less time on less important tasks.
3. Once you have formed intentions regarding some task, you have an obligation and responsibility (primarily to yourself) to act on them.
4. The ultimate payoff for change is that you will feel better about yourself.

Operations Toward Change

1. You must spend more time in the right place/s (a place with fewer distractions; the right place ‘primes’ you to work, prompts your intentions etc p.54).
2. Form highly detailed intentions regarding each task that specify day, time, place, and for how long.
3. Write down the details of your intentions and refer to them often on a regular basis.

Reminders

1. Your intentions should override how you feel at the moment.
2. Procrastinators tend to overestimate the degree of unpleasantness of a task.
3. Work on your task at any level, and think of the task at the simplest level when necessary. Ask yourself “What do I have to do for the next hour? I have to turn pages and read words on the page” as opposed to “I have to complete my degree, get top grades, please my parents, and get a job.” – bring it to practical ‘up close’ small chunk steps.
4. Focus on one task at a time.

Other Helpful Ideas

Building Rituals

In “The Power of Full Engagement” the authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz write about establishing ‘rituals’ to establish new habits. “But just as negative habits and routines in our lives can be undermining and destructive, so positive ones can be uplifting and revitalising... Building rituals requires defining very precise behaviours and performing them at very specific times – motivated by deeply held values. As Aristotle said: “We are what we repeatedly do.” Or as the Dalai Lama put it more recently: “There isn’t anything that isn’t made easier through constant familiarity and training. Through training we can change; we can transform ourselves.”

Urge Surfing

It is important to be aware that unhelpful feelings will pass, and that we don’t need to give in to these feelings by procrastinating. Being more ‘mindful’ of your thoughts and feelings will be important in the fight against procrastination. Learning the Mindfulness technique of ‘Urge Surfing’ is likely to be really helpful. See Chapter 15 in ‘The Happiness Trap’ by Russ Harris, for more about this.