



What is Procrastination?

Definition of Procrastination

Procrastination is a common part of human behaviour. Often people mistake procrastination for “laziness”. In everyday language people use definitions like, “putting off”, “postponing”, “delaying”, “deferring”, and “leaving to the last minute”. Procrastination is...

...making a decision for no valid reason to delay or not complete a task or goal you've committed too, and instead doing something of lesser importance, despite there being negative consequences to not following through on the original task or goal.

It is important to remember that everyone procrastinates. However, problematic procrastination can be distinguished from more general procrastination, by how bad the negative consequences are of us not following through on things.

What Do You Procrastinate About?

Procrastination can occur in many different areas of one's life. It can involve tasks or goals in life domains such as work, household, study, health, financial, social, family, relationships, self-development, and decision making. Really any task we need to complete, any problem we need to solve or any goal we might want to achieve, can be a source of procrastination. For many people, there will be certain areas of their life they are able to follow through on, and certain areas where procrastination reigns.

Procrastination Activities

Procrastination activities are the things you do as a diversion from or substitute for the key task or goal you need to accomplish. These can involve activities such as pleasurable tasks (e.g., movies, reading, surfing the net, etc), lower priority tasks (e.g., sorting, tidying, checking emails, etc), socialising with friends/family/your partner, distractions (e.g., sleeping, eating, smoking, etc) or daydreaming.

Procrastination Excuses

To avoid the guilt associated with procrastination, we often generate excuses for our procrastination which help us feel justified and OK with putting things off. These excuses often imply that because of some set of circumstances, we are better off leaving the task to another time. Some typical procrastination excuses are:

- “I'm too tired, I'll do it tomorrow”
- “I don't have everything I need, I can't start it now”
- “It is better to do it when I am in the mood”

- “It is too nice a day to spend on this”
- “I will do it once this other thing is finished”
- “I have plenty of time, so I can do it later”

Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

The reason people procrastinate, is because they hold unhelpful rules and assumptions about themselves or how the world works. These unhelpful rules and assumptions often generate some form of discomfort about doing a task or goal (e.g., anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc), and procrastination then becomes a strategy to avoid the discomfort.

The unhelpful rules and assumptions most often linked to procrastination are:

Needing To Be In Charge (e.g., “Things should be done my way. I shouldn't have to do things I don't want to, or just because someone else says so”);

Pleasure Seeking (e.g., “Life's too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun should always come first”);

Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval (e.g., “I must do things perfectly, otherwise I will fail or others will think badly of me”);

Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe (e.g., “I must be certain of what will happen. What if it's bad? I am better off not doing anything than risking it”);

Low Self-Confidence (e.g., “I can't do it. I am just too incapable and inadequate”); and

Depleted Energy (e.g., “I can't do things when I am stressed, fatigued, unmotivated, or depressed”).

Consequences of Procrastination

The **positive consequences** of procrastination, such as relief from discomfort about doing the task, feeling good for having stuck to your unhelpful rules and assumptions, and gaining pleasure from your procrastination activities, are all pay-offs that keep procrastination going.

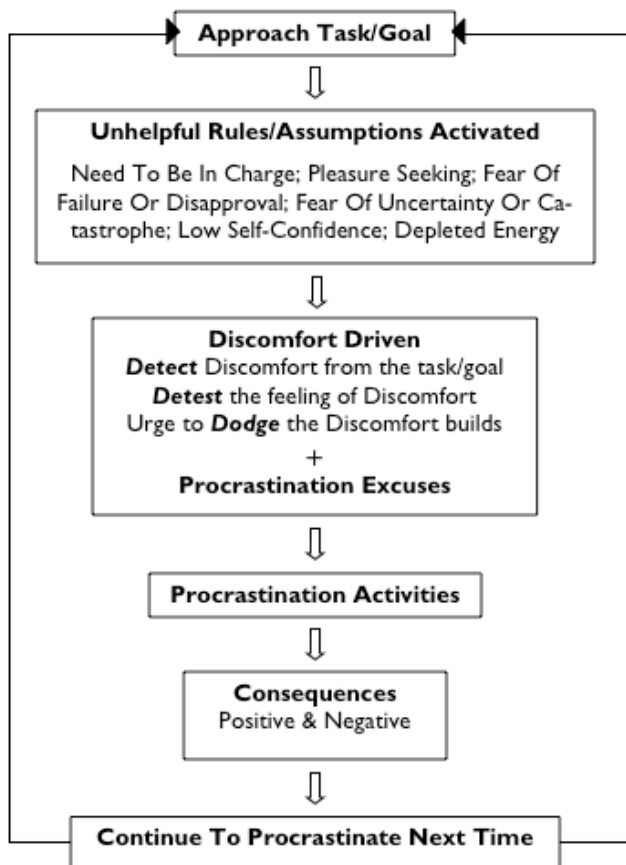
The **negative consequences** of procrastination, such as more discomfort (e.g., guilt and shame), preserving one's unhelpful rules and assumptions, self-criticism, piling up tasks, punishment or loss, also keep procrastination going, as they make the task or goal even more aversive, so next time procrastination looks like an attractive option.



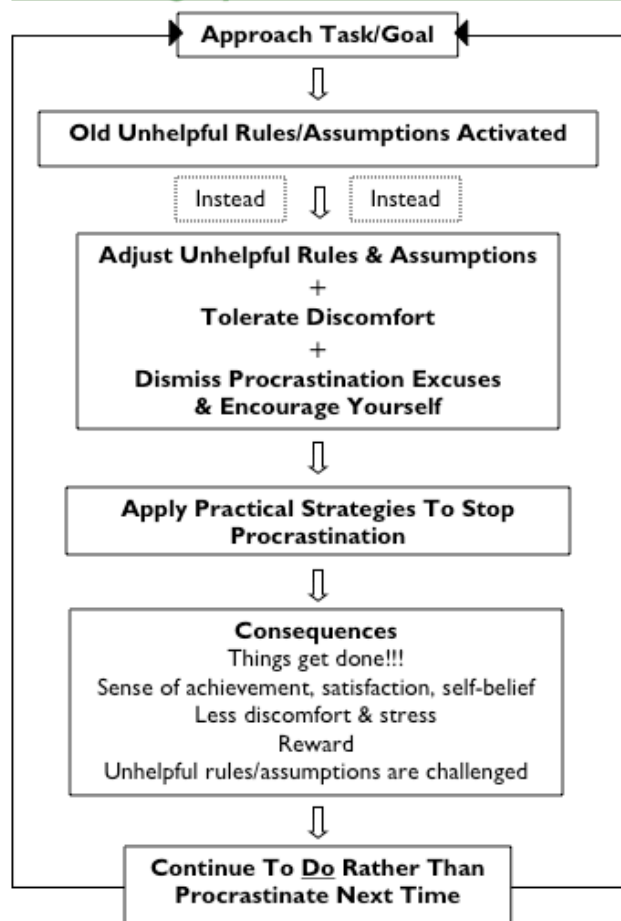
Vicious Cycle of Procrastination

The Procrastination Cycle

Procrastination arises from our **unhelpful rules and assumptions** about what we expect of ourselves and the world. When these are activated, they lead us to feel (or **detect**) some sort of **discomfort** about doing a task or goal we are faced with. If we can't tolerate this discomfort (that is, we **detest** the feeling), we will be likely to use procrastination as our way of avoiding or **dodging** the discomfort. In addition, if we can come up with convincing **excuses** and justifications for our procrastination, we will be all the more likely to travel the path of procrastination. As such we will engage in procrastination **activities**, such as doing pleasurable or distracting things, as a substitute for the tasks and goals we need to be doing. In turn, the **consequences** that arise from our procrastination, whether they be positive or negative, make us more likely to turn to procrastination next time we are faced with a similar task or goal. This happens because we got both a pay-off for our procrastination, as well as made the task even more aversive by putting it off.



The Doing Cycle



The Procrastination Cycle shows us that procrastination is like a vicious negative spiral that we get stuck in. The good thing about a cycle, is that usually we can reverse it from a negative cycle to a more positive cycle.

The more positive Doing Cycle shows us that when faced with a task or goal you would usually procrastinate over, you need to:

- Adjust your unhelpful rules and assumptions;
- Tolerate your discomfort;
- Dismiss your procrastination excuses;
- Be motivational towards yourself rather than critical; and
- Put into action practical strategies to stop procrastinating.



It is important to realise that procrastination is a habit, and like any habit it will take time, practice, persistence and patience to change from 'procrastinator' to 'doer'.

Procrastination: Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

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Adjusting Rules & Assumptions

There are a series of steps you can go through to challenge and adjust the unhelpful rules and assumptions that give rise to your procrastination. This involves asking yourself the following questions:

- What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?
- Where did this rule or assumption come from?
- In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?
- What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
- What is an alternative more helpful (i.e., balanced, flexible, realistic) rule or assumption?
- What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

If you hold more than one unhelpful rule or assumption, tackle each one at a time.

When working out where your rules and assumptions might have come from, this will often be from messages or sayings you have received from others around you, past experiences you have had, or how you have observed others approach life. Often these things will have occurred whilst growing up, but can also come from more recent experiences.

When generating a more helpful rule or assumption, this involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is more balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs.

When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, this involves working out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to believe it.

Example

What is your unhelpful rule or assumption ?

Things should be done my way

Where did it come from?

Messages I received growing up from family (e.g., “it’s my way or the highway”) and past experiences of being dominated by others, and vowing never to be in that same position again.

In what ways is it unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

It is simply not possible to have everything my way.

What are its negative consequences ?

I alienate others, it creates conflict with people.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption? *Things don’t have to always be my way*

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice? *Follow someone else’s orders. Do things I don’t want to for a change.*



A Final Note...

It is important to remember that adjusting your unhelpful rules and assumptions is not always necessary to beat the habit of procrastination. Often *Dismissing Procrastination Excuses* and using *Practical Strategies to Stop Procrastination* (see relevant information sheets) is enough. The unhelpful rules and assumptions underlying your procrastination are harder to shift because they have been with you a long time, and hence may require more intensive work. This sheet provides you with some tips to help get you started on the process.

Procrastination Tolerating Discomfort

Discomfort Intolerance

At the heart of procrastination is feeling or anticipating some sort of discomfort about doing a task or goal you are faced with. The discomfort could be anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc. Now, if you particularly hate, detest or can't stand discomfort, you are going to be more likely to procrastinate as a way of avoiding the discomfort. This puts you in a mode where you are 'discomfort driven', that is, you react from your discomfort, and it is your discomfort that guides your behaviour and calls all the shots.

Not being able to stand discomfort is often referred to as *discomfort intolerance*. Hence, something that can be helpful when addressing procrastination, is to increase your tolerance for discomfort. That is, to adopt the attitude that "I don't like discomfort, but I can stand it, I can stay with it, and I can get through it...I can tolerate it!!!" If you can adopt this attitude, you will be less tempted to use procrastination as a way of stopping the discomfort you have about doing a task or goal.

Increasing Discomfort Tolerance

Below are some suggestions you can practice to increase your ability to tolerate discomfort. These suggestions come from *mindfulness* meditation principles. Mindfulness involves being in the present moment and being a non-judgemental observer of your experience. So when it comes to discomfort, it means that you observe the discomfort in a detached manner, without trying to change it or buy into it, without struggling with it or trying to get rid of it, but just watching it as it is. Often when people do this, they find that paradoxically it lessens how uncomfortable they feel, and allows them to feel they can tolerate their discomfort. Now, mindfulness and tolerating discomfort is a skill, and like any skill it requires practice. The more practice, the better you will get.

Steps to Mindfulness

Be Aware

Firstly, bring a gentle awareness to what it is that you are experiencing right now in the present moment. This may be noticing your *breath*, sensations *in your body*, sensations *outside your body* as it makes contact with the surrounding environment, *sounds* around you, *sights* around you, something you are *tasting*, noticing *emotions* you are experiencing, or noticing *thoughts* that

are popping into your mind. If you are distressed when practicing, notice and bring awareness to the discomfort.

Watch, Observe, No-Judgement

Once aware of your experience, adopt the stance of being an observer or watcher of your experience. An observer or watcher doesn't try to change what is happening, but at the same time doesn't get 'caught up' nor 'buys into' what is happening. They just stand at a distance from the action...just watching. Try to be a non-judgemental observer, that is, not to judge your experience as either good nor bad, it is what it is. To help you be non-judgemental in your watching, it can be helpful to label your experience like..."here is a thought", or "here is a body sensation", or "here is a feeling", etc. Again, if you are distressed when practicing, just watch and observe in a non-judgemental way your discomfort. You might use labels like..."here is the feeling of anger", "here is the feeling of boredom", "here is the feeling of despair" and so on. Try to relate to them as "just feelings, nothing more and nothing less". Remind yourself that "you are not your feelings, and that you are more than just your feelings".

Let Go

If you allow your experience to just be as it is, chances are that because you have let it come into your space (rather than having battled and struggled with it), it will then be able to go and leave your space in its own time. To help you with this, you might try using your breath to let go. Breathe from wherever you feel the discomfort within you. Breathe into the discomfort, making a space for it and allowing it to be there. You may then be able to watch the discomfort leave with your breath, each time you exhale. If the discomfort does move on, it doesn't mean it won't come back. When the discomfort does rear its head again, know that it is OK, and again just bring awareness to it, watch and observe it in a non-judgemental fashion, and then allow it to leave again when it is ready.

Other Tips

Similar to mindfulness is riding the wave of discomfort. Our emotions usually act like waves, rising and gaining height at certain points, then tapering off and dropping back, then sometimes gradually rising again. Imagine your discomfort as a wave. Like a wave the discomfort is temporary, it doesn't go on forever, and at some point will slowly subside



Practical Strategies to Stop Procrastination

Overcoming procrastination in practical ways involves knowing **what** needs to be done, **how** to do it and **when** to do it. Clarity, task approach and time availability is the key.

What Do I Need To Do?

To gain clarity as to exactly what tasks or goals need to be done, try the following:

- write a 'To Do' list of tasks and goals you need to work on. This could be a list for the day, the week, the month, or longer, depending on what makes most sense for your circumstances;
- then **prioritise** the list of tasks, numbering them from most important to least important;
- then **grade** each task, that is, break the task into all the small steps or 'chunks' that are involved in achieving the task; and
- finally, accurately estimate how much **time** each step of each task or goal will take (Note., people who procrastinate often overestimate or underestimate the time it will take to do something, so you may need to actually time tasks to practice getting more accurate at your time telling).



How Can I Do It?

When contemplating how to do a task, there are numerous ways you can approach any given task to make it easier. The following are some methods you can try. Keep in mind that not all of these are suited to every person or every situation, so it will take a bit of trial and error to see what works for you in different situations.

Worst-First: knock out the worst task first, so all other tasks after that are easy by comparison.

Using Momentum: start doing a task that you like and that energises you, and then without a break quickly switch to a task that you have been putting off.

Just 5-Minutes: plan to spend just 5 minutes on the task. This is such a small amount of time, so you will feel you can tolerate just 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes, reassess and see if you can spend just another 5 minutes on the task, and so on.

Set Time Limits: set a specific amount of time to work on a task (e.g., 30 minutes), and stick to just that, rather than extending things even if you feel you can.



Prime Time: work out what time of day you are most productive or energised or creative, and use this time to get started on your tasks or goals. The idea is to attempt tasks when you are at your optimum.

Prime Place: be aware of what types of environments you get more done in, and what types of environments have distractions that make you more likely to procrastinate. Isolate yourself if necessary to minimise social and other distractions.

Remember-Then-Do: as soon as you remember you need to do a task, seize that moment to follow through.

Reminders: if you often forget tasks, use visual reminders and prompts to help you (e.g., place notes or lists in prominent places like on the fridge or bathroom mirror, or program reminders in your mobile phone).

Visualise: use imagery to clearly visualise the task being successfully completed in your mind, and use the momentum from the visualisation to get going on the task in real life.

Focus: if you are feeling unsettled, take a moment to close your eyes and focus on your breath. Try to lengthen out each breath in and each breath out. Spend 5-10 minutes using your slow breathing to settle and focus, and then return to the task.



Plan Rewards: reward yourself after something has been achieved or as a well earned break from a task. The more you reward yourself for small achievements, the less you will feel like you are missing out or being deprived, hence you will procrastinate less.

When Can I Do It?

To manage your time availability, so that you know when you can do your tasks and goals, use a timetable to either **schedule** or **unschedule** your week. Scheduling is a more structured method, where you write into your timetable your existing commitments and routine, and then plan into your timetable specific times in your week for doing specific tasks and goals you have been putting off. Uncheduling is a more flexible method, where like the schedule you write into your timetable your existing commitments and routine, this then allows you to see when you have blocks of time in your week to devote to the tasks and goals you have been putting off. When these blocks of free time arise, mark on your timetable every 30 minutes you spend working on a task or goal.



Dismissing Procrastination Excuses

What are Procrastination Excuses?

Procrastination excuses usually involve some grain of truth about the current situation we are facing, from which we conclude we are better off postponing a task or goal to another time. These excuses make us feel that our procrastination is justified, reasonable, acceptable and OK. As such, these excuses play a big role in leading us to procrastinate, and we need to learn how to dismiss them. Here are some common procrastination excuses. Each excuse is divided into 2 parts, the grain of truth and its unhelpful conclusion.

The Truth	Unhelpful Conclusion
I am really tired	I am better off doing it after I have rested
I will miss out on the fun happening now	I can always wait till nothing much is happening
I don't have everything I need	I will wait till I do
I have plenty of time	So I don't have to start it now
I have other things to do	I will do it once those things are finished

These unhelpful conclusions follow the unrealistic notion that tomorrow will some how miraculously be a better time to get productive and follow through with things. However, often if we wait for a time when we feel rested, motivated, inspired, have no distractions, have everything we possibly need, have heaps of time, have finished all the other things that we could possibly be doing...we will be waiting a very long time for just the right conditions to come together to get started on a task or goal. The real truth is that no time is probably ideal for doing something we don't feel like doing, hence now is just as good as any other time to get cracking. Often if we get started and take a step forward towards completing our task or goal, no matter how small the step, our desire to do that task or goal often increases, and we can get some valuable things done. This means that by taking action first, all the other things often fall into place for us and we feel capable of continuing forward and getting the job done.

Challenging Your Conclusions

You can challenge your unhelpful conclusions and develop more helpful conclusions by asking yourself:

- What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to put off this task or goal?

- What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to start this task or goal now?
- Is it really true that I will be better off in the long run delaying this task or goal?
- Is it really true that I can't make even a small start on the task or goal right now? Can I still get some parts of the task or goal done now, even though conditions aren't ideal?
- Is it really true that later is a better time to do it?
- If I do make some start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?
- If I don't make a start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?

The Truth	Helpful Conclusion
I am really tired	But I can still make a small start right now
I will miss out on the fun happening now	But if I get some of it done, I can reward myself with other fun later
I don't have everything I need	But I can still try to make a start on some bits of the task
I have plenty of time	But better to get on top of it now than leave it to the last minute
I have other things to do	But they are not more important and can be done after this

Another way to change your unhelpful conclusions is to test them. That is, conduct an experiment to see if what you predict about your ability to complete tasks under certain circumstances, really holds up in reality. For example, if your excuses relate to the notion that you can't do it now because you are too fatigued, first rate how fatigued you are (0-10), then spend 5 or 10mins doing the task. Following this re-rate your fatigue and examine what you were able to achieve in that short time. You may then continue for another short amount of time, and again re-evaluate your fatigue and what you got done. Often this experiment shows you can get something done, and you actually feel more energised.

Encourage Rather Than Criticise

The more you criticise yourself for procrastinating, the more demotivated you feel, and the more likely you will continue to procrastinate. As such, turning self-criticism into more motivational self-talk, can also help to overcome procrastination. The best way to encourage and motivate yourself, is to speak to yourself as you would a friend who was in the same situation, as we tend to be encouraging rather than critical to others.

Procrastination Action Plan

Action Planning

It can be helpful for us to draw up a clear plan of action for what it is we need to do when the urge to procrastinate arises. Below are the 6 steps to get on top of your procrastination, any time you feel it is getting the better of you.

Step 1. Being Aware & Non-Blaming

The first step is to stop and recognise your urge to procrastinate. However, when you do recognise that you are procrastinating or you are having the urge to procrastinate, do so in a non-judgemental and non-blaming way. Don't beat yourself up for it, but instead recognise that procrastination has arrived and that you are going to make a choice to do things differently.

Step 2. Adjust Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

If you can recognise the unhelpful rule or assumption of yours that is being activated by your task or goal, you can make attempts to adjust this. You can do this by challenging the rule or assumption, questioning where it came from?, how is it unreasonable/unrealistic/unfair/unhelpful?, and identifying its negative consequences? Then you can think of a new more helpful rule or assumption, and what you would need to do to put it into practice in this situation.

Step 3. Practice Tolerating Discomfort

If you can recognise the discomfort that is arising within you about doing the task or goal, you can practice tolerating it mindfully by just being aware and observing or watching the discomfort without judgement, making space for it and hence letting it go when its ready. You could imagine riding the wave of your discomfort or delaying procrastination to give yourself time to practice sitting with the discomfort.

Step 4. Dismiss Procrastination Excuses & Encourage

Look for the excuses you are making to justify your procrastination. Notice your old unhelpful conclusions, such as not needing to do the task now because of some circumstance. Dispute if this conclusion really is true, by asking what is the evidence or reasons?, am I really going to be better off?, is it really true I can't get started?, what will the consequences be? Also, is there a way to test if your conclusion is true, rather than assuming it is? And finally settle on a conclusion that is

more helpful to you, something more along the line that you can make some small start now! Drop any self-criticisms and instead talk to yourself as if you were motivating and encouraging a friend.

Step 5. Carry Out Practical Strategies

Decide on the practical strategies most relevant to the task or goal at hand and apply these practical strategies. Remember, to gain clarity as to exactly what needs to be done, write a list of tasks and goals, then prioritise these, then grade each, and then accurately estimate how much time each step of each task or goal will take. There are numerous ways you can approach any given step of a task, such as worst-first, using momentum, just 5-minutes, set time limits, prime time, prime place, remember-then-do, reminders, visualise, focus, and plan rewards. To know when you have the time to attempt a step of the task, you can use a schedule or an unschedule.

Step 6. Reflect & Revise Plan

Now step back and reflect on how you are doing. Examine how things are going. Appreciate what is working well and the positive consequences of doing rather than procrastinating. Also recognise what areas may need some improvement. If something does need to be revised, revisit steps 1-5, and try again. Please know that of your action plan, it is steps 4 & 5 that are most important to focus on, in order to see some change in your procrastination habit.

Keeping Going

Now, at the end of the day the important thing is to keep going! Expect that changing your procrastination habit will take time, practice, persistence and patience. Expect that you will have good days and bad. Expect you will have days you feel like a 'doer', and days you feel like you have slipped back into 'procrastinationville'. The old saying of "two steps forward, one step back" is very true. If you expect setbacks when you sign up for the journey of changing your procrastination, then when you face a bump in the road, you will be less likely to blame yourself and give up. As such, you will be better able to use the 6 steps of the action plan just covered, to help you get over that bump and keep moving full steam ahead!

