LEARN TO DEAL WITH PROCRASTINATION

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
Procrastination is about delaying. Delaying may be about not having the skill to do the work, little interest in the work, worry about failure or wanting to get the work perfect. These pages will explain how your self-talk feeds delaying, avoidance and procrastination. You will also find some useful strategies for changing the unhelpful habit of procrastination.
PROCRASTINATION IS A LEARNED HABIT

It can be difficult to break out of the pattern of procrastination because it is a self-perpetuating habit - i.e. avoiding challenging tasks and uncomfortable feelings can actually feel “rewarding” in the short term, but this process eventually reinforces the same patterns of negative thinking and feelings and self-defeating behaviours. Unfortunately, as time runs short, the open loop of anxiety, fear and avoidance leads to outcomes such as poor exam preparation or not completing assignments by their due date. See Figure 1.

There are other difficulties that contribute to procrastination. For example:

- excessive self-doubt and viewing your abilities and qualities in a negative way
- trying to be a perfectionist and maintaining unrealistically high expectations about the standard of your work, which can also result in avoidance behaviours. To learn more about how to manage perfectionism go to Learn To Manage Perfectionism.
- having poor time management skills. For time management techniques take a look at our Learn To Get Organized.

Figure 1
The Negative Cycle of Procrastination

1. Sit down to begin assignment/exam study

2. Negative thoughts and feeling eg. worry about failure, perfectionism

3. Feel urge to avoid uncomfortable feelings and delay starting on studies

4. Avoiding work and engaging in procrastination activities feels rewarding

5. Feelings of increased pressure and anxiety as time runs short
A useful way to begin to make positive changes is to identify and make a list of your own negative thoughts (excuses) and self-defeating behaviours (delaying and diverting tactics). Here are some examples, which may be familiar to you:

**Excuses:**
- I can only write/study when I’m under pressure
- I have to feel inspired and in the right mood to write/study well
- I’m good at research but I don’t like writing
- Even if I do write my essay, it won’t be any good
- I’d rather not write anything than hand in something that’s not really good (perfect)...

**Delaying tactics:**
- It’s nearly dinnertime/bedtime, so I’ll start later/tomorrow
- I work best when everyone else has gone to bed
- I need to tidy up my desk/room/life before I can concentrate
- I just need to check my email & chat with friends first/again...

Obviously, these excuses, delaying and diverting activities are not helpful in facing the reality that success at university involves developing persistence and skills in navigating difficulties. So how can you develop new habits that will allow you to move forward instead of getting stuck in unhelpful cycles of behaviour?

**Acceptance**

The strategy of acceptance may seem counter-intuitive at first. Its aim is to enable you to free yourself from the loops of unhelpful thinking and emotions, and the urge to avoid difficulties and challenges. The key idea is that it can actually be helpful for you to simply accept that you (like most other people) will experience uncomfortable feelings and thoughts and that struggle with procrastination is universal.

This form of acceptance is not about giving up responsibility, nor about avoiding trying to find solutions to your problems. It involves not expecting that you should have no discomfort or unwanted experiences, and also a willingness to allow them to be present as you work on a project or study. As noted earlier, experiential avoidance – such as procrastination or perfectionism - can be an easy way to escape discomfort and unwanted thoughts and feelings, but such avoidance actually increases psychological distress.

Paradoxically, when you are more accepting of your feelings and thoughts, it is likely that you will experience them less intensely and that you can find yourself motivated to learn new ways of interacting with your experiences.
Grow confidence by saying helpful things to yourself. Suppose that you hold a pressure belief such as: “I must be successful at everything I do, or I risk being a failure and feeling worthless”. Write it down and label it as a pressure belief. Then write more user-friendly ideas to encourage a “give it a go attitude”.

Here are some clues: If your friend held this belief, what would you tell her/him? Would your friend feel more encouraged to begin if the expectation was “to learn and improve as I go” rather than to achieve “success”? What would be the outcome if your friend changed their thinking? 

Here are more ways to challenge your unhelpful thoughts and excuses and to experiment with new ways of doing things. Ask yourself:

- Is it really true that I will be better off in the long run doing 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 if conditions aren’t ideal?
- If I do make some start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?

Adopt a personal motto to keep your thinking working effectively for you e.g. “begin at the beginning, break into small steps and follow through in this moment” (not some future moment!).

The same applies to reason giving for delaying tasks. Realistically we know that tomorrow will not miraculously be a better time to get productive and follow through with things.

Here are some more examples of helpful shifts in thinking and action:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The 'Truth'</th>
<th>Unhelpful Thought/Excuse</th>
<th>Helpful Thought/Useful Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am really tired</td>
<td>I am better off doing it after I have rested</td>
<td>I can still make a start right now and then rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't want to do it now</td>
<td>I may feel more like doing it tomorrow</td>
<td>Later won't be any better so I may as well start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will miss out on the fun now</td>
<td>I can always wait till nothing much is happening</td>
<td>If I get some work done I can reward myself later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have everything I need</td>
<td>I will wait till I do</td>
<td>I can still try to make a start on some of the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have plenty of time</td>
<td>So I don't have to start it now</td>
<td>Better to get on top of it now than at the last minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't feel inspired</td>
<td>I will wait till I do</td>
<td>If I get started inspiration is more likely to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have other things to do</td>
<td>I will do it once those things are finished</td>
<td>They are not more important and can be done later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have enough time now</td>
<td>I will wait till I have a lot of time to do it all</td>
<td>I can get some of it done now then more later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work better under pressure</td>
<td>So I will leave it to the last minute</td>
<td>But if I leave things too late it can backfire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An important part of developing a more accepting stance is the practice of mindfulness. For an information sheet on mindfulness go to the Centre for Clinical Interventions website. You can practice a mindfulness exercise above. If you would like to attend a mindfulness skillshop go to our skillshops page.

**ACT ACCORDING TO YOUR VALUES AND GOALS**

Your values give you direction and a sense of how you intend to live your life, while your goals are the achievements that you intend to realise at different stages along the way. Remind yourself of the reasons for studying at university – both the underlying values and the goals that you are aiming to achieve. Sometimes, you have to make changes in how you behave in order to live according to your values. You will need to acquire effective habits of thinking, feeling and action in order to thrive. Remember that, as you move towards achieving your values-based goals, you will encounter obstacles and setbacks, and so you will need to persistently practice using your new skills.

**GUIDED MINDFULNESS EXERCISE**

- Running time: 12 min

See the audio file’s progress bar

Download the podcast

- Size: 11Mb (MP3)

Make a list of the practical techniques and skills that you already use in order to work well - e.g. setting and sticking to a starting time for study/writing, having mini-deadlines for finishing parts of an assignment, starting early in the day, having the internet switched off for a few hours, etc. For further practical tips about changing your behaviour see Learn To Get Organized. You can also or attend a skillshop at Counselling and Psychological Services or at the Learning Centre.

For further detailed self-help information about procrastination you can also go to the Centre for Clinical Interventions website.
MOVING TOWARDS YOUR STUDY GOALS

When you become better organised and finish work on time, you are less likely to feel anxious and guilty because you are no longer letting yourself or others down because of your delays. By completing tasks in a timely way, you will experience positive feelings including a sense of freedom and spontaneity; and you will be able to estimate, more realistically, the time and effort required for you to complete projects in the future. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2**
The Positive & Achieving Cycle

1. Sit down to begin assignment/exam study
2. Negative thoughts and feelings about study recur
3. Adjust thinking and accept uncomfortable feelings. Dismiss procrastination excuses and be positive
4. Engage in effective action to complete study task. eg. time management, meet deadlines, and reward yourself for effort
5. Outcomes are positive eg, obstacles are overcome, study tasks are completed, less stress, positive beliefs about ability to achieve in the future

For an useful online workbook on procrastination you can go to the Centre for Clinical Interventions website.

**INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE**
If after accessing the resources here you are still needing some further help in dealing with procrastination please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS).