



# Combat Procrastination

When he first presented research on procrastination, Joseph Ferrari was often put off. "I'd be given the last day at a conference," recalls Ferrari, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago, "the last hour when people were packing up to go home. 'Oh, its procrastination, you can talk then!'"

I took most of the 20th century for psychology to hunker down and get serious about studying people who postpone till tomorrow what they ought to do today. But today, their focus couldn't be more timely. In our computer-driven society, people can opt for hyperefficiency, but they can also mindlessly procrastinate with endless electronic distractions. The resulting damage - while often trivialized - can be severe, stunting careers and leaving lives mired in shame and self-doubt. Like many self-defeating behaviors, procrastination turns out to be deeply rooted in psyche and personality.

"It's not about time management," says Ferrari, who co-edited the only scholarly book on the subject, *Procrastination and Task Avoidance*. "To tell a chronic procrastinator to 'Just Do It' is like telling a clinically depressed person to cheer up."

## Self-defeating delays

Indeed, all of us occasionally put off boring or unpleasant task - mowing the lawn or organizing our taxes. But so-called trait procrastinators repeatedly postpone acts that would lead to success or more fulfilled lives. If we call friends at the last minute, for instance, they're less likely to be free. If we phone to make a reservation two hours before dinner, we probably can't get a table. And if we revise our resumes or write a presentation the day before a job interview, well, it's no surprise if we don't get the job.

How many people actually are trait procrastinators? No one really knows. Small surveys have found about 20% of adults report trait procrastination. A seminal 1984 study of 342 college students found close to half always or almost always procrastinate at writing term papers.

But it is clear that most trait procrastinators pay a high price. There is the obvious cost: A study of 104 college students published in the November 1997 issue of *Psychological Science* found that procrastinators turned in their papers later and got lower grades. And there's a more poignant impact. A web-based survey by The Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Canada has received 2,700 responses to the query, "To what extent is procrastination having a negative impact on your happiness?" So far, 46% say "quite a bit" or "very much," and 18% report "extreme negative effect."

Even physical health and key relationships suffer. The same *Psychological Science* study that saw procrastinators getting lower grades on papers also found that later in the semester, as deadlines loomed and stress rose, procrastinators suffered more physical symptoms and visited health care providers more often.

"People who have a serious problem with procrastination experience a good deal of shame," says M. Susan Roberts, PhD, a behavioral therapist and author of *Living Without Procrastination*. They berate themselves with the refrain, "I hate not being able to make myself do what I want to do, when I want to do it." She worked with one man who had lost his business because he just couldn't get around to sending out bills for payments due to him.

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# Afraid to be Judged

While agreeing on procrastination's gravity in the fledgling field differ on its causes.

Ferrari says that trait procrastinators are full of self-doubt and worry in particular about how others evaluate their abilities. "Procrastinators view their self-worth as based solely on ability at a task" he says. So their logic says, "If I never finish the task, you can never judge my ability."

Delaying projects also offers procrastinators a handy excuse if they don't do well. "They'd rather create the impression that they lacked effort than ability," says Ferrari. "They can blame it on the lack of time."

In fact, they will often handicap themselves to guarantee an excuse if they perform poorly, Ferrari says. In a study reported in the July 1999 Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, he and some colleagues put 59 trait procrastinators in a room. They were told they could choose between studying for a math test or playing video games they'd been told were "time wasters." The upshot? The procrastinators (observed through a one-way mirror) spent 60% of their time playing games.

Some psychologists say that self-defeating behavior is rooted in parental relationships. Indeed, studies led by Ferrari have found some procrastinators are more likely to have had authoritarian fathers. He views later-life procrastination as reflecting a childhood pattern of rebellion against demanding dads. Others suggest that authoritarian parents, who say when and how things will be done, fail to help kids develop initiative and planning skills.

But Clarry Lay, PhD, a professor of psychology at York University in Toronto and creator of the General Procrastination Scale, sees emotions as effects rather than causes of procrastination. He says he believes that procrastinators simply have a different level of conscientiousness than most folks. Put simply: They think and act in terms of "wishes and dreams" while non-procrastinators' focus on "oughts and obligations," he says. They are also neurotically disorganized in their thinking, he says, making them forgetful and less likely to plan well.


## Tools for change

Still, there's good news for procrastinators. Researchers agree that no matter the underlying cause, procrastinators can change - if they change the way they think. When working with clients who fear the evaluation of others, for example, Roberts has them reduce anxiety by picturing themselves responding to and surviving the harshest of criticism. She also suggests some use a beeping alarm of Palm Pilot as tools to constantly remind themselves through the day about the benefits they'll reap if they finish the task on time.

Indeed, putting a stop to putting things off has benefits beyond completing a particular task. Maybe you'll end up with a better grade or maybe not, Lay tells the students he counsels about their academic procrastination.

But one thing is sure. "You are going to feel better about yourself."

Source from : <http://health.msn.com/>; 2000 by David Jacobson is a San Francisco freelance writer who frequently covers psychology.



divine (dī-vīn')  
adj. belonging to or pro  
holy; excellent in the hi  
prescient, having forebo  
skilled in divine things;  
the gospel; a theologian

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