

Why You Procrastinate

by Donald Asher

Do you put off important work until the last minute? So do I! That makes us both procrastinators. In fact, this article was due weeks ago. But since you didn't know that, you weren't missing it, were you? Only my editors suffer from my work habits. At least, that's what I try to tell myself.

Procrastination costs the country untold millions--if not billions--of dollars, though. Missed deadlines create a cascade of problems in a complex, interconnected economy. The State of California can't seem ever to turn out a timely budget, scads of Americans recently waited weeks and weeks for tardy stimulus checks, and delayed software releases even have their own name, "vaporware."

It turns out that procrastination is not all bad, and not all procrastinators are deficient performers. For example, graduate students are *more* likely than undergraduates to procrastinate, in spite of being statistically superior students. Artists often revel in pulling all nighters full of blasts of creativity and production. The peculiar genius of desperation and 4 a.m. logic is a fecund contributor to the national product. In fact, a little procrastination may be part of living an ambitious and energetic life.

But what about when procrastination goes critical? When relationships are ruined, spouses feel betrayed, bosses are disgusted, and a person is frozen, frustrated, and disillusioned with that nonperformer staring back in the morning mirror? That's when procrastination is an enemy to mental health.

"In personal relationships, if you say you'll do something and you don't do it, people begin not to trust you," says clinical psychologist Linda Sapadin, "If they can't trust you to do what you say you'll do, that's passive aggressive, and it creates a lot of disturbance in relationships." Dr. Sapadin is a national specialist in procrastination, and author of *It's About Time! The Six Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them*. In addition to her private practice based on Long Island, she speaks to corporate audiences nationwide on the costs and cures of procrastination.

It turns out not all procrastinators are alike. Dr. Sapadin's taxonomy identifies six different types. You may recognize yourself in one or more of these:

Perfectionist – They want every project to be perfect, and this often causes them to be frozen in fear that they cannot meet such an unrealistic goal, even though they set the goal themselves.

Dreamer – These people suffer from magical thinking. "It'll all work out," they say, while they do nothing to advance their goals.

Crisis Maker – They often say they do their best work under pressure, but more accurately, they prefer uproar and crisis to do *any work at all*.

Worrier – Their fears consume their thought processes and prevent any real work being done, as they imagine and dwell upon every possible scenario for disaster and failure.

Defier – These people may resent the assignments in the first place, and retake control over their lives by refusing to do the work in a timely and cooperative manner, or at all.

Overdoer – Also known as “the pleasers,” these people can’t say no, and so take on more and more responsibility without any reasonable expectation of being able to deliver on their obligations.

One of the more fascinating findings in the research literature about procrastinators is that time management training doesn’t really help. Procrastinators know perfectly well how to manage time; they just don’t want to do their work that way! When Dr. Sapadin was considering writing her book, “All the existing books had to do with time management or getting organized, but for most people it [procrastination] related to some glitch in their personality style,” she says. So procrastinators have to change their thinking, rather than improve their knowledge of time management techniques. For more on this, check out Dr. Sapadin’s web site at www.psychwisdom.com.

For example, the perfectionist has to tell herself, “This doesn’t have to be perfect. Good enough is just fine. It is more important to be done on time than to do a perfect job. Perfection is unattainable anyway, and it’s not what my boss or professor wants.”

The crisis maker may need to tell himself, “I don’t really do my best work under pressure. That’s just a habit I have. I can do more work if I start sooner, and I’ll probably find that some of that work is just as creative and interesting as the work I might do under pressure.”

It is this sort of cognitive reprogramming that leads to change.

Procrastination is extremely common in academic settings. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students procrastinate. The APA has a guide for educators on how to deal with different types of procrastinating students, *Counseling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings*.

It turns out that procrastination is, in fact, a time management technique! When it’s not a destructive force, it allows workers to be hyperproductive in bursts. It’s an antidote to that old maxim, “The assignment expands to fill the available time.” It’s a way to contain an assignment within a smaller block of time.

To see how procrastination works when it is a force for good, I decided to interview some top students about their work habits. The following students are all top performers.

Ginger White, a McNair Scholar and a senior at IUPUI in Indianapolis, readily admits to procrastinating. “I do work better under pressure, and I’m easily distracted. Little things get in the way, until the deadline gets near.” For the final push, though, she says she gathers all the books and reference materials she needs to do the assignment. “Then, I sit there. I don’t care how long it takes. I sit there. I’m in the zone,

and the ideas just come, and if I were to try to do this two weeks early, the ideas just wouldn't be there." This seems to be working for her, as she has a 3.9 GPA in new media and computer sciences.

Brandon Lewis, a music education major at the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff, and also a McNair Scholar, says he procrastinates "all the time." But he sees a benefit to it. "When I have a big paper due, I might put it off," he says, but "I'm planning out how I'm going to do it, planning when to do it. I'm thinking about it constantly." So this type of mental rehearsal and preparation helps him get ready to be productive.

Dominique Booker, a double major in criminal justice and political science at Anderson University in Indiana, says her busy schedule of activities sometimes makes her delay school work. "I have good intentions," she says, "but I'm involved in a lot of stuff. I'm VP of the Multicultural Student Association, and a delegate on the legal committee for the Model United Nations, and I take these seriously. There's a lot of work and research for these projects, and sometimes I put these ahead of my regular schoolwork." But then, like Ginger White, she gets in the zone. "I get all the library books and articles, and I just do it. I just start reading, highlighting, taking notes, collecting resources and citations, and I work straight through, usually. I normally do it all day, even if it takes several days. I've worked as much as a week straight, usually every afternoon and night, say 4 p.m. to 2 or 3 in the morning."

She recommends academic procrastinators make sure they have all the books and resources they need well before the deadline, or other students may have them checked out!

Then again, there are students like Martsyl Joseph [yes, I confirmed spelling], who is just finishing her MPA at IUPUI and will be going on to law school in the fall. "I don't procrastinate anymore," she says. She overcommitted to activities as an undergrad, she admits, but in graduate school she stays on task. "The key is to know your limit. Understand that you can't do everything, even though you want to. Pick and choose what's most important to you, and stick to that one or two things. And put education first. You'll have plenty of time after you graduate to do all that other stuff."

So, if procrastination is not debilitating, it may be useful, but if it is debilitating, training in time management skills is unlikely to achieve a change in behavior. You'll need to change the way you think about your work. For myself, I'm going to get on the next article due, right away. Just as soon as I ...

BIO:

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent*, *Self-Directed*, *Late Blooming*, and *Just Plain Different*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*. © 2010 Asher Associates. Don welcomes comments at don@donaldasher.com or see his web site at www.donaldasher.com.