



Why Do I Procrastinate?

Directions:

START: Find out why people procrastinate.

- Admit that procrastination works for you.
- Measure the severity of your problem.
- Learn to recognize the urge to procrastinate.

END: Commit to making a change.

There is a good chance that you are reading this book because you are unhappy with yourself. You have probably been procrastinating on things for some time, have tried to change on your own, and have not been very successful. If you are like most procrastinators, you have probably made promises to yourself that the next time you are faced with a task you will not wait until the last minute to get it done. In fact, you have probably made that promise more than once and have had trouble keeping it. This book is for people who:

- Don't understand why they procrastinate.
- Feel bad about doing it.
- Wish that they didn't.
- Want to change, but don't know how.

Procrastination is hard to change. It is not something you can just decide to give up and then completely let it go. It is a well-

worn path in your life, a habit that is so automatic that it does not require thought or planning. It is not like you open your eyes in the morning and say, "I think I'm going to procrastinate today." It is actually quite the opposite. You start your day saying that you will not take that path, fall into that habit, and yet without realizing it you find yourself there again. Procrastination might be that slight pause where you intend to do a task but hesitate and then turn away. Maybe you reach for the phone to call someone and then change your mind and tell yourself that you will do it later. Or you go to the kitchen with the intention of washing the dishes, you see the mess, and then you leave the room to do something else. Procrastination occurs when you start a task like paying your bills and then find yourself cleaning out a drawer instead. It's also those times when you find yourself spending more time getting ready to do a task, like straightening up your office before you work, than actually doing the work. It is like driving down the road toward your destination and then turning off in another direction at the last moment.

Procrastination is our comfort zone. It is where we feel the most at ease. It is familiar. We know how to do it. It doesn't challenge us or scare us. Procrastination gives us temporary comfort in a world full of demands and uncertainties. It is our rest stop on the long road of life and responsibilities.

Procrastination is also an altered state of reality. It is our happy place. It allows us to believe temporarily that we have nothing to do. It pushes our to-do list so far out of our minds that for a short while we can almost believe the list does not exist. It makes us believe we deserve to rest, relax, and take it easy. It makes us feel bold in justifying our inaction, inactivity, hesitation, and avoidance.

Procrastination is a roadblock on your life path. It slows your progress and sometimes takes you off course altogether.

Procrastination is seductive. It allows you to have a little bit of joy or pleasure or relief from stress. It takes away the things you hate to do and replaces them with something better. It keeps you from having to deal with unpleasant people and difficult chores. It

allows you to delay getting bad news. It gives you five more minutes in the comfort of your bed on a cold winter morning.

Procrastination is, however, only a disguise. It masks your true thoughts and feelings. It masquerades as laziness, but it is much more than that. On the surface, procrastination looks like a comfortable, relaxing experience, but underneath it is full of guilt and self-loathing. Peacefulness is what we pretend to feel while we are procrastinating, yet it is anything but peaceful. While we are procrastinating we are watching ourselves do it. We are criticizing the behavior. We are filled with guilt for putting things off. We dread what will happen if we wait any longer to get started. We hate ourselves for doing it and call ourselves names such as “lazy,” “irresponsible,” “uncaring,” “stupid,” and “worthless.” We act like we are relieved not to have to deal with whatever we are trying to ignore, but we are stressing on the inside, worrying about what we will eventually have to face. You have probably had experiences where you sat in front of the TV to watch the news for a few moments before getting started on your chores but were distracted by thoughts of what you needed to do next, so you missed what the announcer had to say. Or maybe for those extra few minutes you stayed in bed after turning off the alarm you lay there physically resting but mentally running through your list of responsibilities for the day. During these times we know that by procrastinating we are probably making it worse. That makes us anxious and also robs us of the desire to take action.

The *number one* reason that we procrastinate is BECAUSE WE CAN. The majority of the time things still get done and no real consequence is suffered. We get away with it when we are students by cramming at the last minute. We get away with it as adults by changing our minds and deciding not to do the task after all. We get away with it at work when another member of the team gets worried and picks up the slack. We get away with it at home because we can work around chores that are not finished or count on someone else doing them for us. We may suffer consequences, but they are usually not substantial. We get a late fee on our credit card bill or on our rent for not sending a payment in on time. So what? We pay it and manage without the extra money.

We live in a world of extra chances. The IRS will give us an extension when our taxes are not done on time. There are grace periods that allow us to delay without penalty. If we lose an opportunity, we can often find another one. We get warnings that we are approaching a deadline. We get alerts when we are about to run out of time, or power in our batteries, or minutes on our cell phones. For many everyday things we can afford to put things off a little, take our time, sit on it for a while, or sleep on it. Our modern world is full of opportunities to procrastinate.

How many times have you waited until the last minute but still gotten things done? How many extensions have you needed? How many apologies have you given for being late? How many late fees have you paid? You are probably aware of the many tasks you have consciously avoided because you just didn't feel like doing them, but how many more do you think you unconsciously avoided? Consider all these times when either nothing bad happened or the consequence was small and not a big deal. You were able to get away with it.

The big question is why we would want to give it up. Why do we feel guilty about it? Why do we pledge time and time again to change our ways? The reason may be that procrastination works only in the short run. It provides only temporary relief. In the long run, it does not get us where we want to go. We feel angry at ourselves for it when we step back and see the stress that it causes and how it interferes with our lives. If we could hold on to the big picture and see clearly where we want to go in life, we would choose not to procrastinate. If we could remember how much trouble it causes, we probably wouldn't procrastinate the next time. The problem is that we are so used to using procrastination as our coping strategy that we do it automatically, without considering the big picture. In the moment, when faced with something unpleasant, we just want to detour around it, and so we avoid, delay, put off, forget about, and otherwise procrastinate on it.

Procrastination is a common behavior. Some do it more than others. This book probably caught your attention because, just like me, you are not a blissful procrastinator. You want to change. That desire makes all the difference.

A Personal Note

Like everyone else, I don't like doing tasks that are unpleasant or stressful. There are some things I would like to avoid forever, but that is usually not possible in my world. I don't like that feeling of hesitation where my mind does a quick tug of war with my emotions: "You should do that now." "No, I don't want to!" I feel my gut tightening and a pressure in my chest. My upbringing leads me to feel a sensation of guilt while this is happening. Sometimes the guilt for thinking about putting something off is more unpleasant than the dread of doing the task. It's better if I just do the thing that I am avoiding and get it over with. My goal is to stop the tug of war and either put off a task intentionally, with good reason, and enjoy my moment of relief or just get up and take care of the task that is nagging at me.

What is your goal?

Procrastination Is a Way to Cope

If you are like most people, you probably associate procrastination with laziness. That is most likely because your parents or teachers told you to stop being lazy whenever they saw you put your work aside to relax, have some fun, watch TV, goof off, spend time on the computer, talk to your friends, or do anything else they thought was a waste of time. I remember teachers saying things like "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today" or "Don't dilly-dally" or "You have to get your work done before you can go out and play." My mom had a few colorful words in Spanish for laziness that I would hear when I was parked in front of the television instead of doing my chores.

What I have come to learn through my personal experience as a mom, a psychologist, and a college professor is that there is much more to procrastination than laziness. Behind most procrastination is a task or activity that the person would like to get out of doing if

he or she could. Often it is something that the person believes will be hard to do, unpleasant, or even painful in some way. Just the thought of it stirs up uncomfortable feelings like anxiety, dread, or anger. Procrastination is a way of shutting down those bad feelings. In this way, it is a type of self-preservation, a way to cope.

❏ **A Personal Note**

I teach college students in the Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Arlington. It is a great deal of fun for me, and my students seem to enjoy my classes as well. I am one of those professors, however, who make their students write papers as part of their course requirements, and I never accept late papers unless there is a verifiable medical emergency. When I first began to do this, I got lots of calls from students within the last few days before the assignment was due, asking about the instructions for the paper. Clearly they had waited until the last minute, and most of the time their papers ended up showing a lack of preparation. My students are quite intelligent, so their poor performance was not due to lack of brainpower. It was due to procrastinating and running out of time.

In subsequent semesters I took time to ask students early in the semester if they were having trouble getting started on their papers. Many had not started and had no idea how to begin. Several voiced fear that they would "do it wrong" and were stuck in their fear. Some were busy having fun and told themselves that they had all the time in the world and were not at all worried about it.

They should have been worried. What they showed me is that procrastination is not laziness or irresponsibility. It is the way my students coped with their fear of making a mistake, their uncertainty and lack of self-confidence about the task, and it was a product of their false belief that they write better under pressure. Knowing this helps me address their concerns before the final paper is due. While we talk about the paper in class, I make them anxious because I force

them to think about what they have been avoiding. For a while, I take away their ability to use procrastination as a way to cope. In the long run, however, they are pleased to have their questions answered and get their fears off their chest.

Read through Changing Directions 1 to determine whether you are using procrastination as a coping strategy.

↳ Changing Directions 1

Are You Using Procrastination as a Way to Cope?

Read each question and put a check next to the ones to which you would answer yes.

- If you feel uncertain, will you postpone taking action or making a decision?
- When you are mentally or physically tired, do you tell yourself you will do it later?
- If you dread having to face a problem or a difficult person, will you avoid it for as long as you can?
- If you are nervous about having to do something difficult, will you delay?
- If you are angry about being forced to do something you don't want to do, will you procrastinate?
- If you are afraid you are going to make a mistake or mess things up, do you wait too long to start a task?
- If you have to face a person who is unpleasant, will you make an excuse to put it off?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are using procrastination as a way to cope.

How Bad Is It?

Procrastination is a common behavior, and doing it once in a while doesn't usually cause problems. Most of the time you are the only person who suffers. At least that is what you tell yourself. Your first step toward overcoming procrastination is to be honest with yourself about how often it happens and how much trouble it is causing you. Try Changing Directions 2. See if you really are the world's worst procrastinator or just a normal everyday procrastinator.

↳ Changing Directions 2

Procrastination Quiz

For each item, rate the extent to which the problems with procrastination occur in your personal life, at school, at work, and at home. Be honest with yourself. For each item, indicate how often it occurs. Use the following scale.

0 = It never happens.

1 = It happens sometimes.

2 = It happens fairly often.

3 = It happens a lot more often than I would like.

Add up your score for each subscale. Think about whether the behaviors in each subscale are more of a problem at work, in your home life, at school, in your relationships with others, or just in personal matters that affect you and not necessarily other people. Check the domain at the bottom of the subscale that applies most. It is OK to pick more than one.

You will tally up the subscales at the end of the quiz to determine the severity of your problem with procrastination.

Subscale 1	How often does this happen?
1. I put things off, and they don't get done.	
2. While I procrastinate, I still keep thinking about what I should be doing.	
3. Other people are on my case for procrastinating.	
4. My procrastination makes me late for lots of things.	
5. I make excuses for not getting started.	
SUBSCALE 1	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓) () Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 2	How often does this happen?
6. I avoid stressful situations and tasks.	
7. When a task stresses me out, I wait until the last minute to do it.	
8. I ignore unpleasant tasks until the last minute.	
9. I avoid bad news.	
10. I avoid information I don't really want to hear.	
SUBSCALE 2	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓) () Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 3	How often does this happen?
11. I tell myself I have plenty of time even when that's not true.	

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12. I have trouble getting organized.	
13. I underestimate how long it will take to get things done.	
14. I overestimate how much time I have available to get things done.	
15. I put off tasks because I can't concentrate.	
SUBSCALE 3	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓)	
() Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 4	How often does this happen?
16. I hesitate because I am afraid of making a mistake or failing.	
17. I avoid taking actions that others might not like.	
18. I avoid things that I am unsure about.	
19. My self-doubt and uncertainty make me postpone getting started on difficult tasks.	
20. I am not always sure what decision to make, so I put it off as long as possible.	
SUBSCALE 4	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓)	
() Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 5	How often does this happen?
21. I hate being told what to do.	
22. I intentionally procrastinate when others tell me what to do.	
23. I show my displeasure by stalling.	

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24. I agree to do things for others that I later regret.	
25. It's hard for me to say no to people.	
SUBSCALE 5	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓)	
() Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 6	How often does this happen?
26. I take on more than I can handle.	
27. If I can't do something perfectly, I won't do it at all.	
28. I get overwhelmed by too much to do.	
29. I either give my all or put things off altogether.	
30. I work so hard at times that I wear myself out.	
SUBSCALE 6	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓)	
() Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

Subscale 7	How often does this happen?
31. I play instead of work.	
32. When I don't feel motivated, I don't take action.	
33. It's hard for me to stop doing something fun or relaxing and get back to tasks.	
34. I avoid unpleasant tasks until someone does them for me.	
35. I have no real excuse for procrastinating.	
SUBSCALE 7	
Where do you have the most trouble with this? (✓)	
() Work () Home () School () Relationship () Self	

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Add up your subscale scores in the following table. Next to each subscale is a description of the type of procrastinator you might be. Read on to learn more about these subtypes.

Subscale 1—General Characteristics	
Subscale 2—Avoidant Type	
Subscale 3—Disorganized Type	
Subscale 4—Self-Doubting Type	
Subscale 5—Interpersonal Type	
Subscale 6—All-or-Nothing Type	
Subscale 7—Pleasure-Seeking Type	
GRAND TOTAL	

How Bad Is It?

- 0 to 35 = **Normal**. Don't worry about it. You don't procrastinate enough for it to be a problem.
- 36 to 60 = **Mild**. You still manage to get things done, but the stress is getting to you. You know you could do so much better if you didn't procrastinate.
- 61 to 70 = **Moderate**. Your procrastination is a problem. Not only do you know that you procrastinate, but the people who know you also know you are a procrastinator. This is embarrassing for you.
- 71 to 105 = **Severe**. It's time to make some serious changes.

What Type of Procrastinator Are You?

There are six types of procrastinators, each with a unique reason for putting things off. Each of the Procrastination Quiz subscales relates to a different type. Items 1 through 5 are general problems

with procrastination that are common to all types of procrastinators such as Bob. Bob knows he puts things off when he shouldn't, and he feels guilty about it. When he was married, his wife got on his case about it, especially when his delays made them both late for appointments.

Items 6 through 10 are rated highly by avoiders. Avoiders cope with stress and unpleasantness by putting things off as long as possible. Donna has to tell her grandmother that she is getting a divorce. Donna knows her grandmother will not approve of this because no one in her family has ever been divorced. The conversation is going to be very stressful, so Donna keeps putting it off.

Items 11 to 15 are typically checked by the disorganized type of procrastinator. People in this group underestimate how long tasks can take and overestimate how much time they have available. They have trouble setting priorities when there is too much to do. Freddie, for example, wastes time on small tasks as a way of avoiding bigger ones; he will, for example, reorganize his CDs instead of cleaning his room.

Items 16 through 20 pertain to procrastinators who are self-doubters. They hesitate to take action because they lack confidence in their abilities. They think they will make a mistake or fail. Arthur, for example, isn't sure how to put together the end-of-year budget summary for his procrastination support group. He puts off doing it because he is afraid it won't be right.

Items 21 through 25 pertain to the interpersonal type of procrastinator. These people procrastinate intentionally as a way of making a point. For example, Carla hates being told what to do, especially by someone at work who is not her boss. She always gets things done on time, but she stalls in getting started just to make people nervous that the job won't get done.

Items 26 to 30 relate to all-or-nothing procrastination. These are people who take on too much and work at full speed until they run out of steam. They can be binge workers who try to do it all until they get overwhelmed and shut down altogether. Olivia is an example of an all-or-nothing procrastinator. She agrees to help out on too many things and then gets completely overwhelmed by how

much she has to do and how little time she has to do it all, so she shuts down and does nothing.

Items 31 through 35 fall into the pleasure-seeking subtype. Evelyn, for example, watches TV instead of typing up her report for class even though she knows she has a deadline and is running out of time. People who fall into this category sometimes call themselves “lazy” or “unmotivated.”

How to Use This Book

The rest of the chapters in this book are organized around these various subtypes of procrastinators. You might be tempted to use the subscale scores as a guide and skip to the section that pertains to the reasons you procrastinate. That's fine if it seems like the best way to get yourself going. But if your overall score is in the moderate or severe range, you probably procrastinate for a lot of different reasons, meaning several chapters may pertain to your kind of procrastination. To get the most out of this book, I recommend that you work through the chapters from beginning to end and perhaps use only the exercises that pertain to your specific problem. Keep in mind that the exercises presented throughout the book might pertain to more than one type of procrastination.

Another reason to consider reading this book from cover to cover is that the people just introduced are discussed throughout the chapters. You will learn more about them as you go through the examples, with each building on the characters' stories.

A strategy you might use as you work your way through this book is to focus on the area of your life where procrastination is causing you the most trouble. Review the domains you checked off at the bottom of each subscale. Is there a pattern of procrastinating more at work than in your personal life? Is it a bigger problem at school? Pick the area of your life where you may be procrastinating the most or where your problem is the most severe. Focus your energy on fixing the type of procrastination that occurs in that trouble spot. Or do what some people find gets them started and

begin with the area that is easiest to improve on. Once you feel more confident in your ability to steer clear of procrastination, you can take on new life domains. Examples of how to address procrastination at work, school, and home, and in your personal life are provided in each chapter. You will pick up clues to coping as you read along.

The exercises that are presented start simple and build in complexity. If you can master some of the basic skills presented in the first few chapters, you will be more prepared to take on bigger changes as you read on.

You Are Not Alone

When people are at the crossroads of procrastination or action, they pause there thinking about what they should do and how much they don't want to do it. They assume they are alone at that juncture because everyone else seems to be on top of things. This could not be further from the truth. If you don't believe it, ask ten people you know if they ever procrastinate. Then ask them if they wish they didn't. You are in good company.

Procrastinators Support Group Chapter 121

Evelyn, Donna, Arthur, Carla, Bob, Freddie, Olivia, and others are members of Chapter 121 of the Procrastinators Support Group. They found each other through an online chat room for procrastinators. When they figured out that they did not live far from one another, they decided to meet in person. They have been meeting weekly in the back room of a diner off Highway 121. Donna, Arthur, Bob, and Evelyn are the longest-standing members and have become friends. Others have joined and left the group over the years. As mentioned, you will hear the group members' stories and read about their struggles throughout this book. If you have similar stories, you might find that their solutions to procrastination work for you too.

Recognize the Urge to Procrastinate

Review your answers to the Procrastination Quiz. Each example of procrastination provides you with an opportunity for improvement. The items you rated as happening “fairly often” or “a lot more often than I would like” (2 or 3) can be used to help you recognize the warning signs that procrastination could occur since that’s where you are currently procrastinating most. These warning signs place you at a fork in the road: when you see one, you can consciously decide to take action or procrastinate rather than falling automatically into old habits. Let’s say you know you really hate it when people try to tell you what to do to (high scores in subscale 5). Then, when your boss cavalierly hands you some extra work without asking if you have time or your brother assumes you’ll take your mother to the doctor without asking if you’d mind, you’ll be reminded that you are probably going to procrastinate just to resist being controlled. Another example is worry. If you know that worry makes you procrastinate on something you dread, the feeling of worry can be your cue that you are likely to cope by procrastinating.

The more aware you are that procrastination is about to occur, the better your chances of taking a different path and avoiding that roadblock. Self-awareness gives you control. There is a big difference between unconsciously procrastinating and doing it on purpose. Arthur wasn’t always aware that fear of making a mistake was causing him to procrastinate. He just thought he was being lazy. Once he learned that self-doubt was his problem, he could decide to cope with stressful situations by putting things off or by finding another way to cope with his lack of confidence. Bob was the same way. Once he figured out that he was using procrastination as a way to communicate his anger to his ex-wife, he could consciously make the decision to speak up for himself rather than coping in a more passive way. Self-awareness gave them more choices and therefore more control.

Keep in mind as you make your way through the exercises in this book that procrastination is a choice. Sometimes it will be

a reasonable choice, depending on the situation. When you have control over it, you can choose to procrastinate when the time is right, and you can choose how long to let it go on. Donna, for example, was having a very difficult time dealing with the fact that her marriage of 10 years was coming to an end. She knew that she had to tell her grandmother, a devout Catholic, about it and that based on her religious beliefs she would protest and try to talk Donna out of it. Donna was ambivalent about her decision to file for divorce and knew that if her grandmother pushed her on it, she might give in and call it off. Donna procrastinated in telling her grandmother about the divorce because she thought it was best to avoid her grandmother's wrath until she was feeling emotionally strong enough to stand her ground and cope with her grandmother's disapproval. Donna knew that her grandmother would eventually find out about the divorce and she could avoid the subject until someone else broke the bad news to her. Knowing this gave her control over the decision of whether to avoid her grandmother and how long to procrastinate in talking with her.

Commit to Change

Everyone procrastinates some of the time. The goal is not to eliminate the behavior altogether but to learn how to control it. If you chose to read this book, perhaps you are ready to make a commitment to change.

The members of the Procrastinators Support Group wrote a pledge that they recite at the beginning of each meeting. It helps put them in the right frame of mind for making changes in their behavior. When you are ready to change directions and get off the road to procrastination, you might consider making this pledge to yourself.

"I am a person who sometimes chooses to put things off for a while.

"I usually have a good reason, even if I am not fully aware of it.

"I have to admit that procrastination works for me some of the time, but I want to change.

"I can learn to do things differently."

Roadmap to Improvement

As you read through this book and practice the various exercises, you will learn a great deal about your tendency to procrastinate. Your improved self-awareness will put you in a stronger position to make changes that last. By the time you get to the last chapter, you will be ready to begin your program for reducing procrastination in the important areas of your life. When you get there, you will be prompted to state your reasons for changing your behavior. The examples provided throughout the book will give you some ideas of why other people choose to stop procrastinating. To initiate your plan for self-improvement you will need to pick a place to start. Once you have a better feel for the types of procrastination that plague you, it will be easier to pick a target to change. Along with choosing a target, you will be coached to set a realistic goal for improvement. This will keep you from trying to do too much too fast and risk getting overwhelmed. Finally, you will have a chance to plan how to take your first steps in the direction of change. As you read through these chapters, keep some notes on your reasons for change, goals, and ideas for how to get started.



There is a good chance that you will stop reading this book even though you think it is a good idea to continue. You might tell yourself that you will read it later or after you have finished some other task. It is very possible that you will get busy and forget all

about it. Or you might tell yourself that because your procrastination score was so high, there is no hope for change. Until you have learned a few skills for sticking with tasks, you will have to recognize and resist the urge to procrastinate.

In the next chapter you'll find a collection of Shortcuts to help you get started down a better path. They are temporary measures, just to help you make some quick progress. The remaining chapters have both Shortcuts and Changing Directions strategies for making bigger and more lasting changes. It has taken a while for you to become a procrastinator, so it will take a while to learn a different coping strategy. It is easier to start small by using the Shortcuts in situations that you can more easily master. Build your confidence and prove to yourself that you can make small changes. Once you have done that, you can work on making them more permanent.

If you have made it through this chapter, you are already heading down a better path. Keep going. Change is just around the corner.