

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 increasing 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

