

What is Procrastination?

Definition of Procrastination

Procrastination is a common part of human behaviour. Often people mistake procrastination for “laziness”. In everyday language people use definitions like, “putting off”, “postponing”, “delaying”, “deferring”, and “leaving to the last minute”.

Procrastination is making a decision for no valid reason to delay or not complete a task or goal you’ve committed too, and instead doing something of lesser importance, despite there being negative consequences to not following through on the original task or goal. It is important to remember that everyone procrastinates. However, problematic procrastination can be distinguished from more general procrastination, by how bad the negative consequences are of us not following through on things.

What Do You Procrastinate About?

Procrastination can occur in many different areas of one’s life. It can involve tasks or goals in life domains such as work, household, study, health, financial, social, family, relationships, self-development, and decision making. Really any task we need to complete, any problem we need to solve or any goal we might want to achieve, can be a source of procrastination. For many people, there will be certain areas of their life they are able to follow through on, and certain areas where procrastination reigns.

Procrastination Activities

Procrastination activities are the things you do as a diversion from or substitute for the key task or goal you need to accomplish. These can involve activities such as pleasurable tasks (e.g., movies, reading, surfing the net, etc), lower priority tasks (e.g., sorting, tidying, checking emails, etc), socialising with friends/family/your partner, distractions (e.g., sleeping, eating, smoking, etc) or daydreaming.

Procrastination Excuses

To avoid the guilt associated with procrastination, we often generate excuses for our procrastination which help us feel justified and OK with putting things off.

These excuses often imply that because of some set of circumstances, we are better off leaving the task to another time.

Some typical procrastination excuses are:

“I’m too tired, I’ll do it tomorrow”

“I don’t have everything I need, I can’t start it now”

“It is better to do it when I am in the mood”

“It is too nice a day to spend on this”

“I will do it once this other thing is finished”

“I have plenty of time, so I can do it later”

Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

The reason people procrastinate, is because they hold unhelpful rules and assumptions about themselves or how the world works. These unhelpful rules and assumptions often generate some form of discomfort about doing a task or goal (e.g., anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc), and procrastination then becomes a strategy to avoid the discomfort.

The unhelpful rules and assumptions most often linked to procrastination are:

Needing To Be In Charge (e.g., “Things should be done my way. I shouldn’t have to do things I don’t want to, or just because someone else says so”);

Pleasure Seeking (e.g., “Life’s too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun should always come first”);

Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval (e.g., “I must do things perfectly, otherwise I will fail or others will think badly of me”);

Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe (e.g., “I must be certain of what will happen. What if it’s bad? I am better off not doing anything than risking it”);

Low Self-Confidence (e.g., “I can’t do it. I am just too incapable and inadequate”);
and **Depleted Energy** (e.g., “I can’t do things when I am stressed, fatigued, unmotivated, or depressed”).

Consequences of Procrastination

The positive consequences of procrastination, such as relief from discomfort about doing the task, feeling good for having stuck to your unhelpful rules and assumptions, and gaining pleasure from your procrastination activities, are all pay offs that keep procrastination going.

The negative consequences of procrastination, such as more discomfort (e.g., guilt and shame), preserving one's unhelpful rules and assumptions, self-criticism, piling up tasks, punishment or loss, also keep procrastination going, as they make the task or goal even more aversive, so next time procrastination looks like an attractive option.