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Catching the Thief of Time: The Perils of Procrastination

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Starting with a case study, this article focuses on procrastination and includes a short test to assess the reader's procrastination tendencies. The conscious and unconscious factors that contribute to procrastination are discussed, suggesting that procrastination can be regarded as a failure of self-regulation, and is linked to the fear of failure and need for perfection. Procrastination can turn into a self-defeating cycle, making it a form of self-harm that can negatively affect a person's mental and physical health and jeopardize both personal and professional relationships. Certain character types are more prone to procrastination, in particular people with obsessive-compulsive, attention-deficit, and passive aggressive characteristics. The article includes a number of behavioural recommendations for tackling this problem, including reframing and self-compassion. It also suggests that a major reason for procrastination is a highly critical superego. In this context, coaches and psychotherapists could help ameliorate its harmful effects.

Keywords: Procrastination; Self-regulation; Self-harm; Mental Health; Depression; Fear of Failure; Need for Perfection; Harsh Superego; Reframing; Self-compassion; Helping Professional

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It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.

—Seneca

When you have to make a choice and don't make it, that in itself is a choice.

—William James

Tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week.

—Spanish Proverb

Introduction

Victor was wondering what to do. His subordinates were pushing him to make up his mind whether or not to go ahead with a major acquisition, but he was unsure how to proceed. He knew that the clock was ticking, but he was worried about the downside. What if the promised synergies didn't materialize? What if they would be buying a cat-in-the-sack? In the meantime, the constant pressure to make a decision was wearing him down. He felt low and exhausted, due, no doubt, to his insomnia. He lay awake at night, thinking about all the things that could go wrong.

Victor was reluctant to admit it to himself, but his response to difficult tasks and decisions had always been to put them off. Maybe this was why he hadn't really taken a deep dive into the details of the acquisition. Overthinking and procrastination was his habitual

modus operandi. He was very good at finding distractions, things that were more satisfying to do. He could always convince himself that more information was necessary to make a truly informed decision. He was well aware, however, of the saying that “When there’s a hill to climb, don’t think that waiting will make it smaller.” Although he knew he shouldn’t prevaricate and delay, he often couldn’t help himself. Why did he feel incapable of making a decision? Was he really waiting for the right moment? Would that moment ever come?

Sadly, although procrastination can offer relief from unpleasant tasks, the relief is only ever temporary. Putting off dealing with something only makes matters worse, as the Victors of this world find out the hard way. And there are many of them: it is estimated that approximately 20 percent of US men and women are chronic procrastinators.[1]

The procrastinator test

Does Victor’s behavior sound familiar to you? Do you share his tendencies? To find out, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you quickly feel overwhelmed after being assigned a task?
- When faced with a major assignment, do you tend to focus on nonessential activities instead of what needs to be done?
- Are you very easily distracted?
- Do you often wait until the last moment to do things?

[1] https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/04/procrastination

- Do you rarely finish projects on time?
- Do you tend to live from deadline to deadline?
- Do you often hope that if you ignore a task, it will just go away?
- Are you good in finding excuses for not doing something?
- Do you have a lengthy to-do list?
- Do you tend to be late for appointments?

A procrastinator will answer “Yes” to most of these questions.

Contributing variables to procrastination

Etymologically, procrastination is derived from the Latin *procrastinare*—to put things off until tomorrow—and the ancient Greek *akrasia*—doing something against your better judgment. However, procrastination is more than simply putting things off or deciding not to act; it is also a failure of self-regulation, in other words, a coping mechanism that’s gone wrong. While delaying doing something can temporarily make us feel better, the feeling will not last. In fact, procrastination contributes to several negative emotions, not the least of which are shame and guilt. For extreme procrastinators, however, these negative feelings are just additional reasons to put things off for longer, until this self-defeating behavior becomes a form of self-harm. The longer an individual avoids a task, the more difficult it becomes to break the dark cycle of procrastination.

Habitual procrastination can have a negative effect on a person’s mental and physical health, in particular, causing depression, which aggravates the situation. Like Victor,

procrastinators end up lacking the energy to start (or finish) even the simplest tasks. Procrastination is also an indicator of self-doubt; insecurity about their ability to tackle an assignment is yet another reason to put it off or to work on other, less challenging assignments. No wonder that procrastination jeopardizes both personal and professional relationships, leading to resentment among friends, family members, and colleagues, whether it involves major acquisitions or unpaid bills and missed income tax returns. So why do people procrastinate? What prevents them from taking action?

Many conscious and unconscious factors can explain why some people procrastinate. A rather obvious one is that procrastinators put off doing a specific task either because they fear they won't like doing it or that it won't be pleasurable enough to override something else they could do. Another factor could be that they fear they won't do the task very well. They may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the assignment. For example, going back to Victor, maybe he just wasn't up to dealing with acquisitions. Or maybe his exhaustion meant he simply didn't have the energy to take on yet another challenging assignment. Maybe he lacked the motivation to act because the rewards tied up with the acquisition lay too far in the future—when there is a significant gap between the time when a task needs to be completed and the time it takes to get any reward for completing it, the value of the reward can be discounted. Basically, when making long-term decisions, we don't feel that strong a connection with our future self. Even if we recognize intellectually that putting off a task will create future stress, our brains are still wired to be more concerned with removing a present threat. Actually, from an evolutionary point of view, Homo sapiens wasn't really designed to think far ahead because we needed to

focus on providing for ourselves in the here-and-now. Hence, an individual like Victor may not experience a great sense of urgency to get things done. To make things worse, we are even less able to make thoughtful, future-oriented decisions when we feel stressed.

Another, less obvious and more unconscious impediment that may stop Victor from acting could be a fear of failure, that he might do something wrong, that the acquisition will not work well, that his board of directors will give him negative feedback. Given all the conscious (and unconscious) thoughts passing through his mind, the one shouting loudest might be “I don’t want to do it.” In essence, Victor is failing to self-regulate. When we need to make a decision or complete a task, we usually rely on our self-control to push ourselves to get things done. Victor, however, is postponing things unnecessarily, even while he knows he shouldn’t be doing so.

One of the drivers that motivates us to take action—why we exert self-control—is the expectation that we will reap the benefits for our efforts in the future. Normally, due to these intra-psychic calculations, we execute certain things in a timely manner. But procrastinators can’t do this. Instead, their inability to self-regulate creates a downward spiral of negative emotions that deters future efforts. Initially, not doing something they’re supposed to do brings illusory benefits—the temporary pleasure of not doing what’s perceived as an unpleasant task. But in avoiding doing something perceived as unpleasant in the present, they’re storing up a high price for their inaction in the future.

Furthermore, while procrastinators may initially experience a sense of control over their lives by not taking action, this rapidly dissolves into feelings of lack of control, as time constraints begin to restrict their ability to successfully execute the assignment. This comedy of judgmental errors is aggravated by self-deception. Some procrastinators believe they perform better under pressure. But last-minuters often produce second-rate results. Procrastination is also driven by other factors, an important one being rebelliousness. The procrastinator may have problems with authority and letting a deadline slip can be a way of adding drama to their lives.

Character types

Many procrastinators tend to be perfectionists for whom it may be psychologically more acceptable never to tackle a job than to face the possibility of not doing it well. Generally speaking, however, certain personality types are more likely to become procrastinators. For example, procrastination is more common among people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), the reason being that OCD is often linked to maladaptive, unhealthy perfectionism, which contributes to anxiety about making mistakes, doubts about whether what's being done is done correctly, and worries about other people's expectations. Hence, as procrastinators are highly concerned about what others will think of them, they will put their future at risk to avoid being judged. People with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can also struggle with procrastination. As they are quickly distracted by outside stimuli as well as intrusive thoughts, it will be difficult for them to start an assignment, especially if it is difficult or doesn't seem to be very interesting. And then there are people who have passive-aggressive behavior patterns. Even though they may

appear pleasant, or even cheerful on the outside, beneath this veneer they experience feelings of anger and resentment when asked to do something. As they have conflictual relationships with authority figures, they resort to more indirect ways to show how they really feel, like putting off finishing a task that's requested by others or making deliberate mistakes. In other words, there's a disconnect between what a passive-aggressive person says and what he or she really does.

In contrast, non-procrastinators focus on whatever needs to be done. They have a greater sense of inner security and are less preoccupied with what others think of them than how they feel about themselves. People who score low on procrastination tend to be high on the personality trait known as conscientiousness, one of the broad dispositions identified by the "Big Five Theory of Personality."[2] People who score high on conscientiousness also tend to have high scores in other areas, including self-discipline, persistence, and personal responsibility.

Behavioral recommendations

There are many drivers that contribute to procrastination, among which low self-confidence and a high level of anxiety are prominent. Procrastination is also linked to rumination, repeatedly having the same, dark, negative thoughts. As Victor's example shows, procrastination and rumination could also be signs of depression. Depression is depleting; drained of energy, you will have a hard time planning ahead or following

[2] Robert R. McCrae and Paul T. Costa, (1990). *Personality in Adulthood.* New York: Guilford.

through. “What’s the point?” and “Why bother?” will become familiar thoughts. Notwithstanding these complex intrapsychic processes, it’s possible to overcome procrastination, although it will be a real challenge. Changing habitual behavior patterns consumes a lot of psychic energy as it means getting out of your comfort zone. It also means that you need to engage in *reframing* and *self-compassion.*

One way of embarking on a change process is to engage in a structured regimen of behavioral interventions. In the short term, several cognitive “tricks” can help prevent procrastination getting the upper hand.

Too big a task

You may think that what needs to be done is completely overwhelming. You tell yourself that the task is too big, so you postpone getting started. But the fact is that the time wasted *not* getting started is the biggest waste of time of all. Therefore, the way to make a task appear more doable is to reframe it by breaking it up into several small tasks that you tackle one at a time. Try not to think about the remaining tasks. Instead, start by trying to complete the first one. Even though this could be seen as a form of self-deception, it will give you a better perspective on the task and make it seem more manageable. Small progressive steps will make you feel much better about the assignment and better about yourself, which will reduce the desire to procrastinate. If this form of behavioural reframing gets you started, motivation will follow.

Lack of self-control

You are more likely to overcome issues with self-control and complete your assignment if you set yourself deadlines. So, the next time you have a big assignment that needs to be done, try not only to break it down in smaller parts but also to set a time and date for delivering each part. It will help you to stay focused and it is more likely that things will get done. In other words, setting deadlines undermines procrastination. In addition, just by taking action, by doing something about the situation, you will reduce your stress level. And while considering stress management, if you are expected to accomplish a number of tasks during a specific period, it's also helpful to start with the most difficult one. You will feel so much better if you tackle the most important task of the day immediately, even if it's the hardest. Subsequently, the easier tasks will seem to take care of themselves.

Time management

You might have been tempted to put things off, thinking that you have all the time in the world. Realizing that you don't longer have time, find you scrambling to get things done and your stress levels skyrocketing. If this often happens to you, you are clearly not setting aside enough time for a task. Maybe you're over-optimistic about what you can do. Maybe you're deluding yourself about your abilities. Consistently underestimating time commitments can make you procrastinate more than you would normally do. Delaying acting is simply a trap. You will always be able to find another reason to put something off. The way to get started is to stop talking and start doing, managing your time more realistically.

Recognize busyness

It can be very satisfying to organize the papers on your desk and see the results of your work there and then. It can be quite enjoyable, frittering away time on trivial pursuits rather than getting on with work-related projects. But what you are actually doing is filling your days with busyness to avoid getting down to business. Of course, you can rationalize your reluctance to begin. You can tell yourself that not everything is ready. But as the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev once wrote, “If we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything is ready, we shall never begin.” One way of getting out of this delaying tactic is to make a to-do list. Obviously, such a list is not the be-and-end-all. However, writing down what needs to be done can have a wonderful effect on your mental state and will often galvanize you into action. To help you to stay on track, you might consider putting a due date next to each item on the list or go one step further and prioritize. Concentrate on the three most important items that need your attention and determine the three high-impact actions you want to take care of each day. As an old Portuguese proverb goes, “Think of many things but start with one.”

Have some fun

While following these recommendations, you should also keep in mind that the time you enjoy wasting isn’t always wasted time. We all need variety and relaxation. So, intersperse your work with rewards, relaxation, and celebration of tasks completed. It will make it easier to continue working on what still needs to be done and will help you to fight procrastination. It is important to remember that life is more than to-do lists. It helps to create “feel good” experiences and be nice to yourself. Make it a habit to pat yourself on

your back when you finish an item on your to-do list on time. Congratulate yourself on work well done. And the obvious way of congratulating yourself is to create fun moments.

What's happening under the surface?

An assignment left undone remains undone in two places: one is the assignment itself, the other is inside your head. And it is the latter that will use up your energy. Not doing something can be exhausting. It will gnaw at your conscience. It will make you feel ashamed and guilty. There is more to procrastination than what is immediately obvious. Even though the behavioral measures suggested here can be helpful, there are also daunting unconscious forces at work.

Perfectionism

Chronic procrastinators tend to be extremely hard on themselves, before and after an assignment. Many of them strive for perfection. In fact, it is fair to say that perfectionism can be the mother of procrastination. Many procrastinators set impossible standards for themselves and put off what needs to be done out of fear of not being able to complete a task perfectly. This behavior can be associated with self-criticism and a lack of self-compassion and accompanied by feelings of anxiety. These people imagine that something awful will happen if they don't execute an assignment perfectly.

Once they start to feel anxious, their negative thoughts start to snowball, contributing to a vicious circle of negativity. Eventually, their negative thoughts will leave them feeling tense, tired, and even hopeless, wondering whether they will ever get off this negative

treadmill. Consequently, fearful at taking on an assignment, they resort to procrastination as a way to give their brain temporary relief. But the assignment won't go away. It keeps on troubling them, creating more emotional turmoil. Yet the extremely high standards they set for themselves stop them moving forward. Paralyzed by perfectionism, they don't see that it is unworkable, impractical, and irrational.

A lack of self-confidence plays a role in this equation. Fearful of being judged is yet another reason why people look for an excuse to procrastinate. Unfortunately, the combination of perfectionism and lack of self-confidence is the ideal mix to create fear of failure. Consequently, these people tell themselves (not necessarily consciously) that they can't fail at something if they don't do it at all. But although they may imagine that they have more control over their lives by putting things off, this feeling quickly dissolves into the experience of lack of control as time constraints begin to restrict their ability to make effective decisions.

So, if you feel tempted to put things off or delay completing an assignment simply because you're worried that the outcome will be less than perfect, it is high time for you to face your demons and confront your fear of failure. The assignment isn't going away. So, the next time you find yourself thinking about putting something off simply to avoid potential failure, you should tackle it head on. Failure is a part of life. Everyone makes mistakes. Nobody realistically expects perfection from you.

Once you get an assignment done, even if the outcome is less than ideal, you might feel more confident in your ability to complete tasks. You should tell yourself that an imperfectly executed task is better than an uncompleted task. Of course, your anxiety level will rise temporarily when you take risks in decision-making. Again, try to manage it. It is important to reframe your perspectives if you want to overcome these fears. Basically, you need to learn to be nicer to yourself. You need to learn the power of self-compassion.

A highly critical superego

If you tend to be a procrastinator, you may be plagued by an internal "enemy," a relentlessly critical, internal voice that reminds you of your failings and shortcomings. In other words, you may have an extremely demanding conscience. Perhaps you were raised by highly critical parents. If that was the case, their critical voices are now part of you. They have been internalized. As a result, you may have developed a harsh, fault-finding superego, and become extremely hard on yourself—self-judging and self-critical. Furthermore, you may also resort to irrational reasoning, and have a tendency to define yourself on the basis of a single outcome, thinking, for example, "If I mess up this assignment, I will be a total failure." Consequently, you will fret about the assignment and how difficult it will be to complete it successfully.

Because your harsh superego is so emotionally draining, you may feel you lack the energy required to complete the assignment. But if you feel that way, you need to change your way of looking at yourself, and create a more benign, supportive self-observing conscience. You need to reframe the way you look at the world, including the way you

look at the assignments given to you. Try to consider the positive aspects of any challenging task you are given. Essentially, try to be more self-forgiving.

Self-forgiveness will allow you to move past your maladaptive behavior and focus on the future without the burden of past actions. It implies treating yourself with kindness and understanding in the face of your mistakes and failures. And by exercising self-compassion, you create a buffer against possible negative reactions when things don't work out as expected. Self-compassion also means that you meet your challenges with greater acceptance rather than destructive rumination and regrets. Self-compassion will reduce the psychological distress that is an enabler of procrastination. It will boost your motivation, enhance your feelings of self-worth, and foster positive emotions like optimism, curiosity, and personal initiative.

However, to be able to employ self-compassion requires you to become more self-aware. Every time you put yourself down—every time you judge yourself harshly—you need to pay attention. This kind of emotional labour can be difficult to do alone, especially as your harsh superego is adept at getting at you in any number of unconscious ways. Discussing this kind of behavior pattern with a non-judgmental, supportive, understanding person, like a friend or family member, will make you more aware of it. You might discover that it is helpful simply to get your feelings out into the open. It can also be a highly effective way to ameliorate your level of anxiety. As you become more self-aware, you will recognize when you are being hard on yourself. This recognition will enable you to

step back and take a more compassionate view. And the more you become aware of your harsh superego, the more empowered you will be to change it.

Self-compassion also implies recognizing your common humanity. You need to realize that you're not alone in having these kinds of problems. We all have the same failings and virtues. Knowing this will lighten the burden, especially when it comes to thinking about your faults. Being mindful, paying attention to the present moment as often as you can, also has a part to play in the self-compassion equation. Even though it is important to recognize how your past influences your present behavior, to keep on harping on it is unhelpful. Instead, you should try to look forward to how to create a better future.

In more serious cases, if, for example, your procrastination has become a chronic or debilitating issue, it could be symptomatic of more serious psychological problems and you may need the help of a coach or psychotherapist. Such helping professionals can make you more aware of specific habits and thoughts that lead to procrastination. They can help you evaluate your personal goals, strengths, weaknesses, and priorities. They can point out self-defeating problems such as your fears, anxieties, difficulties in concentrating, poor time management, indecisiveness, and perfectionism. They can help you discipline yourself in setting priorities. They can also help you to follow behavioral interventions such as those suggested earlier. Most of all, they can help you reframe the way you look at things.

Over time, the modus operandi of compassionate and empathic therapists or coaches can be internalized, replacing your harsh superego with a more benign and supportive

one. Should Victor turn to helping professionals, they might point out that his procrastination is a form of self-destruction—a strategy of self-sabotage whereby the displacement activities he uses to avoid completing an assignment use up more time and energy than the assignment itself would. They could make him realize that when there is a mountain to climb, it doesn't get smaller by waiting. Or as the famous psychologist William James once said, "Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task."

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