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At Last! An Article on Procrastination

"Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow."
Mark Twain

From exercising, to being on time, to spending fewer hours surfing on the Internet, to vowing to keep a journal, a common thread runs through most New Year's resolutions: the longing to nip procrastination in the bud.



Everyone procrastinates from time to time, but with attention-grabbing toys like the Internet, satellite TV, video games, etc., many people are finding it harder to resist the urge to do nothing.

While the odd bout of procrastination may be harmless, constant foot-dragging can take a toll on the quality of your life, your work and even your health. A recent Carleton University study found that procrastinating students had the flu, colds, insomnia and digestive troubles more often than those who didn't wait until the last minute to finish things.

Putting Things Off: The Deeper Truth

Most studies on procrastination show that putting off or avoiding tasks usually has very little to do with time management. There are a number of reasons why you may stall on starting a project or activity. Figuring out why you are resisting a job or assignment is the first step towards "lifting up" your dragging feet. Ask yourself the following:

Do I have too much to do? Sometimes the realization of the incredible amount of work ahead can make you freeze up: you feel so overwhelmed by the gigantic workload that you don't know where to start.

Do I disagree with the task? If you feel that what you're being asked to do goes against your core values or beliefs, you may be tempted to deal with the conflict by doing nothing at all. This is especially true if you feel there are no realistic ways to work out the problem openly, or without a confrontation.

Am I interested in the assignment? Maybe you've been asked to do a statistical analysis, and you hate mathematics. Or, as a 'hands-on' worker, you're suddenly expected to handle the paperwork for orders. If you're truly bored by the work you're doing then you may put it off instead of directly saying "no" when asked to do it.

Do I feel confident in my skills? Feeling "in over your head" or unqualified to complete the work can make you stop what you're doing, or at least slow it down. Whether it's real or imagined, you may also fear that others will judge you harshly. Thoughts like, "I'm not good enough," or, "I can't even get this little job done—I'm so useless," may push you further into inactivity.

Do I expect perfection? Dig below the surface and you may discover a core belief that if it can't be done perfectly, there's no reason to do it at all.

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Am I afraid of failing? People who put things off sometimes worry that they won't gain the credit or achievement they long for. If you don't try, you can't fail is the motto of many procrastinators.

Am I afraid of succeeding? Will I be able to keep up? What if I reach my ultimate goal and I'm unhappy? The flip side of failure is achieving success. In fact, the failure/success factors go hand in hand: both come from a fear of the unknown.

Procrastination Promoters

Procrastination robs you of time and can stop you from reaching your full potential. Understanding how you stall or waste time is an important step to deal with this issue. Some of the most common tools of procrastination include:

The Internet. Whoever said that the Internet would save students and workers oodles of time didn't account for the hours wasted surfing, chatting and playing games online. According to a Carleton University study, 47 per cent of online time is spent avoiding getting the job done. Without a doubt, the Internet is becoming one of the most popular ways to procrastinate.

Television. TV not only lets you escape into a fantasy world: it also helps you put off more important responsibilities.

The Telephone. Your sudden urge to phone a long-lost friend from Junior High may have a deeper meaning, especially if a critical deadline is hanging over your head. Though you're probably working hard, your mission is clear: to avoid completing the pressing task at hand.

Cleaning. Yes, cleaning. This is a favorite for "productive procrastinators," or those who substitute one important task for another. It's not that cleaning and reorganizing are bad things: they can help you feel more organized and in control. When cleaning comes before essential jobs, however, it's a sure sign of procrastination.

Putting Off Procrastination

Once you've figured out the reason for your resistance, there are several changes that you can make to propel yourself back into action.

Break it down. Instead of being overwhelmed by the big picture, look at the small screen. Concentrate on completing the task in gradual steps instead of thinking that you have to do everything at once. Setting smaller, realistic goals gives a sense of accomplishment sooner and encourages you to make it to the next step. Think "micro" and avoid the "all or none" procrastination trap.

Perfect the art of imperfection. Accept that perfection is an impossible goal for everyone, including you. See mistakes as learning opportunities and remind yourself that "accidents" and "errors" created some of the world's greatest discoveries.

Reward yourself for a job well done. You don't have to bribe yourself with a tropical vacation or a new sports car. "Treating yourself" could mean a latté, leafing through a magazine, or going fishing.

Know your weaknesses. Whether it's the Internet, TV or reorganizing your closet, it's important to identify how you like to procrastinate. Can you really go online for five minutes? Or watch only one 30-minute comedy? If the answer is "no," then talk yourself into steering clear until your goals for that day are finished.

Tune out your inner critic. Though you may have lived with your negative inner voice for a long time, it's time to get one that’s more optimistic. Rephrase dialogs with yourself so that you stress the positive. Change thoughts like, "This is impossible!" to, "How can I make this work?" Or, "This project is huge,"

to "What's the first step I can take to get on track?" Putting a positive spin on things might be difficult at first, but with a little practice it'll become second nature.

Take risks. What are the possible worst and best-case scenarios if you reach your ultimate goal? Chances are that your fear of failure or success is exaggerated.

Give yourself time. Setting unrealistic timelines is a big problem for many chronic procrastinators. Look carefully at each task, assign it a sensible time line, and stick to your daily "mini" goals.

Remind yourself of past successes. Remember moments in your life where your energy and effort paid off. It'll help you keep those negative voices at bay and inspire you go for it again.

With the New Year approaching and the possibility of new adventures, challenges and successes on the horizon, resolve to kick—or at least cut back on—the procrastination habit. What are you waiting for?