

Procrastination: What's Really Happening?

— UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERN · REDUCING SHAME · MAKING STARTING EASIER —

Procrastination is the voluntary delay of an intended task despite knowing that the delay may have negative consequences (Steel, 2007). It is common and can have many contributors. Sometimes we are not avoiding the task itself so much as **the feelings, effort or uncertainty that come with doing it**.

What is procrastination?

Procrastination is more than simply being late or choosing to do something later. It involves unnecessarily delaying an intended action, even when we know that waiting may make things harder.

People procrastinate for different reasons. A task may feel emotionally uncomfortable, overwhelming, boring, uncertain or difficult to begin. At other times, competing rewards or difficulties with attention, motivation or self-regulation may make the immediate alternative more appealing.

It is not a character flaw

Procrastination does not automatically mean that someone is lazy, careless or lacking in discipline.

A person can care deeply about a task and still struggle to begin it. Shame and self-criticism may add to the difficulty rather than resolve it.

A more useful question can be:

“What is making this task difficult to start or continue?”

01 What might be getting in the way?

Seven common contributors

01

Emotional avoidance

The task brings up uncomfortable feelings such as anxiety, frustration, boredom or self-doubt. Delaying provides temporary relief from those feelings.

02

Perfectionism

The task feels as though it must be done extremely well, making the possibility of mistakes or imperfection feel difficult to tolerate.

03

Overwhelm

The task feels too large, complex or unclear. When it is difficult to see where to begin, avoidance can become easier than taking the first step.

04

Low immediate reward

The task feels boring, effortful or unrewarding in the moment, while another activity offers something more immediately interesting or satisfying.

05

Fear of evaluation

Worry about criticism, failure, rejection or how others might respond can make starting or completing a task feel threatening.

06

Attention & self-regulation

Difficulty sustaining attention, managing competing impulses, initiating action or maintaining effort can make follow-through harder.

07

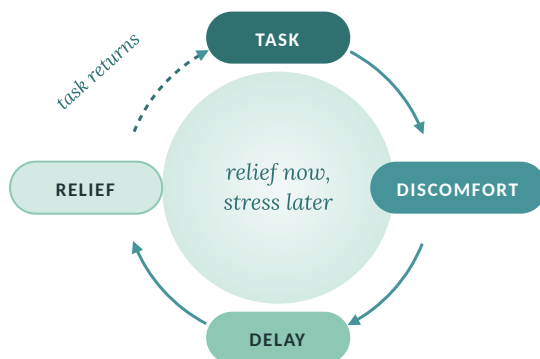
Stress & limited resources

When we are already under significant stress, tired or emotionally depleted, tasks that might normally feel manageable can become harder to approach.

These factors can overlap, and the same person may procrastinate for different reasons at different times.

02 The short-term relief trap

Why delaying can feel good, then worse



Putting the task aside can make difficult feelings decrease temporarily. That immediate relief can make delaying more likely the next time a similar feeling appears.

The problem is that the task usually remains, and may now bring additional stress, guilt or urgency.

What the research suggests: research on procrastination supports this short-term mood-regulation perspective, while also showing that procrastination is influenced by other motivational and self-regulatory factors (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013; Steel, 2007).

What procrastination can cost

When delaying becomes frequent or persistent, it may contribute to:

- Increased stress as deadlines approach
- Reduced confidence in your ability to follow through
- Missed opportunities or unfinished tasks
- A cycle in which stress makes future tasks harder to approach
- Guilt, shame or self-criticism
- Rushed or lower-quality work
- Strained relationships when responsibilities are repeatedly delayed

03 What can help?

Small, practical ways to make starting easier

01

Make the start small

Instead of "finish the report", identify the smallest meaningful first action: open the document, write the heading, or spend five minutes outlining.

02

Name what you are avoiding

Ask:

"What feeling or difficulty am I trying not to experience right now?"

You may discover that the obstacle is anxiety, uncertainty, boredom, perfectionism or overwhelm rather than the task itself.

03

Lower the standard for starting

The first attempt does not have to be the finished product. Give yourself permission to produce an imperfect beginning.

04

Reduce friction

Put the materials you need within reach. Remove one obvious distraction. Make the next step easier to access.

05

Work with the feeling, not against it

You do not need to feel completely motivated or comfortable before beginning. Notice the discomfort and take one small action alongside it.

06

Use short, defined periods

Choose a realistic amount of time and work only for that period. A small commitment can feel more manageable than an open-ended task.

07

Respond with self-compassion

If you have already delayed something, criticism rarely makes starting easier. Notice what happened, understand the barrier and return to the next workable step.

What the research suggests: self-compassion and approaches that reduce the emotional burden associated with tasks are consistent with contemporary psychological approaches to procrastination (Sirois, 2022, 2023).

A different question

INSTEAD OF

"Why am I so lazy?"

TRY

"What is making this difficult to approach right now?"

THEN ASK

What am I feeling?

What am I worried might happen?

What feels difficult about the task?

What is the smallest useful step I could take?

04 Reflection

For personal reflection or to explore in therapy

01 · WHAT AM I NOTICING?

What task do I tend to delay, and when do I usually notice myself avoiding it?

02 · WHAT MIGHT BE GETTING IN THE WAY?

Is the main barrier anxiety, boredom, perfectionism, uncertainty, overwhelm, attention, low reward, or something else?

03 · WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DELAY?

What do I feel immediately after putting the task off? What happens later?

04 · WHAT WOULD MAKE STARTING EASIER?

What is one small, realistic action I could take without needing to finish everything?

A GENTLER REMINDER

You do not have to feel ready before you begin. Sometimes the goal is simply to make the next step small enough to take.

SOURCES

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