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The Procrastination Cure

21 Proven Tactics for Conquering Your Inner Procrastinator,
Mastering Your Time, and Boosting Your Productivity!

Damon Zahariades • The Art Of Productivity © 2017 • 166 pages

Workplace Skills / Become More Productive / Time Management

Take-Aways

- Everyone has to deal with procrastination.
- Procrastination is a manifestation of inferior decision making.
- The jobs and tasks that people delay and anticipate with dread often seem harder than they turn out to be.
- Perpetual procrastinators share some common traits.
- Negative self-talk feeds procrastination.
- You can put 21 tactics to work to defeat procrastination.
- If you procrastinate, forgive yourself. Then try not to do it again.
- “Active procrastination” means substituting another vital task for what you originally planned to do.
- Conquer procrastination by making a commitment to yourself.

Recommendation

Would you love to stop procrastinating, become more productive and have less stress? Productivity expert Damon Zahariades, once a world-class procrastinator himself, can help you accomplish these goals. He explores the nature of procrastination in this comprehensive productivity guidebook, which is light on theory and heavy on best-practice tips. Along with 21 tactics filled with advice you can act on, Zahariades details what constitutes procrastination; why people – you specifically – procrastinate; the blatant and hidden costs of delaying what you know must do; and how to avoid procrastination in the first place.

Summary

Everyone has to deal with procrastination.

“Everyone procrastinates” – including productivity gurus, efficiency experts and time-management consultants. Procrastination is part of human nature. People routinely put things off until later. Procrastination is the most natural – and self-defeating – human activity. Don’t torture yourself about it.

“Procrastination is a difficult habit to break. As with any habit, the longer you allow it to persist, the more deeply rooted it becomes.”

Think of procrastination as “the act of deferring action on something when taking earlier action would arguably have been a better decision.” Everyone understands procrastination. The challenge is how to stop.

Procrastination is a manifestation of inferior decision making.

At its core, procrastination stems from bad decision making. Knowing some background information and some practical productivity tips may enable you make better decisions in the future and stop putting off until forever what you can do right now.

“Sometimes procrastination is helpful, and it makes sense to embrace it rather than try to curb it.”

People who successfully teach themselves not to procrastinate uncover their common “procrastination triggers” and then determine how to avoid them.

The jobs and tasks that people anticipate with dread and delay doing often seem harder than they turn out to be.

Once you start to do a task, the worry, nervousness and discomfort that accompanies the anticipation generally wanes. The important step is to take some – any – initial action. You’ll find that events will move ahead productively from even a small start. Procrastination can cost you personally and professionally. On the personal side, failure to address concerns in your relationships usually guarantees that those issues will become more protracted and difficult to resolve. If you don’t pay your bills, your creditors will tack on late fees. If you feel sick, but you put off seeing a doctor, whatever ails you may get

worse – endangering your health and even your life. And, in general, putting things off builds stress that generates harmful physical, emotional, mental and behavioral effects.

“Break projects down to their smallest parts. Then, treat each part as a separate task. Focus on each one’s completion, at which point you can cross it off your to-do list.”

On the professional side, failure to follow up on job leads means you’ll miss out on promising career opportunities. If you’re in sales and don’t stay on top of your prospects, your competitors will close them first. If you’re in management and don’t give your boss the reports he or she requests, your annual reviews will suffer, and you may find it difficult to keep your job. For businesspeople, professional productivity – a universal performance criteria – depends on being proactive and not letting things go by. There is no such thing as productive procrastinator.

Perpetual procrastinators share some common traits.

Are you a perpetual procrastinator? If most of these traits seem familiar, you have a procrastination problem. And you are not alone. Do you: Rush to finish work on time? Seldom estimate accurately how long tasks will take? Routinely put off today’s jobs until tomorrow? Always substitute easy jobs for tough jobs? Sit on long-term deadline jobs until right before they’re due? Pay too much heed to social media, emails and other distractions? Seldom show up on time? Keep your workspace messy? Let emails and voicemails pile up? Live by the motto, “I’ll do it tomorrow”? If that describes you, you can take some productive steps to stop procrastinating.

Negative self-talk feeds procrastination.

People’s reasons for procrastination generally include perfectionism, laziness, boredom, negative self-talk, inability to deal maturely with difficult events, worrying about failure or about success, feeling overwhelmed by pending work, not knowing where to begin, not knowing which decisions to make, wanting to do something different that provides instantaneous gratification, and not facing the immediate consequences of failing to act. Common questions about procrastination include:

1. **“I’m a lifelong procrastinator. Can I really overcome this bad habit?”** – Definitely, yes. Others have and so can you, but not overnight. It may take months, but you can make your life immeasurably better.
2. **“I’m constantly distracted by social media and end up procrastinating on important work.”** – Shut down your phone notifications, limit your social media time and deal with people face-to-face.
3. **“I procrastinate because I feel overwhelmed. How do I fix this problem?”** – Make a list of what you must do. Do each job one by one, the easiest tasks first. This will give you a sense of accomplishment that fuels more accomplishment.

You can put 21 tactics to work to defeat procrastination.

Tap into this “treasure trove of tactics” to beat procrastination for good:

1. **“Eat the frog first”** – Mark Twain called the worst jobs “frogs” and advised doing them first. Once those unattractive frogs are out of the way, the remaining jobs are easy.
2. **“Do the first 10 minutes”** – You may become intimidated when you think of all the work a job will entail. Do the first 10 minutes of it. Once you start, the task will be easier to complete.
3. **“Reward yourself”** – To make jobs you don’t like more enjoyable, combine them with a reward. For example, lie down and read a book for 45 minutes after working for a few hours on a job you don’t like.
4. **“Fill your calendar”** – If you have free time, you’ll waste some of it and end up procrastinating. Protect yourself by staying busy; block out your workdays by allocating chunks of time to important tasks.
5. **“Prioritize tasks and projects”** – Assign priorities to upcoming jobs. Todoist, a free online app, can help you by assigning red, orange and yellow flags to various chores to indicate urgency. Color-code your most urgent tasks, and do each job according to its priority.
6. **“Shorten your daily to-do list”** – Most people put way too many jobs, projects and tasks on their to-do lists. They never finish all their tasks on the scheduled day, so they move unfinished tasks to the next day – and then to the next, and so on. This leads to additional procrastination, even paralysis. Set clear priorities, and take on fewer tasks.
7. **“Apply Parkinson’s law”** – The more time you allot to finish a job, the more time you will waste. Parkinson’s law says, “Work expands...to fill the time available for its completion.” Limit the time you set for every task. With less time available, you’ll focus more intently.
8. **“Ask others to set your deadlines”** – People often fail to meet deadlines they set for themselves. Research indicates that people do much better when others set their deadlines. Ask your boss or your spouse to establish appropriate deadlines for specific tasks.
9. **“Leverage your peak-energy times of day”** – People perform better at different times of the day and are reluctant to procrastinate during their peak-energy times. Monitor your energy levels for two weeks to identify your peak times.
10. **“Be accountable to someone”** – When you promise someone you will do something, you’re more likely to do it. When you have a task you can’t afford to put off, find an “accountability partner” and promise that person that you will finish the job at a specific time.
11. **“Take small steps”** – Break a big job down into a series of small jobs. Do each separate little job. You’re less likely to procrastinate on many little jobs than on one big job.
12. **“Avoid boring work (whenever possible)”** – Procrastinating on boring jobs is easy, so, if possible, farm out tedious work.
13. **“Get rid of environmental distractions”** – If a distraction, such as a television, is sitting right in front of you, it’s easy to focus on that and not on your work. Move the distraction, or move your work space.
14. **“Get rid of digital distractions”** – According to Stanford lecturer Nir Eyal, Facebook and other social media channels want you to turn to them whenever your day is dull or you have even an instant of free time. Rid your office of these digital distractions.
15. **“Use the time-chunking method”** – Segment your jobs according to work type. Specify the amount of time you’ll need for each job. Break the job into chunks, and then schedule the chunks. Building in breaks between pairs of chunks will make it easier to avoid procrastinating.

16. **“Eliminate as many unnecessary tasks as possible”** – If you have trivial tasks on your daily to-do lists, you might pay attention to those pressing petty jobs and ignore significant ones. Leave minor tasks off your to-do lists.
17. **“Focus on one task at a time”** – Multitasking doesn’t work. It corrodes your focus, makes you distractible, increases mistakes and reduces productivity. And, it promotes procrastination. Many multitaskers tend to do easy tasks but neglect major jobs.
18. **“Purge negative self-talk”** – If you regularly engage in self-critical internal dialogue, you can see yourself as a failure. This undermines your motivation to stay with your work. Negative self-talk fuels procrastination.
19. **“Limit your options to one”**– Working on your primary project should always be your first choice. It shouldn’t be looking at email, listening to voice messages, going to a meeting or talking with colleagues.
20. **“Figure out why you’re procrastinating”** – What are the “personal triggers” that push you to procrastinate? Discover them. Once you identify them, you can learn to avoid them.
21. **“Perform a weekly audit of your goals”** – Regularly monitor your progress on your short-, medium- and long-term goals.

If you procrastinate, forgive yourself. Then try not to do it again.

These three strategies can help you channel your energy more productively:

1. **“Use temptation bundling”**– Tie a work activity directly to a fun activity. Wharton professor Katherine Milkman originated this concept for herself. She was having a hard time maintaining an exercise routine. To gain motivation, she made a self-bargain: Each time she worked out in the gym, she earned the right to relax with a good novel.
2. **“Use commitment devices”** – This strategy constricts potential negative behavior. For example, you need to lose weight. You don’t want to overeat when you join a friend for dinner at a restaurant. So you promise to give your friend \$100 if you have dessert. *Freakonomics* authors Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner call this kind of bargain a “commitment device.”
3. **“Forgive yourself”** – Procrastination is a habit, so it won’t be easy to change. Don’t beat yourself up when you do it. Self-forgiveness can help limit procrastination.

“Active procrastination” means substituting another vital task for what you originally planned to do.

Procrastination isn’t always bad. With the magic of active procrastination, you can actually increase your productivity. For example, let’s say you have plenty of housecleaning to do, but you actively procrastinate by not doing the housework and, instead, you pay some bills, go grocery shopping and prepare dinner. Those tasks are no less important and may be even more urgent than housework.

“Our energy levels affect our tendency to procrastinate. So it’s worth identifying when your energy levels are at their peak and making maximum use of those times of day.”

Once those tasks are done and you’re ready, you will do your housework. This is because you are an active, not a standard, procrastinator. As such, you don’t waste time when you procrastinate. You don’t take a nap,

watch TV, or sit on the sofa and stare into space. You stay productive, but you work on something other than the tasks your originally intended to tackle.

Conquer procrastination by making a commitment to yourself.

If you're a lifelong procrastinator, don't feel bad. Many people are. As a lifelong procrastinator, you should feel good about getting this far in trying to figure out how to stop procrastinating. This is an important initial step, so give yourself credit. But remember that learning how to avoid procrastination isn't enough. You must commit to conquering procrastination by moving from the theoretical stage of reading some applicable strategies to the all-important "application stage."

Tell yourself you can make this big jump. You're in charge of your life. What happens is totally up to you, including whether you continue to procrastinate. You have learned why it's important to stop procrastinating, as well as how to make the necessary changes. Now promise to yourself to put these tactics to work – now.

About the Author

Damon Zahariades operates the Art of Productivity website and blog and is the author of *Morning Makeover: How to Boost Your Productivity, Explode Your Energy and Create an Extraordinary Life – One Morning at a Time!*



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