

INTRODUCTION

If you are reading this, it is probably because you are bothered by procrastination.

You may be even be reading this because you are procrastinating right now. You are avoiding some other task. I want to make the time you spend off task, right now, worthwhile.

That is the purpose of my writing. An hour from now, you will be prepared to act differently. You will be prepared to be more successful in your goal pursuit.

Are you ready to get started? That is one of my most basic strategies: just get started. In this book, I explain why this works and summarize the research evidence for such a simple, practical strategy.

About This Book

This is a short book—practical and no-nonsense. Although as short as possible, each concept, topic, and issue presented has been carefully researched.

I have been researching and writing about procrastination for nearly twenty years. You can learn about my research at procrastination.ca. This Web site provides access to my research group and academic publications, as well as my iProcrastinate Podcasts and “Don’t Delay” blog for *Psychology Today*. I have had millions of downloads of my podcasts and blog entries. Like this book, these resources are research-based but meant to be very accessible for people who do not normally read psychological research.

The key difference between my blog or podcast and this book is the organization of the ideas. The blog and podcast cover a wide variety of important topics, but you would have to spend days reading or listening to get it all. *The value of this book is that it is a digest of my research, and most important, this book provides a concise summary of key strategies to reduce procrastination in your life.*

Why Is the Book So Short?

Too often, we start a book, read the first chapter or two, and never pick it up again (although we intend to finish it!). Among

procrastinators, this is a terrible risk. In fact, procrastination is defined by this intention-action gap. I do not want to contribute to this, so I have written a short book. It is possible to read the whole thing in a few hours (fast readers may get through the main ideas and key strategies in an hour, in fact).

Most important, I have written a short book because I believe that less is more. It is quite possible for me to write hundreds of pages about this topic. I have in my blog and research, for example. My graduate students regularly write lengthy theses on the topic. However, when it comes to learning strategies for change, a few key ideas are what is required. Working with these ideas in your own life will make a difference. Your reading can make a difference in your life right now—if you want it to.

“If you want it to.” This idea is very important to understand. No technique on its own will ever work without a firm commitment to a goal. *If you are committed to change, I know that what you will learn here will make a difference.* I have received emails from people from all walks of life (e.g., lawyers, students, homemakers, consultants, medical researchers, and even other academics) and from all over the world that attest to the difference that these strategies are making in their lives.

How the Book Is Organized

I have structured each chapter in a similar way so that the book is easier and quicker to read. You know what to expect in each chapter.

First, I begin each chapter with a key phrase that may become your mantra for change. A mantra is an often-repeated expression or idea. It is commonly associated with meditation as the focus of your thoughts. I think the first sentence of every chapter can serve you best as a daily focus as you work toward change in your life.

When you read a chapter that really speaks to you in terms of your own procrastination, memorize the opening mantra for change; post it on your fridge or on your computer as a screen saver. In short, make it your own and reflect on it often.

Second, I offer an example through a short story that highlights a common problem with procrastination. These stories are based on lived experiences shared with me by research participants, as replies to my blog postings and podcasts, as well as through people I have met at invited talks, workshops, and even at social gatherings (these are people who tell me that they would be the perfect subject for my studies). I hope these stories help situate the issue in lived experience for you.

Third, I summarize the key issue(s) illustrated in the story. Here, I draw on research, but I do not quote dates, names, or other details as I do in my academic papers, blog, or podcasts. I write

about the issue and research in simple terms to keep the concepts clear. When I do introduce a term from research, some psychological jargon, I explain what it means.

Fourth, based on the research, I present strategies that you might use to facilitate change in your life. These strategies flesh out the mantra at the beginning of the chapter, linking the issue and what we know from research to things you can do to reduce your procrastination. These strategies are the practical things that you can do to solve the procrastination puzzle in your own life.

As appropriate, I also provide a place for you to rephrase the key ideas in relation to your own life. This is where you make the concepts your own in the context of your own life. This is where you do your first bit of personal work and goal setting.

Finally, you will find at least one comic in each chapter. Paul Mason (an artist, creative genius, and all-around great guy) and I created this series of comics together.



INTRODUCTION

In the comics, we embrace the notion of *carpe diem*. The Latin expression *carpe diem* (which means, literally, “seize the day”) has been used for centuries with contrasting meanings. For example, it has been used to celebrate and defend procrastination with a focus on enjoying the moment—“Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die”—and it has also been used as an admonition, scolding ourselves to focus on the pressing task at hand with expressions such as “make hay while the sun shines.”

Our comics allow us to laugh at our propensity to put it off, while lamenting the tragedy of our inability to seize the day and accomplish our goals. Laugh or cry, we hope you will enjoy the situations we portray. Although the context for these comics is college and university life, I think you will find the themes applicable to other life domains.

OK, enough by way of introduction. Let’s just get started.

What is procrastination?

What Is Procrastination? Why Does It Matter?



All procrastination is delay, but not all delay is procrastination.

MARIA, A WORKING MOTHER of three young children, reaches the end of her day with lots left to do. Again, she didn't get the laundry put away or the files sorted in her office. She beats herself up, calling herself a procrastinator, yet she's confused about how she'll ever be able to get it all done when so much happens each day that's out of her control. She plans carefully, but kids' illness, changes at the day care, and both her and her husband's travel for work always seem to necessitate change in her plans and delays on some tasks.

Issue

These examples in Maria's life should *not* be seen as procrastination. We all have to delay things. Delay is part of making priorities. Of course, a child's illness takes precedence over much of what we might plan that day. Other tasks need to be delayed to make time for doctor's appointments, home care, whatever is necessary. The key issue here is that it is not a voluntary delay in the strictest sense.

Procrastination is *the voluntary delay of an intended action despite the knowledge that this delay may harm the individual in terms of the task performance or even just how the individual feels about the task or him- or herself*. Procrastination is a *needless voluntary delay*. In Maria's case, the delay on putting away the laundry and filing were not truly voluntary. She was not needlessly taking on some alternative task to avoid the laundry or filing. She was optimizing her use of time to meet one of *her* most important life goals: to be the best mother she can.

There are many types of delay in our lives. I believe we need to learn to appreciate this. Some delays are not only necessary, as with the example of Maria's task delay in favor of her children's health, they are wise. We might also decide to delay action on a project because we need more information first. It is wise to put things off at times rather than to act impulsively or hastily.

Delay is a necessary part of our lives. At any given moment, there are any number of things we could do. What will we choose to do? This choice is based partly on our earlier intentions, our plans for the day, but of course, our choice will also depend on the context of the moment. What is happening right now that has an effect on our choices? What is most important now? What is the wisest thing we can do given our goals, responsibilities, roles, and desires?

Procrastination, in contrast to other forms of delay, is that voluntary and quite deliberate turning away from an intended action even when we know we could act on our intention right now. There is nothing preventing us from acting in a timely manner *except our own reluctance to act*.

This is the puzzling aspect of procrastination. Why are we reluctant to act? Why is it we become our own worst enemy?

We undermine our own goal pursuit needlessly. *Why?* How can we solve this procrastination puzzle?

To understand the procrastination puzzle—that voluntary but needless delay in our lives that undermines our goal pursuit—we *need to understand this reluctance to act when it is in our best interest to act*. We also need to have strategies to overcome this reluctance.

The conscious use of strategies to overcome our reluctance to act is essential, because procrastination for many people is a habit.

That is, procrastination is a habitual response to tasks or situations, and like all habits it is an internalized, nonconscious process. It is what we do without really thinking about it. In fact, cross-cultural research by Joseph Ferrari at DePaul University (Chicago) has demonstrated that for as much as 20 percent of the population, this procrastination habit is quite chronic and affects many parts of our lives.

Habits are not easy to change. We need to make conscious effort with specific strategies for change to be successful. Throughout the book, I argue that we need to make *predecisions* to act in a different way, counter to the habitual response. Based largely on the work of Peter Gollwitzer (New York University), I emphasize many different ways that we can use predecisions to act when we intend to act, to reduce the effects of potential distractions, and to cope more effectively with setbacks and disappointments as we work toward changing our behavior.

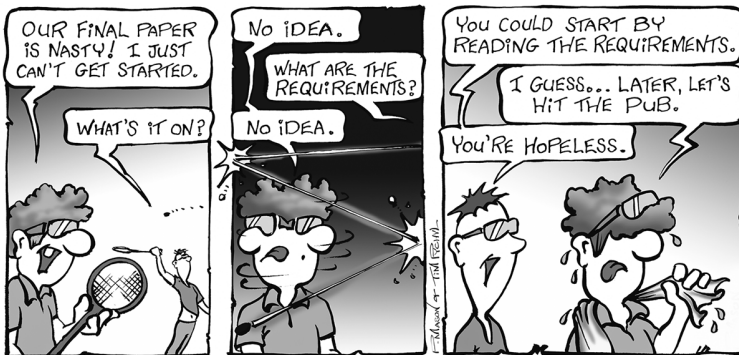
In the chapters that follow, I explain why we may be reluctant to act on our intentions. Then I offer strategies for change to help develop more effective self-regulation by breaking habitual ways of responding. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to emphasize that not all delay is procrastination, and the importance of focusing on the needless delay that is undermining us.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

My initial strategy for change is for you to begin to categorize in your own mind which delays in your life are procrastination. These are the delays that you want to do something about. Knowing this difference is a good place to start.

As you begin to identify which delays are truly voluntary delays that undermine your performance and well-being, you may see a pattern emerge. These tasks, projects, or intended actions may have something in common. For example, you may find that these tasks, projects, or intended actions elicit common feelings.

In the table that follows (or on a separate piece of paper, or on your computer, or simply as a thought experiment), list those tasks, projects, activities, or “things” in your life on which you tend to procrastinate. Next to each, jot down what emotions and thoughts come to mind when you think of each of these moments



of procrastination. Do not overthink this.. It could be, for example, that you are uncertain about what to do to complete a task.

When you have finished your list, look for patterns in the emotions or thoughts involved. You will want to refer back to these when reading some of the chapters that follow.