

Combating Procrastination

Brooke Slater

University of Mary

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Abstract

Procrastination is everywhere: in every country, every race and gender, and has occurred throughout history. Most people have engaged in this delaying act at least once in their lifetime. Thus, it is inevitable. Because of this, teachers in particular must know how to work with students who engage in this behavior frequently, as a terrible habit. Before knowing how to reduce the habit, one must learn why the act occurs. Throughout this document, there are many scientific reasons for why the behavior of procrastination occurs, why it is a sabotaging habit, and theories on how to decrease the practice.

History of Procrastination

When we think of procrastination, we think of it as a modern phenomenon (Stodola, 2016). This is an easy claim to make. In history, it seemed people did not have time to procrastinate. If they did not get the livestock into the barn, the livestock would die and the owners would be hungry. If the voyagers procrastinated in their trips, America may have never been discovered. Even in the stone-age area, if they procrastinated in hunting, they would starve. However, although procrastination seems to be increasing due to the Internet, it has occurred throughout history, in some of the most famous people. Leonardo Da Vinci took 16 years to complete *Mona Lisa* because he spent more time doodling on a notebook than actually getting his work done. In the ancient Greek script *Works and Days* (700 BC), Hesiod states:

Do not put your work off until tomorrow and the day after; for a sluggish worker does not fill his barn, nor one who puts off his work: industry makes work go well, but a man who puts off work is always at hand-grips with ruin.

Hesiod appears annoyed at his brother Perses for procrastinating and not completing his work.

What is Procrastination

Procrastination is an unreasonable, foolish delay in a task. People voluntarily put off the tasks, knowing there are negative consequences for doing so (Steel, 2010). It has nothing to do with ability, but is a product of desire and value (Berkman, 2016).

Why Procrastination Occurs

Research and data throughout many books, journals, and websites hypothesize motives of procrastination and altogether, most of them have developed very similar theories. In 1984, studies proved the number one cause of procrastination to be fear of failure with 49.4% (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Today, over 30 years later, research shows not much has changed. What does fear of failure mean? Many students who procrastinate tend to have similar qualities with each other. These qualities include low self-confidence, self-control, self-consciousness, self-deception, self-esteem, dysfunctional impulsivity, depression, and low competitiveness (Scher & Osterman, 2002; Voge, 2007). Emmett (2002) claims that this fear makes children vulnerable because they feel overwhelmed and helpless. All of these traits make it very difficult for not only children, but also adults to complete important tasks. Procrastinators who fear failure feel as if they lack the skills to complete the task (Burka & Yuen, 2008). Some of these people may have tried very hard to complete the tasks, but their best effort is still not good enough for success. This causes discouragement, so the next time the subject has to complete the task, he or she will put it off because the feeling of failing after working so hard is miserable. Along with that, some people may work harder than everyone else, but still do worse than others. Eventually, these people will give up because no matter what, someone always does better than them. In children, failure may not be actually failing the task, but looking “stupid” in front of peers. In their heads, if they ask for help, they have already failed because everyone will

think they are “stupid.” Because of this, they will continuously put off the task, so they do not fail by asking the teacher for help or by actually failing the confusing assignment.

Most people know somebody who is exceptionally intelligent and does a great job, but procrastinates in almost everything. That is because these people are most likely perfectionists. Surprisingly, perfectionists are some of the most common procrastinators we know. They fear failure more than most people. Perfectionists have a very high bar they must reach, whether they made that bar by themselves or not (Burka & Yuen, 2008). They have done very well in the past, which means, if they do not do that well in the future, they have automatically failed. These people look busy, but ultimately are not getting much done. They spend most of the time avoiding the anxiety of failing the task. For perfectionists, failing the task is not just failing the task, but furthermore, is failing as a person. Perfectionists have three assumptions: “what I do reflects my ability, level of ability determines my worth, and what I produce reflects my work.” Basically, their self-worth is based on their ability, which is shown in their performance. Procrastination cuts between their ability and their performance. Overall, perfectionists believe if they procrastinate on a task, it will not be as decent as it can be. Furthermore, if it is not as decent as it can be, the perfectionist is not failing because he or she did not use all of his or her skills to complete the task.

Another type of fear is known as impulsive fear. Steel (2010) explains this by saying impulsive people give all their attention to the present whereas non-procrastinators pay equal or more attention to the future. Their slogan would be “I will do the fun tasks now and the boring tasks later,” not thinking about how much worse the task will be the more they push it off (Ferrari and Sher, 2000). Impulsive procrastinators value short-term rewards more than long-term rewards. For example, if they were given the choice between waiting for five months to

receive \$100 dollars and immediately receiving \$70, they would choose to immediately receive \$70. A hypothesized reason for this is the procrastinator is fearful they may not receive the \$100 in the future, so they should just take the \$70 now, because it is guaranteed. This type of procrastination may be very difficult to overcome because the procrastinators value the present more than the future, which is a difficult perspective to change.

The second most common cause of procrastination in 1984 was laziness, which was 18% of the students who were researched (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Ferrari and Sher (2000) argue that many procrastinators are simply uninterested in the task; therefore, laziness is still a major cause of procrastination. Their research studies state the majority of students procrastinate on school tasks than household chores. A common trait of lazy procrastinators is making excuses for the delay. They might say they cannot wash the dishes because the sink is too full, or cannot complete their homework because their brother was being too loud. This type of procrastination may be the most dangerous because once the lazy habit is developed, the procrastinator will become lazier with more tasks. Eventually, they will have a long list of things to do. These people as workers seem to be unreliable and may have a difficult time keeping a job.

Many procrastinators share a similar quality with each other. They are simply unorganized (Mind Tools, 2016). These procrastinators mentally want to do well and succeed, but they always seem to forget what they are supposed to do. They may be easily distracted or have a poor memory. An example of an unorganized procrastinator is a husband who is asked to water the flowers. He may look outside and see that the flowers need watering and will think “I will do it after I finish eating.” The thought will slip from his mind, until later afternoon when he goes for a run and sees them again. “After my run” he will think. Three days later, the man’s wife comes home to dead flowers and the husband simply forgot to water them. Another

common quality of this type of procrastinator is poor time management. These procrastinators will always assume they have more time to complete the task than they actually do.

The fourth most common type of procrastination, according to Mind Tools (2016), is feeling overwhelmed by the task. This type of procrastination is not the most common, but has occurred for almost everyone. It is close to the fear procrastination, but is different because the person is not really afraid of the task, but rather, anxious about it. Children engage in procrastinating due to overwhelming tasks more than adults because so many things are still unknown or alien to them. Because of this, children who procrastinate have higher anxiety than children who do not (Sher & Osterman, 2002). An example of this type of procrastination is when juniors take the ACT or SAT. Many of them may be overwhelmed that the test has such a high impact on colleges and scholarships, so they procrastinate studying for it. They will avoid thinking about the test because every time they do, they get very nervous and anxious about their future. Studying will be put off until the week before, when they will cram as much material and information as they can in that short period of time. Some may not even study at all.

There are many more known causes of procrastination, including decision making difficulty, rebelling against control, and lack of assertion; however, the four listed above are the most dominant (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

Negative Effects of Procrastination

When hearing the term *procrastination*, a negative picture comes to mind. It may be thought of as a joke, a small habit, or a way of life. However, procrastination has more negative effects than most people are knowledgeable of. It is a known fact that grades suffer when the assignment is procrastinated, but the student's actual academic success is hindered when the student procrastinates (Scher & Osterman, 2002). When procrastinators are unsuccessful, their

emotions and mental state are harmed as well (Letham, 2016). As stated above, procrastination causes anxiety, but it also causes a great deal of stress. According to the Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Canada, 46 percent of procrastinators stated that procrastination has a negative impact on their happiness. 18 percent claimed procrastination to have an extreme negative effect on their happiness. This study was given to 2,700 random people.

Eric Jaffe claims procrastination can have such a negative effect on a person, it can cause life threatening health problems (2015). According to a study completed by the Psychologist Fuschia Sirosis from Bishop's University, procrastination can link to hypertension and cardiovascular disease. This is because people who have chronic procrastination disorder put off taking care of themselves. Another explanation for the link between procrastination and health is the constant stress leaves the body susceptible to illness. Sirosis' experiments on 800 people proved that procrastinators were more likely to have these health problems; however, the study did not declare why, thus the two statements above are strictly hypotheses.

How to Break the Habit

Because procrastination is so common, it is very important for educators to find ways to combat it. In fact, educators are some of the most important people who must combat it because procrastination increases with age (Solomon and Rothblum, 1984). If educators can destroy procrastination at a young age, it is less likely to become an unbreakable habit. According to Voge (2007), 4 out of 5 students procrastinate. Since it is so common, there are many different types of and reasons for procrastination in the students that educators deal with.

The first step to destroying procrastination is recognizing the procrastinator (Mind Tools, 2016). This may be difficult for the procrastinator him or herself, but easily recognizable for the educator. The next step is to understand why the student is procrastinating. For procrastinators

who are unorganized, teachers and parents can help the child make visuals, to do lists, scheduling and working on one task at a time.

When students who are overwhelmed by the task, teachers and parents can help them break up the project, encourage them to start small, teach them to get used to making mistakes because *not perfect* is different than *fail*, and remove the S.T.I.N.G. from feeling overwhelmed (Mind Tools, 2016; Ranard, 2015). S.T.I.N.G. stands for Select task being put off, Time yourself and take one hour to complete, Ignore everything around you, No breaks, Give yourself a reward once complete (Emmett, 2002).

For procrastinators who believe the task is simply unpleasant, teachers can teach them to change their mindset to “it will not be as bad as I think”, make rewards more immediate, and make the cost or consequences of procrastination more immediate. Todd Rogers and Max Bazerman produced a study at Harvard in 2006 and explained making the consequences of procrastination more immediate in an interesting way (Clear, 2015). They gave the example of working out. If someone skips a workout, the consequence is further in the future, so it does not seem very bad. However, if someone made plans to work out with a friend, the consequence of skipping that workout seems to have a greater impact. They also gave the advice of setting one’s own deadline, giving oneself a physical consequence of the behavior, and placing a bet on one’s own behavior. Students can learn to change their value system by increasing the value of the project by giving themselves an incentive to do it, such as achieving a good grade, and decreasing the value of distraction (Berkman, 2016).

Lazy procrastinators who have trouble with motivation seem to be the easiest ones to cure. These procrastinators need to remove triggers from their environment, including phones and toys (Clear, 2015; Ranard, 2015). Frequent rewards can help for people who delay due to

being unmotivated as well (Mind Tools, 2016). Ferlazzo (2015) gives his readers four suggestions: give students genuine interest, act friendly by lightning up, smiling, and joking, be flexible and remember the learning goal, and do not give up on the students. He also advises teachers to praise students on their hard work rather than intelligence. Students who are praised on their intelligence become procrastinators who are afraid of failure because they do not want to lose their status. It also promotes students to work harder and procrastinate less.

Scholastic also gives education advice to motivate students (Scholastic, 2016). Letting students contribute to the school by giving them jobs, making incentives obtainable, taking students into the community, connecting the information to real life, and giving fun incentives for doing well and working hard on standardized tests can decrease procrastination and make learning more interesting.

Conclusion

Educators are met with procrastinators on a daily basis and must be prepared to combat the behavior. As stated previously, it is immensely important to understand why the behavior occurs. Once that knowledge is known, educators can use the methods stated above to prevent and break the habit. Furthermore, it has been proven that procrastination plays a dreadful role in academic success and physical health. Because procrastination has occurred throughout time and is such a common behavior, it is basically impossible to defeat completely. However, in conclusion, if educators work hard to break the habit when children are young, procrastination could possibly decrease in the future.

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