



The Nature of Procrastination

Procrastination is the thief of time. –Edward Young (1683-1765)

Students frequently present to the Counsellor explaining that they know what it is they have to do, yet "I just can't bring myself to do it" and "I keep putting it off". Statements such as these demonstrate procrastination beautifully.

DEFINITION

Procrastination is a complex psychological behavior that affects everyone to some degree or another. With some it can be a minor problem; with others it can be a source of considerable stress and anxiety.

CHARACTERISTICS

Students are often optimistic about their ability to complete a task on a tight deadline; this is usually accompanied by expressions of reassurance that everything is under control. (Therefore, there is no need to start.) For example, she may estimate that an assignment will take only five days to write; she has fifteen days; there is plenty of time; no need to start. Lulled by a false sense of security, time passes. At some point, she crosses over an imaginary starting time and suddenly realizes, "Oh no! - I am not in control! There isn't enough time!" At this point, considerable effort is directed towards completing the task, and work progresses. This sudden spurt of energy is likely the source of the erroneous feeling and cognition that "I only work well under pressure." Barely completed in time, the paper may actually earn a fairly good mark; whereupon the student experiences mixed feelings: pride of accomplishment (sort-of), and guilt for getting an undeserved mark. But the net result is reinforcement: the procrastinator is rewarded positively for her poor behavior. ("Look what a decent grade I got after all!") As a result, the counterproductive behavior is repeated over and over again.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

- **Low Self-Confidence** - The procrastinator may struggle with feelings of low self-confidence and low self-esteem.
- **Perfectionism** - Your daughter may insist upon a high level of performance even though she may feel inadequate or incapable of actually achieving that level.
- **I'm Too Busy** - Procrastination may be used to call attention to how busy she is. "Obviously I cannot do such and such because my life is so complicated and so demanding." The procrastinator may even spend considerable time justifying her reasons; time that could be spent doing the work.
- **Stubbornness** - Procrastination may be used as an expression of stubbornness or pride: "Don't think you can push me around. I will do it when I'm good and ready."
- **Manipulation** - Procrastination may be used to control or manipulate the behavior of others. "They cannot start if I am not there."
- **A Frustrated Victim** - The procrastinator often feels like a victim: she cannot understand her behavior or why she cannot get work done like others. The whole thing is a frustrating mystery that cannot be solved.

FOUR SIMPLE REASONS FOR PROCRASTINATION

1. ***Difficult*** - the task seems hard to do; we naturally tend to avoid difficult things in favor of those which seem easy to us.
2. ***Time-consuming*** - the task will take large blocks of time, and large blocks of time are unavailable until the weekend.
3. ***Lack of knowledge or skills*** - no one wants to make mistakes, so wait until you learn how before you start.
4. ***Fears*** - everyone will know how you mucked it up.

FOUR COMPLEX REASONS FOR PROCRASTINATION

1. **Perfectionism** - Your daughter may insist upon a high level of performance even though she may feel inadequate or incapable of actually achieving these unrealistically high standards. Everything must go completely right. The perfectionist is long on criticism and short on praise. The words should, ought, must, have to, occur frequently in conversation. (I should get straight A's; I must do everything right the first time, etc.) "If you can't do it right, don't do it at all." The desire to have everything absolutely perfect may mask problems of self-esteem and self-confidence.
2. **Anger/Hostility** - if we are unhappy with someone, we'll often withhold our best efforts. For example, if your daughter is upset with a teacher, she may delay in starting a demanding project as a way of "getting even." Students will frequently have difficulty seeing they are the ones who ultimately lose this battle.
3. **Low Frustration/Tolerance** when students find circumstances overwhelming, they may find situations intolerable and terribly unfair. Frustration is characterised by whining and complaining, and such phrases as "it isn't fair," "this is too hard," and "no one else has to..." etc. When students are feeling this way, it may seem reasonable to "put it off" until they feel better about doing the work. The trouble is, they feel just as frustrated the next day.
4. **Self-Doubt** happens when students continually minimise their own skills and abilities and express doubt about their ability to succeed. Students who put themselves down out of habit disbelieve themselves when they have been successful. They may also find it difficult to accept praise and compliments for the work performed – false modesty. ("Wow, you did so well on the exam!" "Oh, I really didn't know it all that well.") The trouble with self-doubt and self-downing is that, over time, students actually come to believe that they are incapable of certain levels of achievement. Self-downing results in procrastination because the person who is uncomfortable with success will seek ways to become less successful and less visible. Hand in that assignment late, and soon success will fade. ("Why did the teacher fail you/mark you down?" "I told them all along I couldn't do the work, and see! I was right. I can't work at that level. I can't meet those expectations")



Overcoming Procrastination

A good plan executed right now is far better than a perfect plan executed next week. –General George Patton, American Army General
Procrastination can be difficult to overcome because it develops and becomes reinforced over time but there are steps that can be taken to overcome inertia. Often, simply the practice of identifying procrastination in the first place can help.

FOUR SIMPLE STEPS TO CURING PROCRASTINATION

1. Focus on the benefits of overcoming procrastination. What are the benefits of peace of mind, a feeling of strength, purpose, achievement and a healthy feeling of being in charge and in control?
2. Help your daughter to identify that she is delaying a task unnecessarily. Bring this to her attention.
3. Identify possible reasons for the delay – see information sheet on *The nature of procrastination*
4. Assist your daughter to commence the task – *A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step*

FOUR COMPLEX STEPS FOR CURING PROCRASTINATION

1. Help your daughter, even if only once, to do and think about everything in the opposite. When she is focused on one thought pattern, such as perfectionism, encourage her to tell herself: this isn't so hard, it won't take long, and I am sure that I know how to do it, or that I can learn while I'm doing it. Above all, remind her that no one else is going to have time to focus on her assessment results because they are all so busy focusing on their own. Switching our thinking in this way can help us to switch our focus and, in turn, change our behaviours. Have fun with it and use this exercise to highlight the unrealistic expectations your daughter is placing on herself. Remind her that this effort or version will be the best she can do in the time she has available – the faster she starts work, the more time she will have to make the changes she would like to make things 'just right', bearing in mind that it is impossible to eradicate all mistakes. Finally, remind your daughter that great writers, poets, artists at one time or another completed their work; therefore, it will be okay to say that yours is finished also.
2. Help your daughter to determine rational from irrational thinking and behaviours. She may be feeling upset about a particular subject, teacher or situation (eg not getting the topic she wanted) but lack of performance as a result only hurts her in the long run. Identify strategies for solving the problem and model rational thinking "I agree, it's not ideal but you will just have to make the most of the situation as it is". Unfortunately, situations are not always fair but we have two choices: groan about it and delay the task as a result or accept it, complete the task and move on as quickly as possible. Encourage perspective by helping her to see the situation as a small obstacle compared to her overall long-term goal "You are not going to let how you feel about a particular lesson stand in the way of your personal future, are you?"
3. The more we want something and can't have it, the greater our level of frustration. Rather than put the task off all together because it is too difficult, encourage your daughter to write down a list of questions she has about the task. Encourage her to identify and seek help from someone who can answer these questions accordingly. Sources might be other family members or family friends who hold an interest in the topic, or returning to the teacher who set the task initially. With each of these questions set aside, ask them to identify one thing they can do right now to work on the task eg make a list of books on the topic, define each part of the question in order that they can address each in turn, adjust their timetable to ensure they have allocated enough time to complete the assessment task etc. Students can also complete a KWL for their assessment. Ask them to list what they already KNOW about the topic and what they WANT to know. On completion of the assessment, they can then reflect on what they have LEARNED. This activity moves the focus off the task and onto learning.
4. Praise your daughter for each small step she takes with her schoolwork. So often, parents focus on what their daughter is NOT doing, rather than rewarding the things ARE doing. Success breeds success. A simple comment such as "You spent 10/20/30 minutes working on your assignment" is far more successful than nagging about when they are going to return to their task. In turn, you are also modeling to your daughter the internal self-talk you want her to develop for monitoring her own study techniques. In time, you want her to internalise feelings of pride and accomplishment in her work. Each positive works to reinforce successful behaviours and therefore also works to undo the existing behaviours that led to procrastination in the first place. *Self-Confidence is the first requisite to great undertakings – Samuel Johnson, English critic and writer*

TOOLS TO HELP

- Make the tasks look small and easy in your mind. ("I've written lots of excellent assignments; this is just one more.")
- Do only a small part of the task each time. ("I'll just check out the books tonight. Later on, I'll skim through each of them.")
- Five-minute plan: Work on something for just five minutes. At the end of five minutes, switch to something else if you want. Chances are, you'll get involved enough to keep going.
- Advertise your plans to accomplish something, and let peer pressure push you forward. ("I told everyone that I was going to finish this paragraph by tonight.")
- Use a good friend as a positive role model. If you have trouble concentrating, study in the presence of someone who doesn't.
- Modify your environment - if you can't study at home, find a place where you can study; or, change your study situation at home.
- Plan tomorrow and establish priorities - some students find that simply writing down reasonable starting and stopping times help them get going.
- Expect some setbacks. Don't expect to be perfect even when you're trying to get rid of perfectionism! So occasionally, your plans will not work. Accept setbacks and start again on a positive note with the end goal in mind.