

What is Procrastination?

In a nutshell, you procrastinate when you put off things that you should be focusing on right now, usually in favor of doing something that is more enjoyable or that you're more comfortable doing.

According to psychologist Professor Clarry Lay, a prominent writer on procrastination, procrastination occurs when there's "a temporal gap between intended behavior and enacted behavior." That is, procrastination is occurring when there's a significant time period between when people intend to do a job, and when they actually do it.

How to Overcome Procrastination

Follow these steps to deal with and control procrastination:

Step 1: Recognize That You're Procrastinating

If you're honest with yourself, you probably know when you're procrastinating. But to be sure, take our [Are You a Procrastinator?](#) self test.

Here are some useful indicators that will help you know when you're procrastinating:

- Filling your day with low priority tasks from your To Do List.
- Reading e-mails several times without starting work on them or deciding what you're going to do with them.
- Sitting down to start a high-priority task, and almost immediately going off to make a cup of coffee.
- Leaving an item on your To Do list for a long time, even though you know it's important.
- Regularly saying "Yes" to unimportant tasks that others ask you to do, and filling your time with these instead of getting on with the important tasks already on your list.
- Waiting for the "right mood" or the "right time" to tackle the important task at hand.

Notes:

Putting off an **un**important task isn't necessarily procrastination: it may just be good prioritization!

Putting off an important task for a short period because you're feeling particularly tired isn't necessarily procrastination either, so long as you don't delay starting the task for more than a day or so, and this is only an occasional event. If you have a genuine good reason for rescheduling something important, then you're not necessarily procrastinating. But if you're simply "making an excuse" because you really just don't want to do it, then you are.

In his 1986 article "At Last, My Research Article on Procrastination", published in the *Journal of Research on Personality*, Lay noted that procrastinatory behavior is independent of need for achievement, energy, or self-esteem. In other words, you may be a procrastinator even if you're

confident in your own abilities, energetic, and enjoy achieving things.

Step 2: Work Out WHY You're Procrastinating

Why you procrastinate can depend on both you and the task. But it's important to understand which of the two is relevant in a given situation, so that you can select the best approach for overcoming your reluctance to get going.

One reason for procrastination is that people find a particular job **unpleasant**, and try to avoid it because of that. Most jobs have unpleasant or boring aspects to them, and often the best way of dealing with these is to get them over and done with quickly, so that you can focus on the more enjoyable aspects of the job.

Another cause is that people are **disorganized**. Organized people manage to fend off the temptation to procrastinate, because they will have things like [prioritized to-do lists](#) and [schedules](#) which emphasize how important the piece of work is, and identify precisely when it's due. They'll also have planned how long a task will take to do, and will have worked back from that point to identify when they need to get started in order to avoid it being late. Organized people are also better placed to avoid procrastination, because they know how to break the work down into manageable "next steps".

Even if you're organized, you can **feel overwhelmed by the task**. You may doubt that you have the skills or resources you think you need, so you seek comfort in doing tasks you know you're capable of completing. Unfortunately, the big task isn't going to go away – truly important tasks rarely do. You may also fear success as much as failure. For example, you may think that success will lead to you being swamped with more requests to do this type of task, or that you'll be pushed to take on things that you feel are beyond you.

Surprisingly, **perfectionists** are often procrastinators, as they can tend to think "I don't have the right skills or resources to do this perfectly now, so I won't do it at all."

One final major cause of procrastination is having **underdeveloped decision-making skills**. If you simply can't decide what to do, you're likely to put off taking action in case you do the wrong thing.

Step 3: Adopt Anti-Procrastination Strategies

Procrastination is a habit – a deeply ingrained pattern of behavior. That means that you won't just break it overnight. Habits only stop being habits when you have **persistently** stopped practising them, so use as many approaches as possible to maximize your chances of beating procrastination. Some tips will work better for some people than for others, and for some tasks

than others. And, sometimes, you may simply need to try a fresh approach to beat the “procrastination peril”!

These **general tips** will help **motivate** you to get moving:

- Make up your own rewards. For example, promise yourself a piece of tasty flapjack at lunchtime if you've completed a certain task. And make sure you notice how good it feels to finish things!
- Ask someone else to check up on you. Peer pressure works! This is the principle behind slimming and other self-help groups, and it is widely recognized as a highly effective approach.
- Identify the unpleasant consequences of NOT doing the task.
- Work out the [cost of your time](#) to your employer. As your employers are paying you to do the things that **they** think are important, you're not delivering value for money if you're not doing those things. Shame yourself into getting going!
- Aim to “[eat an elephant beetle](#)” first thing, every day!

If you're procrastinating because you're disorganized, here's how to **get organized!**

- Keep a [To-Do list](#) so that you can't “conveniently” forget about unpleasant or overwhelming tasks.
- Use an [Urgent/Important Matrix](#) to help prioritize your to-do list so that you can't try to kid yourself that it would be acceptable to put off doing something on the grounds that it's unimportant, or that you have many urgent things which ought to be done first when, in reality, you're procrastinating.
- Become a master of [scheduling](#) and [project planning](#), so that you know when to start those all-important projects.
- Set yourself time-bound [goals](#): that way, you'll have no time for procrastination!
- Focus on one task at a time.

If you're putting off starting a project because you find it **overwhelming**, you need to take a different approach. Here are some tips:

- Break the project into a set of smaller, more manageable tasks. You may find it helpful to create an [action plan](#).
- Start with some quick, small tasks if you can, even if these aren't the logical first actions. You'll feel that you're achieving things, and so perhaps the whole project won't be so overwhelming after all.

If you're procrastinating because you find the task **unpleasant**:

- Many procrastinators overestimate the unpleasantness of a task. So give it a try! You may find that it's not as bad as you thought!
- Hold the unpleasant consequences of **not** doing the work at the front of your mind.
- Reward yourself for doing the task.

Finally, if you're procrastinating because you **can't decide** what action to take, and are putting off making a decision because you're nervous about making the wrong choice, see our [decision-making section](#). This teaches a range of powerful and effective decision-making techniques.

Remember: the longer you can spend without procrastinating, the greater your chances of breaking this destructive habit for good!

Key Points

To have a good chance of conquering procrastination, you need to spot straight away that you're doing it. Then, you need to identify why you're procrastinating and taken appropriate steps to overcome the block.

Part of the solution is to develop good [time management](#), organizational and personal effectiveness habits, such as those described in [Make Time for Success!](#) This helps you establish the right priorities, and manage your time in such a way that you make the most of the opportunities open to you.