

BEAT PROCRASTINATION NOW!


Dr. Bill Knaus

Make today your day for giving up your membership in the procrastinator's club. You'll get more done and you'll have more fun.

Procrastination affects practically everyone. With a strong history of procrastination under your belt, you'll leave many blank pages and chapters in your autobiography.

Join me and we'll explore the world of procrastination to develop ways to effectively follow through on what is important to do. You'll soon find you have sound reason to feel optimistic that you can improve in this area. You'll have a more interesting autobiography to write.

You can make constructive changes sooner if you have a sound understanding of how this complex procrastination habit works, and how to break it. We'll start by examining what procrastination is, and then what you can do to free yourself from procrastination's shackles.



Procrastination starts with a whisper of negative emotion or anticipation of discomfort, and extends into delays and more delays. This normal human affliction always involves a negative perception about the anticipated activity, always involves substituting something less relevant, and practically always involves procrastination thinking to support or justify the delay.

What Is Procrastination?

What is this thing called procrastination? Procrastination is an automatic problem habit leading to a needless delay of a timely, relevant, priority activity until another day or time. When you procrastinate you may put off something important beyond reason, perhaps forever. You may put off important self-improvements or actions that can positively impact your health, happiness, effectiveness, relationships, or sense of worth. With deadlines looming, you needlessly wait until the last minute before rushing to beat the clock. These forms of self-penalizing don't make logical sense. However, the psychologist Robert Woodworth said it well: "We are psychological, not logical."

Our emotions and impulses often rule reason. So, when you procrastinate you normally have an unpleasant feeling as you perceive and think about a soon-to-be-pressing priority. Then when you procrastinate, you always substitute a less relevant—possibly trivial—activity for your crucial or soon-to-be-pressing priority. The list of procrastination possibilities is endless. Instead of searching for a job, you play computer games.

You fritter away the hours as your housework piles up. You hide in the shadows and watch the person you want to date walk off with another who was bold enough to ask first. You keep gaining weight and swear that you will diet and exercise someday, but not right now. Indeed, you have something more important to do, such as going on that one last binge with ice-cream and pizza. And later you go a bigger binge as you tell yourself “I’ll be good later.” (Isn’t human nature peculiar?)

Clearly, a procrastination habit is a pressuring, relapsing process. By recognizing that you can progressively master procrastination---not cure it---you have put yourself on the path to self-improvement. Continue on that path a way further and you bring yourself closer to a sense of confident composure.

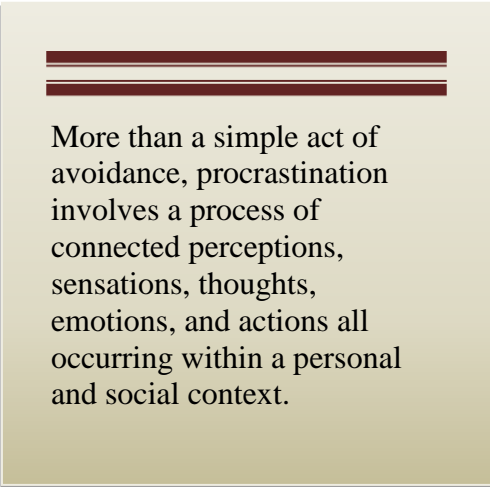
With *confident composure*, you recognize that you can directly command only yourself, and you choose to do so. You don't demand that the world change for you, and you don't need it to. With this softer but stronger view, you can better influence the controllable events that take place around you. Your psychological resources and emotional drives are fully available to defuse, finesse, or directly manage conflicts. You position yourself to create an exciting autobiography where the pages are forged from the fires of self-efficacy where you organize, regulate, and direct your actions to accomplish positive and possibly some great things.

Track Your Procrastination

Procrastination can be a simple default reaction to something uncomfortable. You need to respond to a pressing email message that asks you to volunteer your time for a project you have no interest in doing. Rather than immediately decline the offer, you opt to put off disappointing the writer. Instead of facing the problem now, you microwave a bowl of soup; you pull weeds from your garden; you research the best crab grass killers for your lawn. You simultaneously fritter time that would ordinarily go toward your other priorities. Here is one potential outcome. After several weeks of further delay, you feel obliged to agree to the unwanted project.

What starts as a simple default reaction often plays out as an elaborate form of procrastination. Here is an example:

1. You have a report that’s on your schedule to do.



More than a simple act of avoidance, procrastination involves a process of connected perceptions, sensations, thoughts, emotions, and actions all occurring within a personal and social context.

2. You view the activity as boring, unpleasant, uncomfortable, threatening, or confusing.
3. You magnify the onerousness of the task as you filter out the real incentives for acting now.
4. You experience an emotional or visceral reaction.
5. You seamlessly shift your focus to a substitute activity such as daydreaming or reading.
6. You tell yourself that you'll get to it, perhaps tomorrow. Then, when tomorrow comes, you make up another excuse.
7. When under sufficient pressure, you either finish or quit.
8. You swear to yourself that you'll do better next time.
9. In a related circumstance, you repeat your *automatic* procrastination habit.

The Masks of Procrastination

Procrastination comes in different forms. We'll look at five sample styles: discomfort dodging, self-doubt, behavioral, reactance, and health procrastination. I named the procrastination styles, from the context in which they occur, their distinguishing features, their process, or their end-results.

Discomfort dodging procrastination is probably the most common form of procrastination. Here, discomfort triggers an avoidance sequence. If you view the activity as threatening, boring, uncomfortable, or uncertain, and then dodge it to avoid tension or frustration, you've fallen into a procrastination trap. You can train yourself to build emotional resilience by practicing follow through skills where you allow yourself to experience tension as you act to do relevant activity that you are tempted to avoid.

Self-doubt procrastination can keep you mired in inhibition, fearing failure at every turn. In this sad cycle you procrastinate as you second-guess, hesitate, and down yourself. Members of this self-doubt group habitually put off challenges unless they have a guarantee for success. When laboring under an illusion that their worth is based on what they do, members of this group fear failure more than most. To avoid failure, they avoid many successes. However, negative global self-worth is a fiction. It is normally based on a definition that your worth depends upon what you do and upon what others think of what you do. Alternative reasonable definitions are possible, including one that says that the self is too complex to fully measure, and so a simplistic

definition of worth represents a counterfeit idea. Nevertheless, if you define your worth negatively (I'm stupid. Something is wrong with me.), this view can stimulate procrastination in life zones that activate such thinking. But the bigger procrastination issue is that of putting off taking steps to overcome self-doubts.

You *behaviorally procrastinate* when you plan, organize, and initiate actions then quit prematurely and don't gain the anticipated benefits. You can incur both a dollar and personal cost by starting and not finishing. For example, you pay your money to a fitness center and then quit after a few weeks. Research from Behavioral Economics shows that you are better off not starting something you won't finish. Yet how are you to know what you'll finish before you start?

Reactance procrastination can result from believing that you will be unfairly inconvenienced or lose a privilege. Reactance can be a normal resistance to a loss of privilege. If the government outlawed the use of the automobile and ordered you to use public transportation to save fuel, you might be up in arms. You might agree with the need to save natural resources but at the same time, you might resist what you view as a right. Reactance procrastination has some of the same characteristics and a big difference. You, nightly, drink heavily at your local bar and refuse to quit claiming you lose the freedom to maintain your relationships there. You tell yourself this is a loss of freedom, and that's why you won't stop drinking. Instead of preserving a freedom, you've already lost a big part of your freedom to consummating addictive urges. You're procrastinating on confronting your addictive habit.

In *health procrastination*, you put off making or maintaining important health-related lifestyle changes. If your cholesterol is too high, a lifestyle change in your diet and exercise habits can prove beneficial. What if you decide to start a necessary diet and exercise program at some vague time in the future? Is that not a form of procrastination? Refuse to take medication to prevent Glaucoma, for example, can also blend with reactance if you view this as an inconvenience that interferes with doing what you want to do, which is to avoid the unpleasant feeling of the eye drops. (Decline to use eye-drops and you risk eventual blindness.)

I call a blend of different forms of procrastination, *combination procrastination*. Combined health and reactance procrastination is one example; self-doubts and discomfort-dodging is another. (And who said that procrastination was a simple behavioral habit solved by time management techniques?)

Procrastination Diversions

When people distract themselves from following through on what is useful and important to do, they may engage in various practices that include mental, emotional, and action diversionary ploys. Your awareness of these processes opens opportunities to override them. However, the answer for getting relevant things done is the same. You take the behavioral steps to follow

through whether the steps feel good or not.

By recognizing mental, emotional, and action diversions, you open opportunities for yourself to substitute constructive follow through activities. The following describes these diversionary processes.

Mental Diversions

You will practically always give yourself an excuse to justify the delay. This is a mental diversion. Mental diversions are such a common part of procrastination that they are almost synonymous with procrastination. These mental diversions typically follow viewing a timely activity as uncomfortable. Here you excuse the delay by telling yourself that you'll get to it later. This type of diversionary thinking is like a knee jerk reaction.

Mental diversions can feel temporarily rewarding. Telling yourself that later is better, can yield a specious reward in the form of relief. You will have made a decision that you will finish at a future time. That feels good! Then, when the designated time comes, you repeat the pattern. Over time, whatever immediate relief you may feel, is typically followed by a larger degree of feeling pressured and stressed.

The excuse making, or mental diversion phase of this pattern, normally falls into one or more of the following five illusions: *mañana*, contingency *mañana*, catch 22, the backward ploy, and Wheedler thinking.

1. When you view a timely activity as uncomfortable, boring, or uncertain, you may engage in procrastination thinking such as the *mañana* or tomorrow illusion. You tell yourself that later is a better time to start. You tell yourself that you'll get to the task, perhaps when you are rested. Then, when "later" comes, you put it off again. You can start to address this diversion by asking and answering the question why is later better. Your honest answer is that there is no guarantee that tomorrow is better. By refusing to accept speculations that magically tomorrow will be better, you can make tomorrow better by acting today.

2. The *contingency mañana* ploy adds a creative conditional twist. You decide that you want to lose weight. You decided to diet. But, first you need to research what to do. Then you put off doing the research. Since you put of the research, you have an excuse not to start a weight-loss campaign. You can skip this complex middle step by going straight to the activity that you believe will do you the most good.

3. The *backward ploy* is a cousin to the contingency *mañana* ploy. This is the idea that you have to understand the many relevant factors that contributed to your procrastination before you can do anything to change your life for the better. So, you lie on an analyst's couch for several years

while trying to ferret out how your past links to your present procrastination patterns. You now have an excuse for not acting until your analysis is complete, which will probably never happen. Delaying action until you are more enlightened is a twist on this theme. Changes in perception can be brought about through new actions, which, in turn, can lead to new insights. Action in the present moment is likely to be more instructive than weaving through faulty memories and recollections of selective perceptions to get to murky beginnings of your procrastination patterns.

4. *Catch 22* is a fatalistic form of procrastination thinking. Here is how it works. As a condition for asking for a raise and promotion, you decide to get an MBA degree. At the same time, you believe you are not bright enough to get the degree. Based upon the belief that you are not smart enough to get the degree, you don't try. Because you believe that you need the degree to ask for a pay raise, you don't ask for one. *Catch 22* procrastination is especially common with people suffering from depression. If you believe that you are helpless and that your future is hopeless, then you are likely to avoid taking corrective actions because you've predetermined they would be futile. You can directly address a *catch 22* line of thought by taking an experimental approach. You start the avoided activity at its simplest phase, and find out what you can do through the directed problem-solving actions that you take.

5. Our thoughts can reflect a *Wheedler view*. The *Wheedler* is a fictional character who connives and cons in different disguises. Here is a *Whiny Wheedler* procrastination line of thought: "Don't do it." "You will make yourself feel bad." "This is too much for you to do." "You are going to be overwhelmed." Your *Reactance Wheedler* tells you: "You shouldn't have to do this. It's a waste of your valuable time." Here is an *Easygoing Wheedler* line of thought: "Take it easy. No need to rush. You have better things to do with your time." You can contest *Wheedler* thinking in whatever disguise it appears. You can ask, for example, what does "don't rush" mean? How does this "don't rush" instruction apply to this situation? Then refuse to accept any lame excuse you may give yourself as to why a needless delay is okay. That is one way to *Beat the Wheedler*.

Figure 1 The Wheedler



Emotional Diversions

Sometimes the phrase resistance to change is a way of describing procrastination. Both involve unpleasant emotions. Both lead to repetitions of self-defeating patterns. However, procrastination is more specific. It points to a definable process. Resistance to change, on the other hand, is vague.

Since the beginning of my work on procrastination, I saw this process as often triggered by negative perceptions and unpleasant emotions. A fear of failure, for example, can spur procrastination into a gallop. You may experience a diversionary emotional twist. You tell yourself that you must feel inspired, or emotionally ready, before acting to do something unpleasant. However, why would anyone want to use moments of inspiration to do things that can be uninspiring to do?

Perhaps your day of high motivation will come and you'll finally put procrastination on the run. I personally wouldn't hold my breath on that one. Instead, you are far better off getting yourself motivated as a byproduct of forcing yourself into constructive actions, whether you feel like it or not. That's part of the advice I gave to the hundreds who attended the first workshop on procrastination. You're getting the same advice today. It's how you use it that makes the difference.

Building emotional resilience and stamina is a byproduct of allowing yourself to experience tension as you engage the activity you feel so strongly tempted to delay. But this tension is a good form of stress. Through the constructive actions that you take, to overcome discomfort through your decisive actions, you build emotional muscle. You can discover the strength within yourself to slow or stop subconsciously capitulating to primitive emotions forces designed to spare you discomfort in the short-term, but that so often lead to you going round and round in a hapless procrastination rut.

Action Diversions

When you procrastinate, you always substitute something less timely and relevant than what you are putting off. This is an action diversion. Instead of studying for tomorrow's test, you go to a party. Instead of dealing with an unpleasant conflict, you shop. Instead of filling out your tax forms, you nap. In short, you do practically anything but the priority activity. These action diversions are the classic sign of procrastination.

Action diversions are reactions to uncomfortable feelings. This process often follows this template: (1) you are aware of discomfort associated with the activity. (2) You experience a sense of emotional resistance. (3) You react by doing something different. (4) You continue doing various forms of substitute activities.

A procrastination avoidance reaction contributes to a specious reward in the form of immediate relief. This is specious because the quick fix leads to no meaningful long-term gains. The problem remains. Repeated many times, specious rewards increase the risk for avoidance activities.

Procrastination diversionary actions, thinking, and emotions normally go unmonitored. Once you

are aware of this combined cognitive, emotive, and behavioral process, you are in a stronger position to disengage from it. However, to break this well-practiced habit of the mind takes: 1. Realistic self-monitoring. 2. Recognizing what feeds into your procrastination pattern. 3. Objective self-observation. 4. Acting to follow through even when your thoughts and emotions involve urges and temptations to take an easy but diversionary direction.

Procrastination Complications

Procrastination can be a symptom, defense, problem habit, or combination thereof. These multiple, but correctable states, add another layer of complications.

Procrastination can be a *symptom* of an underlying or coexisting condition, such as an inappropriately low tolerance for frustration, perfectionism, anxiety, depression, helplessness thinking, self-doubt, weak organizing skills, or other. However, this can be a positive signal that you still have self-improvement work to do. Your family may expect you to take over their business. However, you have no interest in running the business. You strongly prefer to become a great chef. Your procrastination on handling most of the day-to-day business routines signals that you are on a wrong career track.

Procrastination can be a *defense* against a fear of failure. If you believe that you cannot succeed at the level that you think you should, a common procrastination practice is to either make a halfhearted effort, or do something different. Fear of success can have the same impact. You believe that if you succeed, the pressure will increase for you to do more. So you avoid the activity. The cognitive behavioral solution is simultaneously to address your self-doubts, and the procrastination process.

Procrastination can be a *problem habit* that exists because it has existed before. You feel a whisper of discomfort and you default to a safer, comfortable, activity. You automatically think delaying thoughts. You adeptly make us excuses. You ask for extensions. This pattern goes on and on even when the consequences are far more severe than any benefits you may gain.

How to Stop Procrastinating

By developing your awareness of when and how you procrastinate, you position yourself to draw upon knowledge and information that those who trod this path before you have learned. Perhaps you can boost your procrastination awareness and put this knowledge to productive use.

Pretend you are a Centaur, or half human and half horse that is torn between two natures. In this form of being, you face a never-ending conflict.

You approach a choice point where you can act on a timely priority or go a wilder way. With a procrastination habit dominating, the horse goes where it wants. Your human reason and ability then abandons the reins.

The horse side of your personality is the power drive for pleasure and for avoiding discomfort. Thus, when in charge, the horse heads for the field to graze, the stream to drink, and the barn to sleep. The horse's normal inclination will be to follow the path of least resistance. But that may not be where you want to go.

What happens when your more human side wants to take the reins and direct the horse where you want it to go? At first you may experience a strong feeling of resistance. Through effort, you can channel the horse's energy and strength into a direction that you've decided is best to go. This takes a focused effort. It is one that you will repeat throughout your life, if you decide to take charge of the horse and your own destiny. It is at this point of decision that you use your higher mental processes to guide your destiny. The following counter-procrastination tactics can help you to keep a grip on the reins, decide how you'll use your time, and to control the direction of your life, and how you use your time.

Get tough on the procrastination habit, but act kindly toward yourself. Most people who procrastinate are hard on themselves, and soft on the problem. This is like keeping your eyes looking inward, and preoccupying and distracting yourself with helplessness feelings about procrastination. Rather than concentrate on yourself, concentrate on interacting with your environment and taking steps to move yourself forward.

1. *Take failure out of the equation.* Failure, in its simplest form, is the absence of a success. You are likely to avoid getting into an emotional quandary if you stick to that basic definition. However, failure, like blame, has extensions that can include a sense of worthlessness. Declaring yourself a failure for not overcoming procrastination is silly. How, for example, can a complex human being be only one thing, a failure? Fortunately, from a personal development perspective, you can eliminate failure. You treat what you do as an

experiment where you learn what works and what doesn't. The experiment helps show any difference between what you originally thought, and the outcome. Still, we can find social conditions where "failure" is inevitable. Not everyone can be promoted into the same job where there is only one such job available. You work in sales and don't sell the product. You will likely need to find a different job. Even under conditions where there are conventional definitions for "successes" and "failure," you can still evaluate your performance and not your entire self.

2. When you feel tempted to procrastinate, *use temptation as a signal to become an objective self-observer*. There are several steps you can take to sharpen your observations of the process you follow when you procrastinate. When you have an impulse to delay, you can start recording and logging what you tell yourself about priority situations, and note the diversionary actions you take. The procrastination log is a valuable tool to help identify the perceiving, thinking, emotion, and action paths you follow as you procrastinate. It is equally important to record what you think and do when you follow through. It is often important to both decrease the negative (procrastination), while increasing the numbers and quality of your positive follow through actions. By matching procrastination thinking and actions against your constructive follow through actions, you put yourself into a position where you can better judge then decide on a procrastination direction or one that can yield a productive advantage. This awareness exercise provides information to identify the "where," "what," and "how" of procrastination.

3. When you see your choice point—to delay or follow through--do a *short-term and long-term benefits analysis* to assure yourself that a personal change you have in mind is truly meaningful to do. The system works in this way. Let's say that the change you contemplate involves quitting smoking. Write the short-term benefits of both smoking and quitting. The short-term benefits of smoking can include heightened concentration, feeling more relaxed, and avoiding the nasty withdrawal symptoms that accompany quitting. Comparatively, the short-term benefits of quitting smoking may be few. Next, write the long-term benefits of smoking or quitting. The long term benefits of smoking are probably no different from the short term benefits of smoking to relax, to avoid withdrawal pangs, and to slightly boost concentration. The long term benefits of quitting can include (1) Avoiding pressuring comments by family and friends that you "need to quit." (2) Reducing your risk of contracting a smoking-related disease, (3) Boosting your chances for extending your life, (4) Banking the several thousand dollars you spend each year for tobacco products, and then using it for a fabulous vacation, as a rainy day fund, or for a retirement fund. This type analysis can help you to motivate yourself to deal with procrastination over breaking a problem habit. You can apply the same analysis to the form of procrastination that causes you the most trouble. (SMART Recovery uses a variation of this analysis.

See: http://www.smartrecovery.org/resources/library/Tools_and_Homework/Quick_Reference/CBA_Worksheetsheet.pdf)

4. *Reflect on your procrastination decisions*. The procrastination decision to defer typically involves an urge to avoid something unpleasant. You see a situation as inconvenient, threatening, uncertain, conflicting, boring, or other. You sidetrack yourself into doing something different. You justify this delay by telling yourself that later is better. This diversionary action/decision can give you a temporary sense of relief. But, that relief is likely to be followed by a nagging sense of incompleteness as the task continues to loom unattended.

5. *Watch out for diversionary actions*. If you didn't divert your attention away from a timely

and relevant activity, you would not be procrastinating. By using the contents of your procrastination log, or through reflective thinking, you may recognize a pattern where you substitute a "safe" activity for a priority activity in order to avoid temporary discomfort. To address these diversions, it makes sense to be aware of what they are, and how and when they occur. What are your prime diversions? Do you take a nap, play video games, watch television, start a fight with your mate, go for a drive, daydream, or bog yourself down with trivia? The next step is to refuse to follow diversionary urges. Instead, force yourself to redirect your actions toward accomplishing the timely goal.

6. *Listen to your self-talk.* Do you tell yourself something like, "This is a waste of my time, so I won't do it now?" Do you hear yourself saying "later will be better" because then you'll be prepared to follow through? Hone in on this procrastination thinking. Evaluate what you hear. Look for flaws in this procrastination logic. How, for example, is later better when it comes to dispensing with a pressing, boring, threatening, or unpleasant activity? Does delay lead to stretching out the misery and reducing opportunities for accomplishments, happiness and comfort? If you believe you can take a simple proactive action step now, why not act now!

7. *Map out your procrastination avoidance sequence.* When you put off a timely, relevant priority action, you always do something else that is less timely, and, perhaps, irrelevant. This procrastination habit sequence often follows a predictable process: (1) Awareness that an activity is likely to be onerous, boring, uncomfortable, or anxiety provoking. (2) Deciding to delay to avoid the discomfort or feeling of resistance to the anticipated action. (3) Telling yourself you'll get to it later, but not right now. (4) Engaging in substitute activities, such as reading the newspaper, phoning a friend, rearranging furniture, starting an argument, or slugging down a drink. (5) When tomorrow comes, you repeat this sequence. Once you see the pattern, you can change it.

8. *Design a metacognitive framework* for positive change. Metacognition, in its most basic form, means thinking about your thinking. This process can be expanded to include: (1) Setting and defining goals in measurable terms. (2) Planning how to achieve the goal. (3) Organizing your resources. (4) Talking yourself through the paces. (5) Revising your goals, plans, organizing scheme, and actions. These five steps involve thinking about what you are doing, and guiding yourself along the steps. By practicing this metacognitive process, you act to stop casting procrastination as a shadow over opportunity. Instead, you progress toward what you want to accomplish.

9. *Set clear and measurable goals.* One of the consistently profitable approaches associated with accomplishment starts with setting clear, measurable, and attainable goals. A goal, such as "to pay my bills by the 29th day of each month," is measurable and achievable. Avoid committing to unclear goals such as to overcome procrastination, or to be happy. These are ethereal goals. How do you get to be happy? Without a measure, a goal of "being more efficient"

is also ambiguous.

10. *Create a realistic action plan.* Goals without plans usually lead to procrastination. A plan is a design for determining where you are and what you can and will do to achieve your goal. A plan describes the steps in the process. Backward planning can give you a new perspective on the planning process. In backward planning you look back at the coming year, not forward to it. Imagine that it is a year from this date. For example, you are looking back over a very productive year. You weren't perfect in overcoming procrastination but you did make progress. From this imaginary future time, trace back how you accomplished an important goal. Suppose you decide that it is important to regularly exercise. A fitness center offers the opportunities you seek to structure this activity. In working backwards, you can say, (5) "I worked out for a year, and am in better shape than before." (4) "I continued with my schedule and unless I was ill, I refused to cut myself slack and put off going to the center." (3) Before that, "I entered the gym for the first time, and began the program." (2) Before that, "I phoned the fitness center and set up an appointment." (1) Before that, "I accepted a feeling of discomfort as part of the process of going from where I am to where I'd like to be." Since the backward plan ends with the first step, you know where to start.

Don't bite off more than you can chew, or you may find yourself behind the eight ball and running yourself ragged as you fall behind on your essential and discretionary priorities.

11. *Take a bits and pieces approach.* The most complex challenges have a simple beginning. In this sense, most challenges can be broken down into bits and pieces. Even a person with a Ph.D. degree in theoretical physics started by taking simple steps in that direction. Few would expect themselves to finish such a degree in a day or a year. For many time-intensive activities, you can have significant gaps in your knowledge before you begin. Filling the gaps can involve researching information for a lecture, report, or business plan. To start, assign a time to the task. As best as you are able,

break the task down into segments. Then start at the logical beginning. This can be as straightforward as making a call, booting your computer, opening a book, or getting out a pen and paper.

12. *Get and stay organized.* Develop an organization system that works for you, and that you can work. The following tips illustrate a way to organize for positive change: (1) Schedule time for recurrent events (bill paying, cleaning, automobile oil changes, etc.), then follow the schedule. (2) Put important objects in their place (keys, reading materials, bills). (3). Eliminate time-hog activities that consume much time yet yield little return (Toss mail and email advertisements and other materials with little relevance.) (4) Delegate. For example, hire someone to clean. (5) When feasible, order items by catalogue or email and have them delivered. (6) Schedule time for matters that require concentration when you are least likely to be

interrupted. While organization and time-management systems do not, by themselves, curb procrastination, these mechanical techniques can be part of the solution.

13. Use a *check-off list* method. List your priorities in a pocket notebook where you can maintain lists. Check off the items as you do them. (For some, the act of crossing off the finished items from the list is rewarding.) If you are inclined to "forget" to use the system, try a reminder system. An elastic band on your wrist can serve as a reminder. However, avoid over scheduling yourself. People are not perpetual motion machines.

14. Use a *catch-up, keep-up, and get-ahead system*. Create three filing systems. On the first, put *Catch-up*, the second, *Keep-up*, and the third, *Get-ahead*. The catch-up file includes previously procrastinated activities that remain timely and important to do. The keep-up file contains current activities, such as you might have on a daily "to do" list. The get-ahead file includes activities that if you were to get a jump on, could advance your interests and make your life easier later. Spend time every day with your catch-up file and whittle it down to where you don't need it because you stay up-to-date. Emphasize the keep-up file to prevent its contents from flowing into your catch-up file. Daily make time for your get-ahead file. This is where you work toward achieving what you envision. You can use this process to boost your efficiency and effectiveness, free your time, and enjoy your life unencumbered by excess procrastination.

15. Use *self-instructions* to guide your actions. The self-instruction technique is useful for short-term projects. To use the self-instruction technique, start by identifying what you want to accomplish. Then, spell out the steps for how you are going to go on to achieve the result. (You can start this mapping process with a bits and pieces approach.) These are your procedures. Organize them in sequence. In private, say the procedures aloud to yourself. Then whisper them. Then say them silently to yourself. Next, talk yourself through the paces following the prescription you previously verbalized.

16. Consistently use the *five-minute plan*. The five-minute approach is a way to break the inertia generated by a procrastination habit. It can be a surprisingly effective way to start intermediate and longer term projects. First, commit yourself to five minutes to get started. After those five minutes, decide whether to commit yourself for another five minutes. You continue deciding at five-minute intervals (or another interval that works for you) until you decide to stop. (It's often easier to maintain momentum after you've initiated a preliminary action.) Then you take the next few minutes to get set up so that when you return to the activity you have a jump on the project.

17. Apply the *PURRRRS plan* to nip procrastination in the bud. When you first experience a procrastination urge, **P**ause. Use your resources to stop the procrastination sequence. One resource is to refuse to continue automatically along the procrastination path. **R**eflect on what is happening. Ask yourself questions such as, (1) "How am I stopping myself from addressing the

priority”? (2) “What do I do to sidetrack myself”? (3) “What do I want to accomplish”? (4) “How can I improve my ability to do it now”? **Respond** by initiating preliminary actions, such as challenging mañana thinking, talking yourself through your preliminary plan as you act out the steps of the plan. **Revise**, or make modifications in your plan based upon the feedback you get. **Stabilize** this do-it-now approach by repeating PURRRRS whenever you feel tempted to procrastinate.

18. *Make a contract with yourself.* The contract establishes what you'll do, when you'll do it, the rewards for following through, and a penalty for not following through. Set a time. Fix a reward that is equal with the task. If the task is making three overdue phone calls, do something you find pleasurable shortly afterwards, such as read a newspaper. This reward approach is based on a positive and intentional use of the Premack Principle, which is that one high probability activity can act as a reward for another. So, if you follow an efficiency action with, say, reading a favorite newspaper or having a desired cup of coffee, reading the newspaper or drinking the coffee serves as a reward for the counter-procrastination action you took. For a penalty, choose an onerous one that you agree to impose upon yourself if you don't follow up within the time you've designated. Suppose you agreed with yourself that you'll contribute \$200 to a group that preaches something that offends you. You can avoid the penalty by making the call. Avoiding a penalty by doing the task, can feel rewarding. This dual reward system can be a spark to get a specific thing done.

19. Use the *do it when you think of it* technique. We all have short-term tasks that get put off, such as canceling a dental appointment. If you need to cancel an appointment, do it when you think of it. This frees your mind for other things. It also eliminates nagging self-reminders and excuse-making for the last-minute cancellation. A slight positive change in throwing off daily details can make a big long-term difference. If you can't do it when you think of it, write it in a pocket notebook and read the notebook at designated times of the day when you are free to respond. Or, you can record what you thought to do, and play the tape back at scheduled times. Then, do it the first time that you can.

20. If possible, *engage a support group.* So far we've looked at what you can do to self-regulate your actions so that you can make positive changes in your life. You can go it alone. Nevertheless, when confronting a complex procrastination habit, you may need all the help you can get. Who are the people in your life you can call upon if the going gets tough? These are friends, acquaintances, and family members who are willing to back your efforts and offer practical suggestions. Some may be willing to call you at random intervals to check your progress. Generally, you would wisely select tolerant and encouraging people.

21. Have a plan to *deal with procrastination lapses and relapses.* After making progress, slipping back to old patterns is common. Make a plan in advance that describes what you are going to do when the going gets rough and you find yourself lapsing back into a specific

procrastination pattern that you recently curbed. This is a sample maintenance plan: (1) Laminate a 2"X 3" card for your wallet. On one side of the card, summarize your procrastination habit process. Summarize your approach for curbing procrastination on the other. Examine the card when you feel tempted to procrastinate so as to redirect your attention from starting a procrastination habit sequence toward a do it now sequence. (2) Arrange a bimonthly check-in with a support group "buddy" who has agreed to help. You report your challenges, how you are progressing, and any procrastination stumbling blocks that merit attention. (3) Create a progress chart, and put it in a place where it is visually available and you can easily add daily entries, and review progress. The chart can consist of numbers from one to 100 on the vertical axis, and daily dates on the horizontal. Each day you progress with a key priority, you record it on the chart. The chart is cumulative. If you notice that the chart is flattening out, you have an early warning system. If you keep accumulating points, this visual report can feel rewarding and you can encourage yourself to continue your progress. When you fill one chart, file it, and then start another.

22. *Get your act together.* Get rolling! Make a plan for how you will gear up for the change and start the change in motion. Pick a start date. Publicly announce your intentions. Make a deal with a "buddy" to periodically monitor your change program. Start at the anointed date and time. Expect and accept making adjustments to your plan. Chart your progress. Routinely remind yourself about the long-term benefits you gain and the long-term hassles you avoid. Press forward. Reinforce yourself for persisting. (Rewarding persistence can be more important than rewarding completion.) While the procrastination end-game does not guarantee happiness or success, the process can dramatically boost your chances for a purposeful life filled with meaning and many worthy accomplishments. But if during the course of grinding it out you feel like quitting, remind yourself that *Doing gets it done!*

23. *Track your progress.* How do you know if you have made progress curbing procrastination? If you get and maintain a ten-percent improvement in your follow through skills, I'd rate this as positive progress. Over time, this percentage change can make a big difference; it may also increase.

I won't wish you luck in your quest to improve on your timeliness and efficiency. Waiting for luck to arrive is a passive game. It's also a form of procrastination. Instead, I wish you the will to persist in your efforts to free yourself from procrastination stumbling blocks that stand between you and the accomplishment and happiness that you deserve and that you can earn through your own productive efforts and actions.

If you want to take a deeper look into the causes, forms, and corrections for procrastination, see *End Procrastination Now*: http://www.amazon.com/End-Procrastination-Now-Psychological-Approach/dp/0071666087/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1310752586&sr=1-1

©
Dr. William Knaus
2011
All Rights Reserved