

Procrastination

Procrastination – to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting that you'll be worse off for the delay - has a long history. Almost 3,000 years ago the Greek poet Hesiod asserted that “a man who puts off work is always at hand-grips with ruin.” Things have likely gotten worse since Hesiod's time; modern workplaces frequently require individuals to make their own decisions about time management, while computers provide ready access to tempting distractions such as email, instant messaging, and eBay. The problem may be even worse for college students; a full 75% see themselves as procrastinators, and procrastination has been shown to predict lower scores on assignments, exams, and grade point averages.

Procrastination is a behavior, but that doesn't mean it's easily changed. Research performed with twins suggests there may be a genetic component to procrastination, while another study that tracked people across time found their tendency to procrastinate was stable over a period of ten years. In fact, a recent review of 216 research studies on procrastination indicates that it may be appropriate to think of procrastination as a personality trait.

For those who procrastinate, these findings may be discouraging. But take heart; together with those findings, review author Piers Steel of the University of Calgary also offers these four scientifically-grounded guidelines for reducing the effects of procrastination. First, because we tend to delay tasks when our expectation of success is low, we can reduce procrastination for a particular task by remembering times we have succeeded, by observing the success of others, and by acquiring successful experience. Second, because we delay long-range goals in favor of activity that is immediately rewarding, we can reduce procrastination by fusing activities and rewarding different needs through a single action. An example is a study group; while it rewards our immediate desire for socializing, it simultaneously keeps us on track for an exam several weeks or months in the future. Third, because procrastinators tend to be impulsive, they should take control of the environment in which they work; close the e-mail and instant messaging programs and choose a workspace in which tempting distractions are minimized. Finally, it has been shown that short-term goals reduce procrastination; dividing a large project into smaller subgoals can help a person to stay focused and avoid distractions.

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