

Stop procrastinating

When the work is piling up but you just can't face it, figure out why

BY KIMBERLY WINSTON

Kimberly Winston is a freelance writer.

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It's just before midnight on Tax Day - April 15 - and you're running breathlessly to the post office, hastily scribbled tax return in hand.

Is this a sign of pecuniary prowess? Or is it a testimony to your tendency to put things off - and off and off and off?

Put your money on procrastination - avoidance of a task that needs to be accomplished - which, some researchers say, has become an epidemic.

No one knows why for sure, but many blame modern life - jobs, kids, school, sometimes a second or even a third job. Who has the time to clean out that drawer, change the oil or see the dentist?

"There is no doubt we all procrastinate," says Timothy Pychyl, director of the Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. According to Pychyl's research, 70 percent of North Americans may have a problem with procrastination.

"It's an incredibly high number," he says. "That's why so many people say, 'What's the problem?' But what matters is the extent to which procrastination has a negative effect on our lives."

Procrastinators report feelings of guilt, inadequacy and depression. One study found chronic procrastinators have higher levels of drinking, smoking, insomnia, stomach problems, colds and flu.

Then there are procrastinators who put off medical treatment. They can end up dead.

So, if procrastination can make you sick - or worse - why not, as Nike has trumpeted for years, "Just do it"?

The fear factor

The No. 1 reason people procrastinate is fear.

"They are afraid of being criticized, afraid of making mistakes," says Neil Fiore, author of "The Now Habit: Overcoming Procrastination While Enjoying Guilt-Free Play" (Penguin Group/Jeremy P. Tarcher, \$13.95). "They are afraid the little dictator inside their head is going to keep them

working endlessly. I liken it to 'I am going to be in solitary confinement for 400 hours with a critic.'"

And when fear is compounded by perfectionism - procrastination's evil twin - the problem worsens. "The person has the attitude that if I can't get this done perfectly on the first try, then I will delay and delay," says Wilson McDermut, an assistant professor of psychology at St. John's University. "Putting it off provides short-term relief, but it produces other problems, like not getting it done."

Some procrastinators do get it done. Many, like John Ennis, 33, a paralegal from Bay Ridge, say they thrive on the adrenaline rush that putting things off to the last minute brings on.

Procrastination, he says, "is the way I operate. I put something off so much that when it has to get done my adrenaline gets going, I focus on it and I probably do a better job, and I do it in a lot less time," he says.

Chronic procrastinators say their problem goes beyond laziness. For them, procrastination is a crippling, smothering condition.

"Procrastination is the nagging, shameful, horrible place inside you where you have a list of things to do and they are not getting done and you don't know why," says Laura Rottmann, a 36-year-old from Nashville, Tenn., who has spent up to 10 hours a day playing video games, surfing the Internet and watching TV. "You are missing some element of self-knowledge that will help you move forward, but you don't know what it is."

The best way to move forward, professionals say, is one tiny step at a time. As executive vice president of client services for the Applied Research Corporation in Metuchen, N.J., Maggie Sullivan helps people such as Rottmann overcome procrastination on the job. First, she advises, make a list. "Prioritize," she says, "and stick to it."

Sometimes, what needs to be done seems so big it is overwhelming. Why even start? Experts suggest breaking the task into pieces. If you have been putting off cleaning your basement, commit to a small section - a couple of boxes, or the space under the stairs. If you've been putting off seeing the doctor, pick up the phone and make an appointment.

Reward yourself

Be sure to build in rewards. Schedule both work and play time. This is crucial, says Fiore, whose research among doctoral candidates shows that those who made time "to play" finished their degrees faster than those who did not.

"It is like a sabbath," Fiore says. "We need that so that we don't burn out."

And listen to Nike.

"It's easy to get caught up in thinking and talking about why one procrastinates and that can become a form of procrastination in itself," McDermut says. "At some point, it is important to stop talking about it and just do it." Meanwhile, drop the perfectionist act. "Just take a shot. Accept the fact that it isn't going to be perfect the first time. You can fine-tune later."

Finally, keep at it - work builds momentum. "Once we get started, we say, 'This isn't so bad. I kinda like it,'" Pychyl says. "It is amazing the difference that makes."

That difference can be more than improved self-esteem and better health. Gregg Krech, director of the ToDo Institute in Middlebury, Vt., an education center based on Japanese psychology, draws a link between getting things done and a deeper spirituality.

"Procrastination runs counter to a spiritual or religious life because it puts our interests above the interests of others," Krech says. "But if we say whatever we need to do is what God has placed before us to do - here is a bathroom that needs cleaning ... snow that needs to be shoveled - then attending to them is a service to God and to humanity."

But there's an upside to procrastination, too. Putting something off can be a sign the task is not worthy. In this sense, procrastination can signal a need to make significant decisions - perhaps changing jobs or lifestyles. "Procrastination can be a symptom that our lives are not meaningful," Pychyl says. "So you can start thinking about why am I in a position where I have to do these things I really don't want to do in my life?" But, he warns, "This can be a rationalization, so be careful."

Rottmann is working to overcome her chronic procrastination. Last year, she founded a procrastination Web site - www.procrastinationsupport.com - and a bulletin board where she and people like her can help each other. Knowing she is not alone in her struggle has been the biggest help of all.

"I've quit video games almost completely, and I am making lists and crossing things off," she says. "I've really made strides toward trying to create structure in my life."

10 WAYS TO GET GOING

1. Make a list of the things you need to do in order of importance. Then make a list of things you want to do. 2. Set realistic goals. Don't try to finish a large job in one swoop. Accept that your time, strength and attention are limited.
3. Break large jobs into small tasks. Achieving goals, even small ones, will foster feelings of accomplishment and success.
4. Make a timeline and stick to it.
5. Make your task meaningful. Choose a task that will measurably affect your life or relationships, like returning phone calls.
6. Make your plan public so someone holds you accountable.
7. Reward yourself. For every hour of work, schedule 15 minutes of play. Or after a day's worth of chores, plan a night out.
8. Eliminate tasks you never plan to do. Do you really need to read "War and Peace" or roll the quarters in your coin jar? Or would your time be better spent organizing your records for next year's taxes?
9. Estimate the amount of time you think it will take you to complete a task - then up it by 100 percent. This will keep your expectations realistic and stave off a sense of failure.
10. Just do it.

SOURCE: PROCRASTINATION RESEARCH GROUP AND MAGGIE SULLIVAN

THE THINGS THAT STOP US

Why do people put things off?

Fear of failure: Procrastinating is frequently about the fear of disappointing one's self, family, friends or superiors.

Unrealistic expectations: Chronic procrastinators often set unrealistic goals, like completing huge tasks in small amounts of time.

Adrenaline rush: Some procrastinators are addicted to the thrill of getting things done just under the wire. The work may get done, but it seldom gets done well.

Perfectionism: Chronic procrastinators are their own worst critics, finding it easier to do nothing than to do something they consider less than perfect.

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