

'Procrastination is the thief of time'

– Edward Young

Procrastination means putting off something that we know we need to do. Most of us procrastinate to some extent. We have all said, 'I'll do it later', or 'I must get around to doing that'. But some people habitually procrastinate to such an extent that tasks build up and their lives become very stressful.

Procrastination often amounts to deliberately avoiding having to confront our fears. Procrastination flourishes in two optimal conditions. First, when the task is not urgent – we do not have to do it right now – there is time to do it in the future. Second, when there is something more pleasurable to do now. Procrastination is usually about putting pleasure before pain.

■ Seven reasons why people procrastinate

1 Lacking a sense of mastery. You may hold the attitude that successful people achieve their goals without frustration and self doubt. When the going gets tough you think – 'this is not how it should be, this is wrong' and give up. Whereas people who are consistently successful have a 'sense of mastery' and assume that life will be a tough frustrating struggle, to be mastered. So, when they encounter obstacles they just carry on because that's what they expect.

2 Assume you have to be in the mood. Procrastinators often think, 'I don't feel like it, I'll wait until I'm in the mood'. But with some tasks that are boring or too demanding you will never feel in the mood. Successful people will often put action before motivation. Once you get started and begin to feel a sense of accomplishment it spurs you on to do more.

3 Fear of failure. You may leave the task until the last minute and then say, 'I didn't have enough time to do it properly'. By doing so you give yourself an excuse and protect yourself from the reality that your best effort might not have been good enough. Alternatively, if you are something of a perfectionist, you may think, 'I do not want to start unless I can do it properly (perfectly) – otherwise I will feel like a failure'.

4 Fear of rejection or intimacy. You may avoid inviting friends around, or making that telephone call, in case you get rejected. Alternatively you may not feel comfortable with the other person getting to know you. Procrastination helps you maintain a safe emotional distance, allowing you to avoid revealing yourself to others.

5 Fear of success. If you do it really well you may draw attention to yourself or create more work for yourself.

6 Getting back at somebody. You may put something off as a way of getting back at somebody. If you are feeling bossed around or coerced into doing something, your procrastination may be an indirect way of expressing anger or rebelling.

7 Lack of commitment. You may simply not consider the task important enough to put in the effort. Alternatively, you may think, 'It's an unpleasant task and I would prefer to do something else'.
