7 Myths About Procrastination & Strategies for More Successful Goal Pursuit in 2014
Myth #1
Procrastination can be a good thing.
Latin roots

Latin verb *procrastinare*

*pro* - forward motion
*crastinus* - belonging to tomorrow

“put off or postpone until another day”

That’s not so bad, it’s about belonging to tomorrow...
Tomorrow

▪ A mystical land where 98% of all human productivity, motivation, and achievement are stored.

(Unknown)
How do psychologists define procrastination?

- Gap between intention and action
- Voluntary, irrational, delay despite the expectation of a potential negative outcome

All procrastination is delay, but not all delay is procrastination

Strategy #1

Identify what is really procrastination versus what is just the delay in your life (that is just a necessary part of busy lives).
Myth #2
Procrastination is a time-management problem
Procrastination – it’s not about time

The Procrastinator’s Clock?

Carleton University
Canada’s Capital University
The Planning Fallacy

- Used study prediction calendars and study “logs” to explore the potential discrepancy between intention (“I'll study early for the exam and lots!”) vs. action (“maybe next time!”).
- Expected a greater “planning fallacy” for procrastinators

Together with Paul, I've begun to think about this as the procrastination puzzle. Here it is with a focus on our procrastinator.
What just happened here?
The procrastination puzzle
It’s that gap between intention and action.
It’s weakness of will.

SELF-REGULATION FAILURE
Short-term mood repair
“Giving in to feel good”

Related to over-eating, problematic gambling, compulsive shopping — one of subset of self-regulation problems.

Fuschia and I presented a paper at APA in Chicago a few years ago where we presented research documenting how higher P scores were related to more drinking among undergraduates, for example.
Strategy #2

Recognize procrastination for what it is, an avoidant coping response that is meant to provide short-term mood repair. Is this the best coping strategy? What else could you do?
Myth #3
It’s not a big deal,
only a few all-nighters.
The costs of procrastination

- Performance
- Well-being
- Health
- Relationships
- Regrets & bereavement

"... procrastination is usually harmful, sometimes harmless, but never helpful" (Steel, 2007; p. 80).


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**Story about my travel to Amsterdam last year, Montreal airport waiting for the shuttle bus, met Luke. Luke said in response to my procrastination research, “they need to consider death”**

Every procrastinator knows the stress associated with that needless delay. The question is, does this relate to increased stress and delays in treatment, and for the latter, health. Treatment delay and fewer wellness behaviors have been implicated in the procrastination-illness relationship.

There’s little doubt about it. Procrastination is a behavioral style that may increase vulnerability to illness and even death. With the pursuit of work. Now an associate professor of psychology, her research contributes to our understanding of health and well-being.

"I’ll look after my health later" is part of the title of two of her publications. The first, done at Carleton while she was a student, showed that procrastinators were less healthy than those who did not procrastinate. In the second, she found similar results, but the effects of stress and the role of treatment delay and wellness behaviors varied.

Based on the research on personality and health, Dr. Sirois hypothesized that the poor health of procrastinators may be related to their tendency to avoid difficult tasks, particularly those related to their well-being. This was reflected in her findings.

Her research methods for both studies consisted of a battery of questionnaires that included measures of procrastination, stress, and health behaviors. Her findings were relatively consistent across the samples.

Procrastination was associated with higher stress, a greater number of acute health problems, the practice of fewer wellness behaviors, and a greater number of chronic health problems. Furthermore, health behaviors, procrastination may confer additional risk for increased stress and subsequently more health problems.

In her research, Dr. Sirois also found that procrastination was related to a greater number of accidents at work and a greater number of household safety behaviors such as checking and replacing smoke detectors (behaviors with potentially devastating consequences).

Taken together, this research clearly shows that trait procrastination (our tendency to procrastinate in most areas of our lives) is an important contribution to our understanding of how personality plays a role in our understanding of health.

This research demonstrates the far-reaching effects of procrastination in our lives. We don’t just suffer the consequences of our procrastination, but we may also be contributing to our own health problems.

International Network on Personal Meaning (meaning.ca) - conference in 2008

"Living well & Dying well."

Dr. Grafton T. Eliason, co-editor of *Existential and Spiritual Issues in Death Attitudes*, presented a paper entitled, “Death anxiety, coping mechanisms and the tale of the grateful dead.” In the course of his discussion of coping with death and counseling individuals who are grieving, Dr. Eliason noted two kinds of regrets that people express in their grief over the loss of a loved one: regrets of commission and regrets of omission. The second regret, the things we omitted doing while our loved one was alive, captured my interest. Regrets of omission are so often the result of procrastination.

I asked Dr. Eliason, “What is the nature of these regrets of omission?” adding, “Are these: 1) Things people really wanted to do and failed to do?; 2) Things people didn’t think they had the time to do?; 3) Things people thought they would have liked to do, but didn’t?; or 4) Internalized expectations about what the loved one might have wanted them to do?”

His answer didn’t surprise me. He said that all four types were part of the regrets he’d seen in his practice. So, I asked, “If this is so, which type do you think is most problematic? The regrets of omission related to our procrastination were most troubling in the grieving process.

The chair of the paper session, Dr. Adrian Tomer (and lead editor of the volume noted above) added that, in his experience, this type of unfulfilled intended action truly was the most problematic aspect of bereavement. While it may be possible to forgive oneself for an act of commission, as we all make mistakes, realizing too late in life that you simply failed to take action when you could have, is unbearable in many instances.

Dr. Tomer nodded in agreement when I replied, “I can understand this, as the real existential dilemma in these regrets of omission is that we had failed to recognize until too late our own agency in life to act according to our values.”
Strategy #3

For the tasks you identified as procrastination with #1, list the costs associated with this needless delay.
Myth #4
Perfectionists are procrastinators
Perfectionism comes in at least two flavours: adaptive and maladaptive. The maladaptive flavor seems to have social roots. (Take the self-test at the end of the blog.)

I like the example Neenan provides with his client. His maintenance message was “My time is precious. Don’t waste it!” I think that this could apply to anyone. It’s simply an existential fact of life.

I like the example he gives his own clients. He notes, “A way to teach clients the difference between trying and doing is to encourage them to set deadlines for themselves. However, these deadlines are to be met if possible. If they are not met, planning must be rethought. Trying means keep trying until you succeed, while doing means you choose not to continue working on the task. So if the client cannot meet his deadline, he can allow himself to leave it. Trying will keep them in the room indefinitely while doing means they will have left it in seconds” (p. 59).

While we may not be consciously aware of how procrastination is troubling us, our emotions might provide a clue that there may be irrational beliefs at the root of our delay. We have to acknowledge that we’re procrastinating and that there may be irrational beliefs at the root of our delay.

Neenan argues that it’s best to treat procrastination as the “C” - the consequence of an Activating event and Belief. The “A” in the box is the activating event - imagining giving a presentation to a group of colleagues.

In the example above, these justifying irrational thoughts were about having to give a perfect presentation.

“By exposing herself in imagination to giving the presentation (A), the client’s critical A is located which triggers her critical C: ‘I can’t do it. Either I’m not a good presenter or it’s a bad presentation. ’ And then her doing C: ‘I must do it perfectly, or the audience will lose interest, or the after work will be the worst, or the manager will be angry.’ “(pp. 56-57, emphasis added)

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behavioural: highly agitated
C = consequences
A = activating event - imagining giving a presentation to a group of colleagues

Neenan’s clinical perspective documents the costs of procrastination; costs that have been clearly documented in the blog to date as well. He writes, “Another view of procrastination is that you give away your time free of charge - time that you might pay anything for on the open market. In the words of the study authors, ‘In the case of behavioral procrastination, it is plausible to postulate that choosing not to do a task may have the same impact on motivation as well as task initiation and persistence, leading to behavioral procrastination.’”

1. Beliefs about cognitive confidence (e.g., “my memory can mislead me at times”) was related to behavioral procrastination.


Here is how Kilbert and colleagues make sense of the results overall.

The implication of these findings for perfectionism and procrastination

Kilbert and colleagues used a battery of measures with a sample of 475 students. As you might expect given the concepts presented in the blog, they found procrastination was related to perfectionism. Here’s a brief description of the relationship between perfectionism and procrastination:

- Socially prescribed perfectionists tend to have high standards and high levels of procrastination.
- Other-oriented perfectionists tend to have high standards and high levels of procrastination.
- Self-oriented perfectionists tend to have high standards and high levels of procrastination.

These findings suggest that perfectionism may be a contributing factor to procrastination. It is possible that perfectionists may have difficulty initiating or persisting in tasks due to high standards or fear of failure.

Hewitt and Flett’s three types of perfectionism are:

1. Socially prescribed perfectionists: tend to have high standards for others and high levels of procrastination.
2. Other-oriented perfectionists: set unrealistic standards for significant others (e.g., partners, children, co-workers) coupled with a stringent evaluation of others’ performances.
3. Self-oriented perfectionists: Adhere to strict standards while maintaining strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure; engage in stringent self-evaluation.

Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett developed a multidimensional perfectionism scale with three subscales or types of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented and socially-prescribed. Here’s a brief description of each:

- Self-oriented perfectionism: high standards and high levels of procrastination.
- Other-oriented perfectionism: set unrealistic standards for significant others and high levels of procrastination.
- Socially prescribed perfectionism: high standards for others and high levels of procrastination.

These findings suggest that perfectionism may be a contributing factor to procrastination. It is possible that perfectionists may have difficulty initiating or persisting in tasks due to high standards or fear of failure.

In the blog, we discussed how perfectionism can lead to procrastination. However, we also discussed how perfectionism can have benefits, such as increased motivation and performance. The key is to find a balance between perfectionism and procrastination.

In summary, perfectionism and procrastination are complex phenomena that are influenced by a variety of factors. Understanding these factors can help us develop more effective strategies for managing procrastination.

References:

The nature of our goals & intentions

Personality

Self-Regulation Failure

Cognitions & Beliefs

Self-Control & Willpower
Strategy #4

Challenge the negative self-talk.
Myth #5
I’ll just check my email it will only take a minute.
We've truly reached a new level of technological time wasting, and it's called Facebook. Talk about a study in procrastination! So, study it we are. Jena Roy has begun this research with me at Carleton University. She conducted 3 studies for her research. The first was a questionnaire-based study exploring possible personality correlates of Facebook procrastination. The third study was a questionnaire-based study exploring possible personality correlates of Facebook procrastination. We're still making sense of the data from the third study.

My focus for this entry is Study 2 - the interviews. For now, all I want to do is share some quotes from the interview participants as captured in Jena's thesis. Read them and post your comments about Facebook and procrastination.

Interview Quotes Below

“...because I set aside time for a break period and it seems to get extended ... is where it becomes a problem. Time flies on the Internet and it is not a cognitive process. I don’t think about it.”

“At first with Facebook you can spend hours on it, but eventually you really know that you are wasting your time. It is a real problem if you don’t.”

“I don’t really have any desire or urge to use it now, it was more fun when I was procrastinating. I don’t feel a need to go on the Internet when I am not procrastinating.”

“You see a lot more people on Facebook during exams since they are already at the computer and it is easy to access and procrastinate.”

“Facebook definitely interferes with my school work. If I see that there is a party planned I will look who is going and who had responded. And if someone has written on my girlfriend’s wall, I will go and check those people out.”

“It’s all about whoever has the most wall posts, some people have over 2000 wall posts. They talk about things that are not important and that doesn’t need to be said on there, but it makes them look like they have a life.”

“I won’t give up social opportunities to use Facebook, but I will have cravings and urges to check it after a night out, ... have even taken time away from hanging out with people to go check my account, and it is always in the back of my mind.”

“I know people who have had to get their roommate to delete their profile for them because they were so addicted that ... just say they are addicted to Facebook to seem cool and get attention, it is a ridiculous thing to be addicted to.”

So . . . what’s going on with Facebook and procrastination? Is it just something to use when you’re procrastinating (as reflected in the first quote) or is it destined to get you addicted as reflected in the final couple of quotes? Your thoughts would be very much appreciated!
Strategy #5

Pre-empt that which tempts. Make the threshold for the desired behaviour lower than for the distracting or habitual behaviours.
Myth #6

My motivational state has to match the task at hand.
Myth #6

My motivational state has to match the task at hand.

I’ll feel more like it tomorrow.
Tappolet argues that procrastination involves the voluntary infliction of a burden (perhaps even pain) on our future self. It may not be a disassociation from the future self, a break in our understanding of a continuity of self, but it does involve harming future self. She argues that putting things off for the future self despite the burden (e.g., the dried dirty dishes now stuck to the counter) clearly indicates a lack of concern for the future self.

In a sense, we're passing the buck to our future self. This might make sense if I'm passing the buck to a roommate who will face the kitchen in the morning (as long as I really don't care about this person), but how can I make sense of my procrastinating on the task when it's me, in the future, who will face it? As Tappolet writes, "The lack of concern for one's future self is particularly obvious in cases of clear-eyed procrastination" (p. 125). And, given how common procrastination is, Tappolet argues that "it is a mistake to think we usually have a special concern for our future selves" (p. 126).

Instead of lacking concern for her future self, she might have a concern for them that is overridden by some other concern, such as a stronger concern for her present self" (p. 126). However, she concludes that "...if the future selves regularly lose to the present self, the conclusion to draw, it would seem, is that real concern for the future selves is lacking" (p. 126).

Alternatively, it is feasible to see future self as continuous with present self but not identical to future self. For example, future self is not as tired as present self is now. Future self will have more energy to face the dishes tomorrow. More energy means more willpower, something that present self lacks now. In short, present self doesn't see this as an imposition on future self, at least certainly not as much as it is on the exhausted present self.
You know, some day these kids will be out of the house and you'll regret not spending more time with them.

That's a problem for Future Homer.
Man, I don't envy that guy.
Will I save for the future or spend now?


http://hbr.org/2013/06/you-make-better-decisions-if-you-see-your-senior-self?
Strategy #6

Practice time travel. How will future self really feel about your choices today? Why does that matter?
Myth #7

I work better under pressure.
In search of the “Arousal Procrastinator”

“We push against the deadline to build tension. The release of tension is a powerful reward.”
"I work better under pressure"

DO YOU HAVE YOUR HOMEWORK FINISHED, JEREMY?

NOT YET, I'M WAITING FOR THE MOOD TO STRIKE ME.

ADRENALINE-FUELED PANIC IS NOT A MOOD.

ARE YOU SURE? I NEVER GET ANYTHING DONE WITHOUT IT.

"I only work under pressure"
On working under pressure

“The mental discipline necessary to work toward a deadline is something that you must develop. It can become habit just as letting things slide until the last minute can become habit. That pattern leads to staying up all night and writing in a blind panic. Besides ruining your health, you never can write your best. If anyone tells you, “I have to wait until the pressure is on before I can start to cook”, don’t believe it. Occasionally, you maybe able to work under pressure of a deadline, but stop kidding yourself, it won’t be your best” (Hagen, 1990, pp 123-124).

There is no feeling like being on a roll! When the juices are flowing and the ideas are coming faster than you can write them down, YOU'RE A GIANT. Ten feet tall, strong as a bull with a mind like a steel trap. “Look out, world! Here comes a composing machine! Name it! Rock, Jazz, Serial, Classic, Electronics—the whole bag. I can do it all!”
Then there are those “other days.” The ones in which you get up, have breakfast, take a shower; feeling fresh as a daisy you sit down to work, turn on the idea faucet, and nothing comes out but AIR! You stare at the paper until it starts to burn and all the while your brain is slowly turning to jelly. As a good friend, Quincy Jones, described it, “I’ve been under the piano all day, rolling on the floor and chewing the rug, and this turkey is due tomorrow morning.” Well, take heart! You’re not alone. All over the world, at this very moment, there are composers just like you who are “rolling on the floor and chewing the rug.”
Strategy #7

Be prepared to “chew the rug!”
Well, he’s finally done. Did we learn anything?
Strategies

1. What’s delay, what’s procrastination?
2. How am I coping?
3. Stop, stay put, identify the costs.
4. Challenge the negative self-talk.
5. Pre-empt that which tempts.
6. Practice time travel.
7. Be prepared to “chew the carpet.”
The nature of our goals & intentions

Personality

Self-Regulation Failure

Cognitions & Beliefs

Self-Control & Willpower
Want to know more?

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