

It's Never Too Late to Stop Procrastinating

By Star Lawrence

WebMD Feature

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It's such a long word, you almost want to put off saying it. It's Procrastination -- also known as delaying, shillyshallying, and excuse-making. But if you chronically put things off, you will suffer for it -- fines, late payment fees, nosebleed tickets, and often, bad, hastily done work that can lead to unpleasant consequences. Plus -- don't forget that nagging feeling and a suspicion that you are "not worthy."

William Knaus, EdD, a professor at American International College in Springfield, Mass., wrote the book on not writing the book. Co-author of *Overcoming Procrastination; Do It Now -- How to Break the Procrastination Habit*; and *The Procrastination Workbook: Your Personalized Program for Breaking Free of the Patterns That Hold You Back*. Knaus tells WebMD that even people who are perpetually late qualify as procrastinators.

Procrastination, Knaus tells WebMD, is an automatic habit process that leads to needless postponement. "It's automatic," he says. "It happens seamlessly time and time again." Symptoms include:

- When you face something unpleasant, boring, or have doubts about your abilities, you substitute a less-timely, relevant, or lower-priority task. Time to do taxes -- but wait, the windows haven't been washed in ages! They look terrible. I can hardly see out. Let's see, where is the bucket? Knaus calls these diversions "addictivities."
- You decide later would be better because the task or idea needs time to "season."
- You need to do more "research."
- I want to do it, but there must be an easier way. Let me think of one.
- In what Knaus calls the "catch-22" ploy, you put yourself in a position in which you cannot follow through. Say you want to find a mate, but you convince yourself you have a fatal flaw, so you foreclose on yourself before you even begin. Or you'd like to get an advanced degree, but convince yourself everyone will be younger or smarter.
- Or you think backward. "I can't start this because I don't understand the past as well as I should." You look over your life. Then you look over your life some more. "Pretty soon," Knaus says, "you know more and more about less and less and still haven't started whatever it is yet."
- Indecision is another procrastination trigger, according to Gail McMeekin, MSW, owner of the coaching firm called Creative Success in Newton, Mass., and author of *The 12 Secrets of Highly Creative Women*. "You feel the need to weigh the options," she says. "Then weigh them some more."

"These are all what we call 'mañana diversions,'" Knaus says.

Procrastination can also be born of disorganization or forgetfulness. Fear is also a motivator -- what if you don't do a good job or do you know how to do a good job? Anger can also bring out resistance -- you don't want to be controlled!

Other procrastinators are, strange as it sounds, perfectionists. They don't want to do something if they can't do it perfectly. Even though a desire to not leave things hanging is also a trait of being a perfectionist, these types of people often let tasks pile up because they cannot do them perfectly in the time allotted.

Procrastination Can Be Bad for Your Physical Health

All this thinking, delaying, excuse-making, and pangs of dread not only can make your brain an unpleasant tangle, but it can affect your physical health. Timothy A. Pychyl, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, has done a number of studies on procrastination in the academic setting. He started out studying how doctoral students structured their studies, but quickly became more interested in what they said they were going to do, but didn't do. "I started out looking at actions," Pychyl tells WebMD, "and ended up looking at inaction."

In one study, his procrastination research group looked at 374 undergraduates and found that students who put things off were more likely to eat poorly, sleep less, and drink more than students who do homework promptly.

Pychyl speculates that this behavior flows from the inability to control impulses. Many assignments are devised by others, too, he says, so students are less interested and invested in them than in their own research. Up to 70% of students in one study said they procrastinate.

"Stress compromises the immune system," he adds. "Procrastination is a stressor." Also among things students put off? Getting help and starting healthy behaviors, such as exercise.

"Making the decision to put something off," Knaus says, "provides only a temporary feeling of relief."

How to Kick the Habit

"There are different reasons people procrastinate," Pychyl says, "so there are different routes to stopping it. All behaviors are a combination of personality and situation."

Just knowing you do it is not enough to make you stop, Knaus emphasizes. "You may know a six-pack [of beer] a day is bad for you, but will this make you stop?" he asks. "In a sense, procrastinators are optimists; they think they can escape by putting things off. Change is a process not an event."

Some suggestions for breaking the habit:

- Knaus recommends "mapping out" the process of change. Why are you uncomfortable about digging into a project or changing your behavior? Write down the reasons.
- You know yourself. What diversions or mañana behaviors will you probably adopt?

- Then question those. If you say "later is better," ask yourself why. "And why," Knaus says, "do you need to be better to do this? Save the better state for a better task. You need to recognize the hogwash!"
- When you feel actual physical resistance, when every bone in your body is resisting the task, force yourself to put one foot in front of the other. "This is similar to overcoming irrational fears," Knaus notes.
- Break up the task into segments. Do one a day. If it's your taxes, call the accountant one day. Then find all the income statements the next. Then divide the receipts into categories the next. And so on. "I always feel I can do anything for five minutes," McMeekin says. "So I set a timer. Once I start, I usually go over five minutes and may finish the job."
- Involve others, invoke a buddy system. This increases your chances of doing the task, McMeekin says.
- Set a reward for yourself once the job is done.

"The habit of resisting the feeling of recoiling will become inherent," promises Knaus. "I believe when brain scans are perfected, they will show that your brain will change -- structural changes will follow behavioral changes."

And the best approach of all? "Ask yourself if, in the end, this is something you need to do," McMeekin says. Maybe it could be delegated. Often we need to delegate."

One catch: You can't put off the decision to delegate.

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SOURCES: William Knaus, EdD, professor, American International College, Springfield, Mass.; and co-author of *Overcoming Procrastination; and Do It Now -- How to Break the Procrastination Habit*; and *The Procrastination Workbook: Your Personalized Program for Breaking Free of the Patterns That Hold You Back*. Timothy A. Pychyl, PhD, associate professor of psychology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Gail McMeekin, MSW, owner, Creative Success, Newton, Mass.; and author, *The 12 Secrets of Highly Creative Women*.

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