

Identity: A Link to Procrastination

Imagine this. You leave the first meeting of your English course with a fresh syllabus in your hand that specifies the details of a term paper that is due in eight weeks. How likely are you to go home, jump on your laptop and start researching this topic the first week of school? Let's be realistic. Just because you do not immediately start on an assigned paper does not automatically make you a procrastinator. But imagine this scenario: it is three weeks before the paper is due and you have done a wonderful job of repressing the contents of the syllabus because, let's face it, you have three other classes to worry about. Perhaps you have a job that is tiring and you just want to relax when you get home. Or, maybe you tell yourself, "I have three more weeks, that's plenty of time!"

Now, let's imagine that it is Tuesday and the term paper is due Friday. You have not researched a thing. You might have a vague idea of what you will write about but there are a hundred excuses keeping you from sitting down and starting this grueling process. For example, you have to clean the kitchen, you have to send an email to a friend you have not spoken to in a while, and my favorite, you cannot write a paper and do a good job if you're not up to the task at the present moment. Is it better to wait for tomorrow's divine intervention that will make all your other responsibilities go away and provide you with enough inspiration to write a superb paper while actually enjoying the process? Are you beginning to get an idea of what this is? That's right! It's procrastination.

Procrastination has been linked in psychological literature to personality characteristics and states, such as: perfectionism, depression, fear of failure, irrational thinking, low-self esteem, inability to delay gratification and more. There is no single reason why people procrastinate, just as there is no one way of eliminating it.

Some suggestions people have offered to procrastinators are to get organized, break down what you need to accomplish into small parts, ask for help, get a new attitude, write reminders and make yourself accountable. These suggestions may prove helpful for many people who occasionally procrastinate. However, for the chronic procrastinator who habitually puts things off — an estimated 20 percent of American adults — counseling is frequently necessary to get at the root causes. Psychologist and Professor Dr. Timothy Pynchyl suggests that telling a chronic procrastinator to get organized or get a new attitude is like telling a depressed person to cheer up. Changing a tendency to procrastinate requires a different approach, one that goes beyond the consideration of behavioral actions. It requires a deeper understanding; one such area to consider is identity.

Pynchyl has linked identity to action, which means that our tendency to face a task head on from the very beginning or to procrastinate as long as humanly possible, is very much like a particular stage of life, *Identity v. Role Confusion*. Posited by Erikson, this refers to the struggle of understanding oneself or feeling lost. During this stage, it is common to feel uneasy about settling on a school or occupational identity or other life choice.

The next question becomes, how do we become clearer about our identity? This is where hard work is required. *Role Confusion* doesn't just mean being perplexed over who one is. Behind the confusion is a lack of exploration on the part of the individual. Someone may want to become a doctor, but has not taken any prerequisite courses to see if they are capable of withstanding the academic rigors of a medical program and whether the subject fascinates them. The individuals who have not explored or committed to a goal, Pynchyl argues, are most likely to procrastinate.

As painful as confusion may be, it may still be more comfortable than committing to just one thing. The fear that we may miss something or exclude something by the choices we make can cause us to stop dead in our tracks. Procrastination becomes a kind of paralysis that keeps us temporarily safe from losing all the wonderful possibilities that exist. Commitment is experienced as "a forever state" never to be changed or modified. While this is far from true, it may still feel overwhelming.

Sometimes people commit to a goal without doing the necessary exploration. For example, someone majors in engineering because their father or mother was an engineer but lacks any interest in mathematics, physics and other subject areas required to succeed in that profession. The potential engineer who has not done the exploration is also at risk for procrastination. This is also true of those who choose a profession based on salary alone. Exploration is difficult to do because it may force us to take a look at ourselves in a way that isn't flattering. For example, a pre-med student may be devastated to learn that he or she cannot perform well in chemistry or biology. One way to avoid that devastation is to put off the pre-med courses until junior year.

The concept of identity and its link to procrastination relates not only to choosing a major, but to many different situations. For example, starting on a paper may be anxiety provoking because it's complex and requires a lot of steps, in the same way as establishing an identity does. We don't want to feel lost or feel like we cannot do it. There is, of course, a major difference between identity development and writing a paper; however, both involve fear that precludes exploration and commitment.

Sometimes taking small steps toward completion of a task is so difficult because we may discover that as attempts are made to explore ways of completing it, certain barriers emerge. For instance, we may be faced with the awareness that getting there may be difficult. So instead, we may feel so tired that it is easier to not even worry about it. We all know, however, that this style of avoidance is self-defeating, and, as such, we would never engage in it, right?

The first steps are often difficult, and it may be that our past life experiences were such that our choices were limited or that exploring possibilities were traumatic or were discouraged by others. Whatever the case may be, procrastination is not caused by laziness. While making choices can be anxiety producing, they can also lead us to fulfillment. Exploration and commitment are the vehicles through which we determine whether our choices are in line with the person who we feel ourselves to be and therefore determine the cornerstones of our identity. As we make choices in accordance with who we are, we flourish.