There's Always Tomorrow: The Procrastinator's Mantra

“One more day won’t make any difference.”
“It won’t matter if I’m a few minutes late; no one else will be on time.”
“I work best under pressure.”
“I’ll just watch 15 more minutes of TV.”
“I’ll wait until I’m inspired to start working.”

Sound familiar? These are common excuses we use when putting off doing something that needs to be done; this is called procrastination. Do you act as though ignoring a task will make it go away? Do you underestimate the work involved in the task, or overestimate your abilities and resources in relationship to the task? Many of us do. Frantic trips to the library and all-night cramming sessions are not uncommon in college; although these behaviors do not always lower academic performance, students who procrastinate do seem to learn less and retain less than students who do not. Moreover, procrastinators commonly have feelings of guilt and frustration, are plagued with self-critical thoughts, and experience other people’s disappointment or anger.

True procrastination involves putting off a task that we have decided is important or beneficial to accomplish. Habitual procrastinators irrationally postpone what is in their best interest to complete. They acknowledge the value of doing the task -- yet experience anxiety or conflict in trying to accomplish it. The result is a last minute rush, post-deadline completion, or total avoidance. This can have highly negative consequences, such as receiving poor grades, losing job opportunities, and not following up on physicals or medical symptoms. Habitual procrastinators often have high levels of stress as well as anxiety and/or depression.

The cycle of procrastination

Since destructive procrastination occurs frequently, a cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been associated with it (Burka & Yuen, authors of Procrastination, why you do it, what to do about it, 1990). The cycle begins with an optimistic thought, “I’ll start early this time,” and yet no immediate action is taken, and anxiety and pressure begin to build. A person may have visions of horrible consequences and become paralyzed in their thoughts and actions. Guilt, a constant companion to most procrastinators, sets in: “I should’ve started sooner.” It’s extremely common to do everything and anything except the avoided project, such as cleaning the apartment, and to feel soothed by the rationalization, “Well, at least I’m getting something done.” Many procrastinators try to distract themselves with pleasurable activities—going to the movies or getting together with friends. Although they try hard to enjoy themselves, the shadow of the unfinished project looms over them. As time drags on and nothing gets done, some procrastinators feel ashamed. They don’t want anyone to know of their predicament, so they create ways to cover up their inactivity, perhaps by looking busy. They may feel like they’re lacking something fundamental that everyone else has – self-discipline, courage, brains, or luck. Procrastinators may wait for a magical reprieve. Eventually a choice is made: either to do it or not do it. Feeling relieved and exhausted that it’s over, many vow, “I’ll never procrastinate again.”

The causes of procrastination

Procrastinators may say that they are lazy, or undisciplined, and they just don’t know how to organize their time.
Poor time management can be a cause of procrastination; if this is true for you, you will need to learn and develop time management skills (watch for our upcoming workshop). If, however, you know how to manage your time but don’t use those skills, perhaps you might relate to the following:

**Ambiguity.** If you are uncertain what is expected of you, it may be difficult to get started.

**Inability to handle the task.** If you feel you lack the personal resources to do it through lack of training, skill or ability, you may avoid it completely.

**Perfectionism.** Many procrastinators have unrealistically high expectations of themselves; they set high standards and expect to achieve them easily. Moreover, thought processes can be distorted, so that performance on a particular task is equated with self-worth.

**Fear of evaluation.** Fearing judgment or being laughed at, a procrastinator can feel it’s better to do nothing at all than risk doing something “bad” or “stupid.”

**Fear of Failure.** Procrastination can help us defend against the fear of failure by reducing the expected quality of our work to the best that can be expected given the limited amount of time. If our performance doesn’t live up to ours or others’ expectations, we can always say, “I could have done a lot better if I’d just had another day.” If we happen to do well in spite of a last-minute effort, we can congratulate ourselves for having pulled it off in a pinch.

**Fear of success.** Some procrastinators fear that success will lead to additional demands on their time and energy, or additional expectations from others, or that others might be envious and reject them.

**Fear of the unknown.** If you are venturing into a new realm, and are fearful of how well you will do, your desire to begin may be inhibited.

**Rebellion.** For some, procrastination can be a passive, indirect act against a perceived authority, a means of angering or inconveniencing others. Procrastination then becomes a means of retaining a sense of power and control.

**Procrastinators can change**

Procrastinators can change their behavior by identifying their stress reactions and stressors, being aware of patterns of procrastinating, and having more effective techniques to cope with stress. Here are several ways to overcome procrastination:

- The larger, more involved, the project, the more difficult it is to plan effectively to carry it out. Try the following steps:

1) Work to acquire an adequate understanding of what is necessary to accomplish a task within a given time frame.
2) Divide the task into small steps.
3) Distribute the small steps reasonably within the given time frame; for example, going over chapters, notes, and previous exams a few weeks before your final.
4) Realize that we need variety and relaxation. Intersperse rewards, relaxation and gratification for work completed. This will help you feel less resentful of the task and the work that still needs to be done.
5) Monitor your progress on the small steps, watch for your personal pitfalls.
6) Try a buddy system: tell someone else when a part of the task will be done, then ask them to check on your progress.
7) Assess problems when they arise and do something about them quickly.
8) Be reasonable in your expectations of yourself.
- Make honest decisions about your work. If you wish to spend only a minimal amount of effort or time on a particular task, admit it. Weigh the consequences of various amounts of investment in a project and find the optimal return for your investment. This step exposes intentional reasons for avoiding work. If you have been unintentionally avoiding work, admit to yourself that you do want to achieve certain goals and accept the responsibilities involved in meeting those goals.

- Many procrastinators believe that unless they have a large block of time available, there is no point in getting started. Even 10 minutes of work is an accomplishment. Pay attention to your current mood, take advantage of it, and find a part of a task that fits your mood.

- If you repeatedly find yourself unable to get certain things done, it may be a motivational issue. Make a list of advantages and disadvantages for continuing to put things off. This is a way you might be able to access and identify some of the obstacles. As discussed earlier, procrastination can be a way of expressing internal conflict and protecting a vulnerable sense of self-esteem; consequently, dealing with the psychological issues may be necessary. This may involve: developing a more realistic self-image and setting realistic expectations for oneself, learning to value the process of work and not just the product, learning to experience satisfaction in small accomplishments, clarifying what is really important for oneself, learning to cope with the stresses that accompany success, and developing assertiveness, as well as new modes of self-expression.

- Regard procrastinating behavior as a source of information about yourself—as a pointer to areas of your life that need cultivation and attention. View procrastination experiences as opportunities for further learning.